

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?

³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;

³² 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.'

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Matthew 13:31-32

³¹ He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his

THREE WORLDS OF THIS TEXT

WORLD BEHIND THE TEXT.

The gospel of Matthew. Most commentators today propose a late first-century dating for Matthew, sometime between 85-90, possibly in Antioch, a stronghold of early Christianity where Peter was revered. Matthew's gospel is not a biography of Jesus nor is it merely a historical presentation of the facts of Jesus' life and ministry. The destruction of the Temple by the Romans in B.C.E 70 had occurred and this had disastrous effects not only on the Jews, but on the relationship between the Jews and the emerging community of disciples of Jesus who were known as Christians, and who called themselves the "church". By the time Matthew was written these disciples were struggling with their identity since many fellow Jews were rejecting Jesus as the Messiah whereas more and more Gentiles were becoming his followers.

Luke's Gospel was written around the middle of the eighth decade of the first century about the same time as Matthew's. Luke had access to the same sources as Matthew namely the Gospel of Mark and the sayings source known as Q. Luke was a Gentile writing for Gentile Christians.

Mustard seed is not, contrary to what Jesus states, the smallest of seeds; orchid as cypress seeds are smaller. Moreover, mustard seeds do not grow into giant trees. The black mustard seed sprouts into a plant that can grow given perfect agricultural conditions, eight to ten feet; therefore, scholars frequently presume this is what Jesus is talking about.

It is clear from ancient literature that some Jews were plating mustard seed. The parable mentions nothing about other crops in the garden. Since mustard can be planted and since mustard has medicinal and gastronomical benefits, there is no reason to see anything untoward, let alone transgressive or impure, about the seed in the garden.



field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'

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Luke 13:18-19

¹⁸ He said therefore, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? ¹⁹ It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.'

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For daily life affected by insufficient and limited resources, reactions of the audience to the great promise of the kingdom of heaven as a negligible grain of growing into a great tree would undoubtedly be received in earnest wonder. The promise of shelter in the shade of the branches of God's great reach would also have been a subversion of order to those who were slaves to the land beneath those branches.

WORLD OF THE TEXT

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

The nature of metaphor itself is such that it leaves Jesus' descriptions of the kingdom largely unarticulated, requiring hearers to draw out the conclusions based on what they know of him, the character of God and the intricacies of life. The kingdom of God as it is compared to a grain of mustard planted in a garden sets up a point of contrast that is "creative of meaning".

How is the kingdom like a tiny planted seed?

Who is the man who planted it?

How is the realm of God like a tree with branches providing shelter?

This is a metaphorical narrative that calls for participation, and leads hearers to a point of decision: will you continue to see signs of the kingdom a futile and diminutive or will you open your eyes to the possibility of a great and hidden reality?

The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven form a pair in both Matthew (13:31-33) and Luke (13:18-21). The pairing by two evangelists reflects the evenhandedness of Jesus in word as well as deed. These parables, one about an experience familiar to men and the other very familiar to women, both portray the extraordinary results that are produced from inauspicious beginnings.

As for the location of the seed in the parable, Luke's garden is only one of several variants. Matthew has the mustard planted in a 'field' and planting mustard in a field is not a problem. Luke may have mentioned the 'garden' in order to make the parable more familiar to his gentile readers.



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THE WORLD IN FRONT OF THE TEXT

Most people have a common mentality that being small is synonymous with being immaterial. However, almost everyone starts small. No matter how big your dreams are, it will start with baby steps and then eventually will gain momentum. Even Jesus started with only 12 disciples and those men are ordinary men that include fisherman, tax collector and common people. But as we all know those few people have started a movement and now 2.2 billion people of the world's population identify themselves as Christians.

A seed will become a plant if it will be properly nourished.

What will it take for us to be nourished?

To speak of the parable as demonstrating that great outcomes arrive from small beginnings is correct, but it is banal. To note what outcomes might occur provides better provocation. Mustard is a curative and one available to anyone. It is part of the good world God gives us, to be used by anyone who finds the plant. The mustard plant offers more than a single person can use. The invitation to partake is the universal one as the birds so neatly demonstrate. Instead of looking at the plant as a noxious weed we might be better off seeing it as a part of the gifts of nature, something so small, allowed to do what it naturally does produces prodigious effects.

The parable speaks of the significance of the seed, that one seed grew into a plant. Thus no seed is, or should be, seen as insignificant: each contains life within it.

The seed parable is set in a garden or local field. The kingdom of heaven is found in what today we might call "our own backyard" in the generosity of nature and in the daily working of men and women. The challenge of the parable can be: don't ask "when" the kingdom comes or "where" it is. The when is in its own good time – as long as it takes for seed to sprout and dough to rise. The where is that it is already present, inchoate, in the world. The kingdom is present when humanity and nature work together, and we do what we were put here to do – to go out on a limb to provide for others and ourselves as well.

References

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