



# DOES SIZE MATTER?

Mark 4:30-32

The Parable of the Mustard  
Seed

## Mark 4:30-32

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." (NRSV)

## Thesis

The differing circumstances in which Jesus originally used the parable and those in which Mark recorded it caused a shift in genre and meaning that has been seeded on through the centuries to present hearers.

## Critical Methods Employed

Primary: Form Criticism		Encompassed Aspects Of:
<i>Sitz im Leben</i>	Genre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tradition-Historical</li> <li>• Social-Scientific</li> <li>• Canonical</li> <li>• Narrative</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Author</li> <li>• Setting</li> <li>• Context</li> <li>• Audience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parable</li> <li>• Allegory</li> </ul>	
Secondary Methods: Structural and Redaction		

## Parable

At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it in to active thought.

(C.H. Dodd)

## Today's Most Common Interpretation of Jesus' Parable

The smallest of seeds	The small beginnings of the kingdom (the community of believers) in the person and original followers of Jesus
The greatest of shrubs	The grand and glorious kingdom into which this movement/church will grow
The birds of the air who find shelter	Those who believe and follow the ways of Jesus

## Problems with this Interpretation

<i>Allegorical interpretation</i>	Kills parabolic qualities • Comforting, not disturbing or radical • Fixes meaning, no longer polysemous
<i>Does not speak of the Kingdom</i>	It is about the growth of a movement, not a vision of the Kingdom
<i>Does not speak to Christians today</i>	Christianity has already grown into one of the world's largest religions The size of the movement is not really relevant today

## Allegory

- ❖ A type of story in which the true meaning is deliberately concealed
- ❖ Formed by starting with an underlying message then shaping a story to overlay that message
- ❖ It speaks of that which is already known
- ❖ It is starkly representational; each detail stands for something in the underlying story being mediated
- ❖ It provides no insight of the world beyond that which it represents; it is self contained

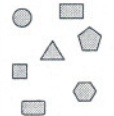
*(Dan Otto Via, Jr.)*

## Allegory & Parable

There is a difference between making an allegory and giving an allegorical interpretation of a story which is not in itself allegorical. A story which is itself allegorical should be so interpreted. But to treat a story which is not as if it were—to allegorize it—can only frustrate the function and intention of the story.

*(Dan Otto Via, Jr.)*

## Christian Tradition Development

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Ministry of Jesus	Oral Preaching	Recording Tradition
Words and Actions of Jesus		Writing of the Gospels

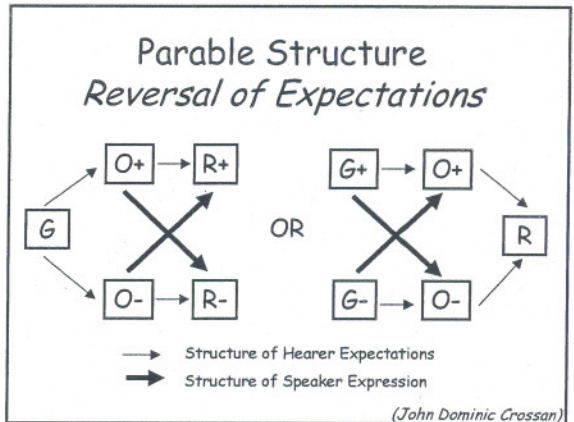
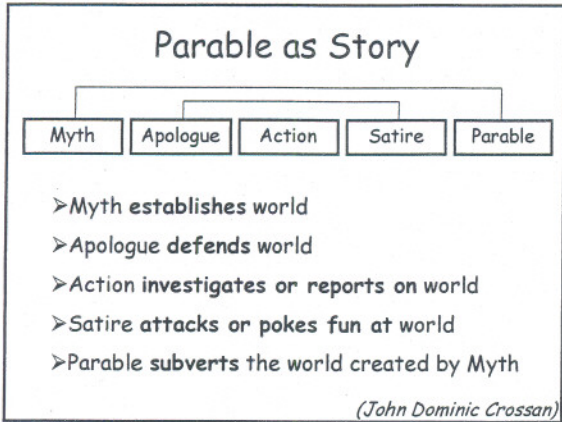
<i>Stage 1:</i> Jesus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Proclaimed the Kingdom of God</li> <li>•Taught in Parables</li> </ul>
<i>Stage 2:</i> Apostolic Preachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Forced to deal with death of Jesus and resurrection of Christ</li> <li>•Used remembered stories, sayings and parables of Jesus as they needed</li> <li>•Parabler became the parable</li> <li>•Hellenization promoted allegorical interpretation</li> </ul>
<i>Stage 3:</i> Gospel Writers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Used oral and written sources to develop unique theological statements directed toward specific audiences and circumstances</li> <li>•Formalized oral tendencies toward allegory</li> <li>•Proclaimed Jesus as Christ</li> </ul>

## Mark Assumptions

Author	Unknown Gentile
Audience	Mostly Gentile
Setting	Rome, ca. 67-68 C.E.
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Heart of Christian persecutions being carried out by Nero in Rome (64-68 C.E.)</li> <li>•During the Jewish/Roman war in Jerusalem (66-70 C.E.)</li> <li>•Prior to destruction of the Temple (70 C.E.)</li> </ul>

## Mark & Jesus' Parable

- ❖ Today's interpretation stems from Mark
  - ❖ Redaction emphasizes superlative contrast and thus growth
- ❖ Made sense for Mark and his audience
  - ❖ Writing to a persecuted community likely beginning to fragment
  - ❖ Writing in an apocalyptic age; concerned with making new converts
- ❖ Jesus' parable becomes a message of hope and assurance to an embattled people as well as an exhortation and warning
  - ❖ Those who have faith in Christ will soon be relieved of their suffering with the inevitable coming of the great and glorious kingdom
  - ❖ Shelter will not be provided for those who do not believe



### A World of Expectations

- ❖ Jesus preached to a Jewish audience bristling under Roman occupation
- ❖ They were expecting a great Messiah who would free them from the yoke of oppression and fulfill God's promise to his chosen people; to make of them a great and powerful kingdom
- ❖ They expected a kingdom here, in this world, based on political and even military strength; power as understood in human terms

This was their myth

### A World of Boundaries

The first-century Jewish culture was social in nature; much different from today's individualistic society.

Peasant Society	Urban elites vs. rural peasants (90% of population): huge gulf
Pure Society	Pure vs. impure (sin, illness, disfigurement)
Patriarchal Society	Men rule; women and children viewed as property

### Jesus' Vision of The Kingdom


- ❖ Radical Egalitarianism and Love
  - ❖ No boundaries, no divisions, all are welcome
  - ❖ Power based on God's terms; giving, service, love
  - ❖ Jesus calls us to love our neighbors, all of them

The Kingdom Jesus proclaims reverses the expectations of his culture, subverts its myth and challenges its social structures

### Jesus Subverts Boundaries

With his life, words and actions, Jesus challenges his society's structures

Open Commensality	Eats with tax collectors, sinners, women
Healing	Touches the untouchables
Rejection of Family	Rejects patriarchal structure




## Mustard in Jesus' World

- ❖ Fast growing annual
  - ❖ Starts from a seed almost invisible to the eye
  - ❖ Grows into an 8-12 foot plant that spreads rapidly
- ❖ Very common; seed became by-word for smallest thing imaginable
- ❖ Plant seen as a noxious weed that, once sown, threatened to take over everything and was almost impossible to eradicate


## Mustard Controlled

- ❖ Planting tightly controlled by Jewish law
  - ❖ Based on 'rules of diverse kinds' and purity boundaries
  - ❖ Society's desire to create order in a disorderly world; set up sharp distinctions between sacred and profane, clean and unclean
  - ❖ Basic rule - keep plants in their proper place and not mix them
- ❖ Not allowed to be planted in a
  - ❖ Garden; the space was too small, mustard would mix with vegetables normally grown there
  - ❖ Grain field; mustard and grain are too similar in appearance and they could not be distinguished if they mixed
- ❖ Permitted to be planted in a
  - ❖ Field of vegetables; the space was large enough mixing would be minimal and the plants dissimilar enough to tell them apart if they did mix
  - ❖ Field of its own where it would mingle with nothing else




## Why Mustard?

Mustard Seed/Plant	Those Marginalized by Jewish Society
Small	Inconsequential
Common	90% of population+
Noxious Weed	Untouchables
Spreads Rapidly - Must Be Controlled OR Must Be Included	



## Does Size Matter?

- ❖ Jesus is a paradigm
- ❖ He lives a life of radical love
- ❖ He calls believers to follow his example
- ❖ Imagine the world today if the millions of Christians did just that
- ❖ The Kingdom of God would indeed arrive...all from the beginning seed of one small life; it is about the smallness of one life and it is about us.
- ❖ So, yes, size does matter.



## Problems Resolved?

- ❖ Parabolic qualities restored
  - ❖ Radical and disturbing nature revived
  - ❖ Polysemous potential demonstrated
- ❖ Returned to proclaiming Jesus' vision of the Kingdom rather than the growth of the movement
- ❖ Message capable of speaking to Christians today

## The Dance of Metaphor

Metaphors are locomotives of meaning. They bear the freight of insight from place to place. They roll into the settled cities of our ideas, blasting their horns to announce the new arrival, shining their headlights to dazzle the citizens. The arrival of a powerful metaphor alters the geography of our thoughts and forces us to redraw our conceptual maps.

The most powerful metaphors drive on forever. They never die - although they may be sidetracked. After a while, they get up steam again and blow through the smooth, neat streets of newly constructed suburbs, rudely awakening our comfortable concepts from their quiet slumber and jumbling our straight boulevards and cookie-cutter houses.

Other metaphors expend all their motive power on their first trip. They can then work only where they settle down. They become dead metaphors. They live on as root ideas to structure our worlds, official titles to rule our days, code-words to form our conversations, settled concepts to use without a thought, stereotypes, lingo, jargon and puns. It is not far from the truth to say that the houses of our intellects are build of the corpses of metaphors.

*(Terrence Tilley)*