

***A Hermeneutics of Hearing  
Informed by the Parables  
with Special Reference to Mark 4***

KLYNE SNODGRASS  
NORTH PARK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

*Jesus' parables were intended to enable hearing and elicit a response. They assume a hermeneutics of hearing, one that calls for depth listening and includes a hermeneutics of obedience. The Parable of the Sower more than any other is a parable of hearing, even though on the surface Mark 4:11-12 seems to suggest the opposite. An analysis of the Sower, its Markan context, and its background in Isa 6 underscores the importance of hearing and provides a basis for understanding a hermeneutics of hearing.*

*Key words: Parables, hermeneutics, hearing, Mark 4*

I have recently argued that a hermeneutics of hearing is a helpful paradigm for understanding the interpretive process and that hearing is what Scripture seeks from us.<sup>1</sup> Such a hermeneutic has a built-in complexity, for the Hebrew word שָׁמַע and the Greek word ἀκούειν have a range of at least eight nuances for which these words for hearing are used: literally to hear sound; to understand a language; to understand in the sense of grasping meaning or significance; to recognize; to discern; to pay attention; to agree with, accept, or believe what is said; and to obey. God seeks real and complete hearing of his message, one that hears correctly, discerns, affirms, and responds with obedience to what God speaks. The parables of Jesus contribute directly to a hermeneutics of hearing, especially in the discussion of the purpose of parables in Mark 4 and parallels.

Hearing is the most important of all our senses, those receptors by which we order our world—God's world. This might seem like an undue exaggeration. None of our sensory abilities is unimportant, but

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1. "Reading to Hear: A Hermeneutics of Hearing," *HBT* 24 (2002): 1-32.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, following Aristotle, argues for the primacy of hearing. While other senses are limited to their own arena, hearing language provides an avenue to the whole of life, not just because one can hear about the other sense arenas, but because with hearing one is able to listen to the *logos*.<sup>2</sup> Language opens a new dimension whereby tradition, the past, is made available to us and we are allowed to understand who we are. All that ancient Greeks intended with *logos* may be uncertain, but for Christians, hearing the *Logos* is life itself and no human option exceeds this privilege. A hermeneutics of hearing is comprehensive, much more than merely hearing sounds. It is primarily about response. In fact, we could even speak of really "hearing" what we see.

Parables provide one of the most effective avenues to real hearing. They "dial in a radio frequency" so that we may hear. Because of their vividness and their frequent surprises, although they are not noisy, parables provide a megaphone, allowing God to break through our deafness. Other metaphors are helpful for understanding parables as well. Parables are lenses through which one is allowed to see; they provide an angle of vision for insight. They are handles for understanding the kingdom, just as in rabbinic Judaism they are handles for understanding the Torah. But possibly Søren Kierkegaard's discussion of indirect communication is the most helpful. He shows that parables are indirect communication that "deceives you into the truth" and that all ethical communication is unconditionally indirect communication.<sup>3</sup> To actually move people to act, not merely to inform them, indirect communication is necessary.

Parables are indirect communication intended to enable hearing and move people to response. More than anything else, parables seek

2. H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), 420. See Aristotle, *On Sense and Sensible Objects* 437a, and *Metaphysics* 980b. See Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking* (trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi; New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 59, for a discussion of Heraclitus, Fragment B 50, which also speaks of listening to the *logos*.

3. Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers* (ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 1.282, 288, 1060: "This Socratic thesis is of utmost importance for Christianity: Virtue cannot be taught; that is, it is not a doctrine, it is a being-able, an exercising, an existing. . . . Here I come again to my thesis—Christianity is not a doctrine but an existence-communication." Note his concern for the question what it is to communicate (1.304). He does not disparage direct communication and says ethical-religious communication, namely, Christian communication, requires both direct and indirect methods. He accuses preachers of being like gymnastics coaches who cannot swim themselves but instruct people in swimming (1.309). Kierkegaard was, of course, a master in using parables. For a discussion of Kierkegaard's method and its relevance for preaching, see Fred Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 79-100. For a collection of his parables, see Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Parables of Kierkegaard* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

to elicit a response. Even if they do not explicitly ask for a decision, as many of them do, virtually all of them intend to force a response. If one considers the 38 narrative parables of Jesus,<sup>4</sup> 28 have explicit questions (either at the beginning, within the narrative, or at the end).<sup>5</sup> They confront, engage, force thought, and promote action. The parables are pointed and clinching arguments for a too-often slow-minded or recalcitrant audience, to move them to action. Approximately one-third of Jesus' teaching in the synoptics is in parables. If you wish to hear Jesus, you must hear the parables, and they are designed to stimulate hearing.

Yet, nowhere has a hermeneutics of hearing been so violated as with Jesus' parables. Stories are so easily abused. For 18 centuries the church allegorized Jesus' parables, interpreting individual features in the parables, not in relation to Jesus and his message, but as pointing to some aspect of the church's theology.<sup>6</sup> Best known, but by no means unusual, is Augustine's allegorizing of every feature of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Even the donkey and the innkeeper have significance, with the former standing for the incarnation and the latter for the Apostle Paul.<sup>7</sup> Adolf Jülicher rightly reacted to such allegorizing, but his rejection of allegorizing led him to the blunder of rejecting allegory and of limiting parables to one point of correspondence between story and reality, with the parables being reduced to pious religious maxims.<sup>8</sup> Parables cannot be limited to having one point, as popular as that notion has been.

In some ways, for parable research the twentieth century was spent trying to get past Jülicher, but in many quarters the voice of Jesus in the parables was increasingly distorted or ignored. C. H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias both brought insight, especially Jeremias, but also dampened the voice of the parables with their own agendas.<sup>9</sup> Dan Via expressed less interest in the voice of the historical

4. The number isolated for analysis by Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

5. The questions are sometimes lost in English translations. Twelve begin with questions (such as "Who from you . . .," or "What do you think?"), and the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower also begins with a question. Another ten have questions within the parable, seven end with questions, and one is in response to a question. Obviously some have more than one question. Another parable is in response to a statement someone else made.

6. For a history of this allegorizing, see Stephen L. Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

7. Augustine, *Quaestiones Evangeliorum* 2.19.

8. Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (2 vols.; Freiburg i. B.: Mohr, 1888-99).

9. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1936), especially with his overemphasis on realized eschatology; Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Scribner's, 1963).

Jesus but sought an understanding of life through an existential reading of the parables.<sup>10</sup> In the last two decades of the twentieth century, the distortion of the parables has intensified so much that often one hears only static. Jesus' parables are often reconstructed to arrive at a supposedly shorter, always more enigmatic—one might say insipid—original.<sup>11</sup> Mary Ann Tolbert, Daniel Patte, and others focus on polyvalence (multivalence) so that the parables have no stable meaning. They may be read in multiple contexts (such as Freud's psychological theories) for multiple meanings.<sup>12</sup> Charles Hedrick argued that Jesus' parables are poetic fictions without reference to the kingdom.<sup>13</sup> William Herzog tore them from Jesus' historical situation, read them not of the kingdom but of oppression, and used the twentieth-century educator Paulo Frière as the lens through which they are to be understood.<sup>14</sup> All of us should be opponents of oppression, but that is no license to abuse Jesus' parables for our own ends. Recent books by Winterhalter and Fisk and by Ford move even more in the direction of a psychologizing approach to find the God within by allegorizing the parables' features as psychological traits (nega-

10. Dan Otto Via Jr., *The Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), x; see also 24, 39 ("... Jesus was not giving information about his situation but an understanding of the possibilities of existence which his situation brought"), 46, 94, and 185.

11. Any number of examples could be listed; typical is Bernard Brandon Scott's approach to the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (*Hear Then the Parable* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989], 237-53). One can understand why Jan Lambrecht asks whether the ingenuity of the biblical scholar has not complicated matters beyond comprehension as he seeks to show the necessity and fruitfulness of the modern exegetical approach, but one is astonished that he adds, "In personal prayer and preaching it may be preferable at times to let oneself be directly inspired by the text itself" (*Once More Astonished* [New York: Crossroad, 1981], 60)!

12. Tolbert (*Perspectives on the Parables* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979]) interpreted the Parable of the Prodigal via Freud as addressing the wish of every individual for harmony and unity within. The younger son corresponds to Freud's id, the elder brother to the superego, and the father to the ego (pp. 102-7). Alternatively, but still with Freud, the parable speaks about the painful nature of emotional ambivalence. The excessive love of the father betrays hostility toward the prodigal, and the anger of the elder brother is displaced onto the father (pp. 107-11). Both interpretations are viewed as legitimate. Daniel Patte offers three competing interpretations of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, all considered valid ("Bringing Out of the Gospel-Treasure What Is New and What Is Old: Two Parables in Matthew 18-23," *Quarterly Review* 10 [1990]: 79-108).

13. Charles W. Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), esp. 25-35.

14. William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech* (Louisville: Westminster /John Knox, 1994). Note p. 7: "What if the parables of Jesus were neither theological nor moral stories but political and economic ones? What if the concern of the parables was not the reign of God but the reigning systems of oppression . . . ?"

tive attitudes, etc.) or to offer subverted readings based on therapists' functions.<sup>15</sup>

Pastors, of course, have a knack for violating the intents of the parables, possibly no one more than Robert Capon, who reads death and resurrection into many of them and grace instead of works into many others, even though the parables are as directly concerned with obedience to the will of God as any collection of materials could be. Capon has read Paul into Jesus.<sup>16</sup> One wonders if anyone is really listening to Jesus' parables.<sup>17</sup>

But the parables beg to be heard. Seven times the expression comes at the end of a parable: "Let the one who has ears to hear hear."<sup>18</sup> They implore the hearer/reader to depth-listening. They urge one to ask "What really needs to be understood from what has been said?" These are stories with communicative intent even when the specific context has not been preserved, as is the case with many of them.<sup>19</sup> They seek not mere hearing but effective hearing, hearing that leads to doing. They assume a hermeneutics of hearing, one that calls for depth-listening and includes a hermeneutics of obedience. Note, for example,

15. Robert Winterhalter with George W. Fisk, *Jesus' Parables: Finding Our God Within* (New York: Paulist, 1993); Richard Q. Ford, *The Parables of Jesus: Recovering the Art of Listening* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). One is reminded of Nicholas Wolterstorff's comment that what impresses him about the historico-critical method is how little there is of the historical and how much of the critical. The discipline has been shaped almost entirely by theological convictions, epistemological convictions, convictions as to what does and does not happen in history, assumptions of influence, and literary and rhetorical convictions as to how reasonable humans would and would not compose texts. The discipline strikes him as reflecting ourselves back to ourselves ("The Importance of Hermeneutics for a Christian Worldview," in *Disciplining Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective* [ed. Roger Lundin; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 25-47; see p. 35).

16. Capon, *Parables of the Kingdom, The Parables of Grace, The Parables of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985, 1988, 1989, respectively). Notice the complaint of Irenaeus (*Haer* 1.8.1) about people twisting the parables and that he faults them specifically for disregarding the order and connection of the Scriptures—the set of relations, if you will.

17. For a recent treatment of the history of parable research, see my "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing: A History of the Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus," in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (ed. Richard N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 3-29.

18. All three versions of the Parable of the Sower: Matt 11:15; 13:43; Mark 4:23; Luke 14:35; also in Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; and 13:9. It also appears as a variant in Mark 7:16. The origin appears to be Ezek 3:27.

19. I have no fear of Jesus' parables' becoming a fossil or trapped in my exegesis just because I resist the idea that they are polyvalent depending on how loosely one defines the term. The parables themselves remain the dominant focus—not my or anyone else's explanation (or reconstruction). But I insist that the parables have a message, they have intent, and must be listened to, sought after, and responded to without hardness of heart.

the Parable of the Two Builders, which contrasts mere hearing with hearing and doing, or the Parable of the Two Sons, which emphasizes doing the will of the Father over affirming the will of the Father.

Other than the two builders in both Matthew and Luke and the two debtors in Luke, the first parable in all three synoptics is the Parable of the Sower,<sup>20</sup> the parable more than any other that is a parable of hearing and the *only* one to which all three synoptists attach the saying "Let the one who has ears to hear hear." This is in many ways one of the most difficult parables,<sup>21</sup> especially the Markan account, which is followed by a logion that seems to view parables as *anti-hearing* instruments. Dan Via even charged that Mark with his predestinarian view is really saying that the parables in themselves are useless,<sup>22</sup> which is difficult to fathom considering the amount of space Mark gives to parables in a Gospel that does not actually record very much of Jesus' teaching. Maybe we have not listened deeply enough to Mark.

That we have not listened deeply to this text may be understandable. Its many problems make it a text we would rather avoid. Note its omission from the standard lectionary. The language of Mark 4:10-12, partly drawn from Isa 6:9-10, is difficult and harsh; it appears to say that Jesus tells parables to keep people from understanding, so they will not repent and be forgiven—the exact opposite of everything we think we know about both Jesus and parables. The interpretation of the Parable of the Sower (vv. 13-20) looks so much like the allegorizing of the early church that Jülicher and many since have rejected it outright, especially since Jeremias argued that so much of the language in the interpretation is not used elsewhere by Jesus but is common in the literature of the early church.<sup>23</sup> But other problems are obvious. The disciples ask about the parables, but only one has been told (unless the riddles from 3:23-27 are included). What is the mystery of the kingdom and why is it given only to the disciples (v. 11)? Who are the outsiders (v. 11) and why are they outside? Is this some type of double predestination? Why is there inconsistency in the interpretation so that both the word and people are sown (vv. 14 and 15-20)? Does Mark have a parable theory that views parables as ununderstandable riddles? Even more, why is this chapter so seemingly disorganized? Jesus is teaching from a boat in 4:1-2, then is

20. Other parabolic sayings and the word παραβολή do occur prior to the Sower as well.

21. Rudolf Bultmann, in fact, thought the meaning of this parable and many others is not recoverable (*The History of the Synoptic Tradition* [trans. John Marsh; New York: Harper & Row, 1963], 199-200).

22. Via, *The Parables of Jesus*, 8-9.

23. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*; and Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 77-78.

*alone* but the disciples are with him in vv. 10-20,<sup>24</sup> but in vv. 35-41 Jesus is back in the boat and it is still the same day. Further, vv. 21-25 insert some seemingly unrelated sayings, and vv. 26-32 record two other parables. Further, what is said in 4:10-12 about the mystery being given to the disciples while others are kept from understanding by parables does not fit with the rest of the Gospel. In the remaining chapters it is the disciples who do not understand and people like the Syrophenecian woman, blind Bartimaeus, or the centurion who do understand.<sup>25</sup>

The solutions for dealing with Mark 4:10-12 are not very satisfying, even if often creative. Jülicher and a number of scholars have rejected these words as inauthentic. The evangelists are to blame for any idea that the parables hide; Jesus' purpose with parables was only to make his thoughts clear and convincing.<sup>26</sup> Jeremias and many others argue that vv. 10-12 were originally used by Jesus but not in this context or specifically about parables. Rather, the logion has to do with Jesus' preaching generally and teaches that the presence of the kingdom has been disclosed to the disciples, but to the outsiders it remains obscure (taking ἐν παραβλάῃς as "in riddles," in keeping with the breadth of the Hebrew term מְשָׁל because they do not recognize his mission and repent. "ἵνα in v. 12 is understood, not as "in order that," but as if it were ἵνα πληρωθῇ, "in order that [the Scripture] might be fulfilled." The difficulty of μήποτε ("lest"; NRSV: "so that . . . not . . .") is removed by noting the similarity of Mark 4:12 to the targum's rendering of Isa 6:10,<sup>27</sup> which has the Aramaic אֲלֵיךְ ("unless"), and arguing that Mark meant "unless" as well, so the passage is really a promise of forgiveness.<sup>28</sup> The solution is almost ingenious, but one is left with the impression that we have "fixed" the text. Further, if Jesus could have held such ideas about revelation to

24. Compare the similar, odd expression in Luke 9:18; obviously the intent in both cases is to indicate that the crowds were not present.

25. See Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 126.

26. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1.135-48. For Jülicher, literally we are left with an either-or situation—either the evangelists or Jesus (p. 148).

27. Mark and the targum agree against the Hebrew and LXX in using participles and third person verbs instead of the imperatives and second person verbs in Isa 6:9 and in using "forgive" instead of "heal" in v. 10.

28. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 13-18. Both the Greek μήποτε and the Aramaic אֲלֵיךְ can mean either "lest" or "perhaps." Note that μήποτε in 2 Tim 2:25 means "if perhaps." Note too that J. F. Stenning's translation of *The Targum of Isaiah* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949) uses "lest" in the translation of Isa 6:10. Cf. Vincent Taylor's comment that Mark's position is "intolerable," yet he too thought 4:11-12 were from something Jesus actually said, only it did not relate to parables (*The Gospel According to Mark*, London: Macmillan, 1959).

his disciples while others were left in the dark for his *teaching* on the kingdom, why could he not have also had such ideas about his teaching in parables?

T. W. Manson thought that Mark 4:12 is simply absurd and offered another way out of the difficulty. He argued Mark misunderstood the ambiguous Aramaic  $\overline{\text{T}}$  as  $\overline{\text{IV}}\alpha$  when it should have been understood as  $\overline{\text{OI}}$ , the relative pronoun "who." The passage only describes the hardness that people already have, not the purpose of Jesus in telling parables.<sup>29</sup>

Some would point to the fact that Matthew at this point has  $\overline{\text{OTI}}$  ("because), not  $\overline{\text{IV}}\alpha$ , and that  $\overline{\text{IV}}\alpha$  can in fact mean "because" (e.g., Rev 14:13; 22:14). Others would argue for the meaning "so that" which is also a legitimate meaning of  $\overline{\text{IV}}\alpha$ .<sup>30</sup>

Without diminishing the difficulties of this text, I would suggest this passage is not only understandable but that its message is important both for understanding Mark and Jesus and for seeing how the parables might inform a hermeneutic of hearing. No doubt, from the space given to this material, which encompasses 4:1-34, Mark thought he was communicating something important. The keys to understanding this section of Mark are: (1) noticing what Mark gives prominence; (2) understanding the significance of the structure of this section; (3) understanding Jesus from his prophetic vocation; and (4) understanding the significance and role of the quotation of Isa 6:9-10 in Mark 4:12.

The item given prominence throughout 4:1-34 is obviously hearing. Mark uses the verb  $\acute{\alpha}\kappa\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\iota\nu$  ("to hear") 13 times in these 34 verses (4:3, 9 [twice], 12 [twice], 15, 16, 18, 20, 23 [twice], 24, and 33). The Parable of the Sower is bracketed by a focus on hearing. Possibly some people hearing this parable would have thought of the *Shema*, but three OT *meshalim* also begin with an encouragement to hear (Judg 9:7; Isa 28:23; Ezek 20:47[21:3 in the Hebrew text]).<sup>31</sup> Other passages begin similarly,<sup>32</sup> which seems to indicate that this introduction is a call to pay close attention. As often noted, the Parable of the

29. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939), 75-80.

30. See the overview of options given by Craig A. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 91-99.

31. See Madeleine Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1977), 45, who also points to *1 En.* 37:2. On the relevance of the *Shema* for understanding the Parable of the Sower, see Birger Gerhardsson, "The Parable of the Sower and its Interpretation," *NTS* 14 (1968): 165-93, whose argument is intriguing but not completely persuasive.

32. Matt 15:10; 21:33; Mark 7:14; 12:29 (in quoting the *Shema*); Luke 18:6; Acts 2:22; 7:2; 13:16; 15:13; 22:1; and Jas 2:5. Is there any significance to the fact that Mark 4:3 uses the present tense, whereas 7:14 uses the aorist (for which the parallel in Matt 15:10 has the present)?

Sower is the key parable, a parable about parables, and the guide to understanding the others. It is in fact a parable about the right hearing of parables.<sup>33</sup> This whole section of Mark is a primer on hearing.

What may seem at first glance like a haphazard arrangement is actually a carefully balanced narrative, the structure of which provides the direction for understanding the whole and the individual parts. Mark's parable discourse is arranged as a chiasmus with the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower in the middle:

- A 4:1-2 Narrative Introduction
- B 4:3-9 Seed Parable
- C 4:10-13 General Statement on Parabolic Method
- D 4:14-20 Explanation of the Parable of the Sower
- C' 4:21-25 General Statements on Parabolic Method
- B' 4:26-32 Seed Parables
- A' 4:33-34 Narrative Conclusion<sup>34</sup>

This is obviously a redactional arrangement (whether Markan or pre-Markan). The narrative of Jesus' teaching from a boat is interrupted at 4:10 to insert other teaching material dealing with the same theme as the Parable of the Sower. The explanation of the Parable of the Sower is emphasized by being placed at the center. The seemingly unrelated statements in 4:21-25 are not unrelated at all; they provide commentary and direction for the interpretation of 4:10-13,<sup>35</sup> as we will see.

A feature of Markan style provides insight for understanding the significance of his structure. Mark's grammar may be more colloquial than the other evangelists', but he is an artist in the way he arranges his material. Often he "intercalates"<sup>36</sup> his material, setting one pericope between two others to provide insight for understanding the matter at hand. An obvious example is the two-stage "seeing" miracle set between the failure of the disciples to see/understand and Peter's deficient "Sight" in his inability to understand what his confession of Jesus means (8:22-26 set between 8:14-21 and 27-33). A second example is the cleansing of the temple, which in Mark (unlike Matthew and Luke) is set between the cursing of the fig tree and the

33. Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable*, 46.

34. See Greg Fay, "Introduction to Incomprehension: The Literary Structure of Mark 4:1-34," *CBQ* 51 (1989): 65-81. A similar five-part chiasmus is favored by some. See Lambrecht, *Once More Astonished*, 86-87.

35. The connection of 4:10-13 and 21-25 is often noted even by those who do not argue for the chiasmic structure adopted above. See Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable*, 53; or Aloysius M. Ambrozic, *The Hidden Kingdom* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1972), 104.

36. Some describe this procedure as "bracketing" or "sandwiching."

withering of the fig tree (11:15-18 set between 11:12-14 and 20-25). Such passages provide implicit commentary for understanding the evangelist's thought.

In chap. 4, vv. 10-12 are intentionally set between the Parable of the Sower and its interpretation to shed light on their intent. In fact, each intercalation in this section provides insight for understanding the individual components. Note, for example, that the first two words of the Parable of the Sower—ἀκούετε, ἰδοὺ (literally, "Be hearing, see," sometimes lost in translations)—reappear in v. 12 from the citation of Isaiah (βλέποντες βλέπωσιν καὶ μὴ ἴδωσιν καὶ ἀκούοντες ἀκούωσιν . . .). At least at the Markan level, Isa 6 has been the *starting point* for framing the material. An additional intercalation is also evident. The Parable of the Sower is bracketed by 4:10-12 with its mention of "those outside" and by 3:31-35, which tells of Jesus' family standing "outside" calling for him and his redefining his family as those who do the will of the Father. At least for Mark we will not hear the gospel unless we see the sets of relations he creates to show the way to understanding.

A caution is in order. Typically Christians read small sections of the NT, and sermons typically and understandably focus on a short pericope. This often leads to distortion, but especially with Mark it can be disastrous, for it does not allow one to hear all the text with the implicit commentary that the narrative offers on itself. We cannot deal adequately with the whole on a given occasion, but we must be sure that we see how the relations within a text work and the implications this has for understanding.

The third and fourth keys for understanding this text—Jesus' prophetic vocation and the role of Isa 6:9-10—may be taken together. As much as anyone among recent authors, N. T. Wright has correctly emphasized that Jesus presented himself as a prophet.<sup>37</sup> Certainly Jesus saw himself as more than a prophet,<sup>38</sup> but the initial model for understanding him is that of a prophet. Like the prophets of the OT, he came announcing both the judgment and deliverance of God. Unlike the prophets, his message was that the long-awaited kingdom was already at work, and with his proclamation of the kingdom he called for repentance and the reconstitution of the nation under his leadership. He presented himself through the language of the prophets (e.g., Luke 4:18-19; Mark 11:17) and in explicit comparison with them (e.g., Luke 4:25-27), and he performed symbolic acts, as they did (both miracles and actions such as the Triumphal Entry). Of most importance for our purposes is the fact that parables (including acted

37. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 147-97, esp. 164-65. See also Scot McKnight, "Jesus and Prophetic Actions," *BBR* 10 (2000): 197-232.

38. Cf., e.g., E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 319-26.

parables) are the language of the OT prophets. Parables are prophetic instruments. They occur especially in contexts of judgment and indictment.<sup>39</sup> Parables enlighten and instruct but often with a message that people do not want to hear. Jesus consciously presented himself as a prophet, and his use of parables was both a fitting and effective means of presenting his prophetic message. Matthew 13:34-35 points precisely to this idea by quoting Ps 78:2 to show that Jesus' teaching in parables fulfills the word of the *prophet*: "I will open my mouth in parables; I will proclaim things hidden from the beginning."<sup>40</sup>

With this awareness of Jesus' prophetic mission, we can begin to understand Isa 6:9-10. If we think that Mark 4:10-13 is difficult, the problem in Isa 6:9-13 is even worse. If Mark wanted to emphasize that Jesus taught to prevent understanding, he could have done a better job by using the even harsher words from Isa 6 that he has omitted. After Isaiah volunteers to be sent by the Lord, in addition to the words Mark quotes, Isaiah is told, "Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look . . . and listen . . . and comprehend . . . and turn and be healed." The words to Isaiah are so harsh that some say they must reflect the stance at the end of his life looking back at the results of his preaching,<sup>41</sup> but that is no solution.

What is the function of these words? Are they not, as C. F. D. Moule argued, a vigorous way of stating the inevitable—that Israel will not listen and repent—and a hyperbolic description of the conditions of the ministry of Isaiah?<sup>42</sup> Are they not even more an expression that we often see in the prophets, that Israel is already too-far gone and that judgment is already decreed? The nation has refused the pleading of Yahweh, and the commission Isaiah receives is to verify their stance and announce their judgment. The passage presupposes that the hardening has already occurred and is being confirmed.<sup>43</sup>

39. See Claus Westermann, *The Parables of Jesus in the Light of the Old Testament* (trans. and ed. Friedemann W. Golka and Alastair H. B. Logan; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 2, 20-30, and 150-60; and my "Parables and the Hebrew Scriptures," in *To Hear and Obey: Essays in Honor of Fredrick Carlson Holmgren* (ed. Bradley J. Bergfalk and Paul E. Koptak; Chicago: Covenant, 1997), 164-77, special issue, *Covenant Quarterly* 55/2-3.

40. Note the connection of this quotation to the Parable of the Treasure Hidden in the Field in Matt 13:44.

41. Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark*, 127; Frank E. Eakin Jr., "Spiritual Obduracy and Parable Purpose," in *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays* (ed. James M. Efird; Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1972), 90.

42. Moule, "Mark 4:1-20 Yet Once More," in *Neotestamentica et Semetica* (ed. E. Earle Ellis and Max Wilcox; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), 100.

43. See also Rikki Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1997) 183-210, who argues that the blindness and deafness imagery reflects a tradition that connects these traditions with idolatry, with people becoming blind, deaf, and without understanding just like their idols.

If we look closer at the few prophetic calls that we have in the OT, such harsh words about the rebelliousness of Israel and the certainty of judgment are regular features. Already in chap. 1 of Isaiah the desperate situation of rebellious Israel is declared. Jeremiah is given a message of judgment and warned that the people will fight against him (1:10-19). Later he is told not to pray for the people, for God will not hear (7:16), and using the words right from Isa 6:9, Jeremiah is directed to tell Judah, "Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but do not see, who have ears, but do not hear" (5:21). Similarly Ezekiel at the very first is told he is going to a nation of rebels who will oppose him and, whether they will hear or refuse to hear, they will know that a prophet has been among them (2:2-7). He is told that the house of Israel will not listen, for they "have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart" (3:7). Later Ezekiel also receives a word from the Lord taken straight from Isa 6:9: "Son of man, you are living in the midst of a rebellious house who have eyes to see, but do not see, and who have ears to hear, but do not hear because they are a rebellious house" (Ezek 12:2; cf. also Zech 7:11).

At the same time with each of these prophets, despite the message of judgment and the expectation that the people will not respond, still the word of God is to be proclaimed, a word that includes both judgment and hope for future deliverance and restoration. It is absurd to read Isa 6:9-10 literally, as if Isaiah is to prevent repentance. If the desire is to prevent hearing, the easiest route is not to send a messenger.<sup>44</sup> Our problem is that we read pericopes, not documents, and in the process do not see the sets of relations the various authors weave. When the commission of Isaiah is seen in light of the earlier chapters of Isaiah with their announcement of judgment for failure to respond to Yahweh and in light of the larger message of hope and the remnant as the foundation for the restoration of God's people, then it is clear that these words are not meant in a crassly literal way. The remnant idea is explicitly present in Isa 6:13 with its reference to the "holy seed."<sup>45</sup> Even the harsh message of Isaiah seeks hearers and gains disciples (8:16-18). The function of this language is both a warning of what is happening—that judgment is inevitable, that the people have not and will not respond—but it is also a challenge and an invitation for people not to remain in such insensitivity but to hear the word and repent. As with Ezekiel, whether they will hear or not, they will know that a prophet has been among them.

44. Cf. Eakin, "Spiritual Obduracy and Parable Purpose," 89-99, who describes the commission of Isaiah as "a masterful study in contradiction" (p. 89).

45. See also Isa 1:9; 10:20-22; Jer 23:3; 31:7; Ezek 11:13; et al.

Four things are obvious: (1) the harsh language of Isa 6:9-10 is a prophetic instrument for warning and challenge; (2) it expresses the certainty of God's coming judgment for a people who are past hearing; (3) the words of Isa 6:9 became the classic expression to speak of the people's hardness of heart; and (4) the proclamation still expects some (a remnant) to hear and follow.

We should note that the quotation of Isa 6:9-10 and ideas such as messages' being hidden from some and revealed to others and of difficulty in hearing or the refusal to hear are not confined to Mark. They appear elsewhere in the Gospels and in the rest of the NT. Revelation from God is not merely thrown out and easily grasped. In Matt 11:25-26/Luke 10:21-22 Jesus thanks the Father for hiding "these things from the wise and understanding and revealing them to infants" (cf. 1 Cor 2:6-16). In Luke 19:41-42 Jesus wept over Jerusalem because the things of peace had been hid from its eyes. In John 6:60 in response to difficult teaching from Jesus, some of his disciples asked, "Who is able to hear him?" In John 8:43 Jesus asks why the people do not understand what he says and answers, "Because you are not able to hear my word," which in the context clearly means they are not willing to hear. In John 12:39-40 at the close of Jesus' public ministry, Isa 53:1 and 6:10 are quoted to explain the unbelief of the Jews, and just prior to the quotation of Isa 6:10 the evangelist notes: "Because of this, they were not able to believe." The language of being able to hear or believe is reminiscent of Mark 4:33: "With many such parables he was speaking the word to them even as they were able to hear." Finally, Luke quotes Isa 6:9-10 at the end of the book of Acts to explain the failure of the Jews in Rome to believe Paul's preaching.

Is the use of Isa 6:9-10 merely the early church's attempt to explain why the Jewish people did not believe, or is more going on? From the texts just listed and numerous others it is clear that the Word of God is offered broadly to all, but its effect is not automatic or guaranteed. It is not a light message, the equivalent of baby food, even if the word "infants" is used metaphorically to describe those who take it in. The Word must be discerned and incorporated. It seeks response, the engagement of the human will. It seeks to call people out of their present stagnation, but too often the response is superficial.

Mark 4:10-12 is not merely an attempt to explain why the Jews did not accept the Messiah, nor is it evidence of a Markan parable theory in which parables are not understandable and obfuscate. Given that Mark has only four narrative parables, one of which is understood quite well by Jesus' opponents (12:1-12), such a parable theory has little in its favor. Mark 4:10-12 has been the *reference point* for the organization of this section of the Gospel, but the quotation from Isa 6:9-10 is not merely a Markan instrument. Every indication is that

Jesus identified himself as a prophet and took these classic words about hardness of heart to describe his own ministry, just as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah had done. What had happened with Isaiah and regularly with the prophets in encountering unwilling hearers was also true of his ministry.<sup>46</sup> Jesus drew an intended parallel between his ministry and the book of Isaiah. This is evidenced in non-Markan texts drawing on Isa 61, such as Luke 4:18-19 and Matt 11:5-10 / Luke 7:22-27.<sup>47</sup> There is a correspondence in history between the prophet Isaiah and the prophet Jesus.<sup>48</sup>

Isaiah 6:9-10 is more important for this whole context than is often realized. The Parable of the Sower is not a parable that Mark or his tradition has brought into relation to Isa 6. Rather, as several others have seen, *the Parable of the Sower is based on the ideas in Isa 6:9-13*. It is odd that so many ignore the fact that Isa 6 deals with hearing and explicitly refers to the remnant with the image of the "holy seed" (Isa 6:13c). This set of relations is hardly a coincidence. John Bowker argued that the Parable of the Sower and its interpretation should be understood as an exposition of Isa 6.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Tom Wright argued that the Parable of the Sower depicts Yahweh again sowing true Israel, the remnant, in its own land, and in the process the parable acts by creating the situation where having ears to hear is one of the marks of the true remnant. For Wright the parable is a story of the return from exile taking place in Jesus' own work.<sup>50</sup> Wright is guilty at times of overreading the parables,<sup>51</sup> but his instincts on the Sower are essentially correct. By adapting Isa 6, the parable points to the fact that God's seed is being sown in the proclamation of the Kingdom, and involvement in that Kingdom depends on the reception that the proclaimed seed receives in human ears and hearts. Such an

46. See Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 101-6; and Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark*, 184-210.

47. And other texts such as the Beatitudes; Matt 21:33//; 24:29//; and at least at some level, the use of the suffering servant ideas.

48. On correspondence in history as an interpretive device, see my "Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament," in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues* (ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 215 and 224.

49. Bowker, "Mystery and Parable: Mark iv.1-20," *JTS* 25 (1974): 300-317; see esp. 311. He and others point to the added emphasis given the seed in the targum on Isa 6:13 as making such a suggestion even more plausible. Cf. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 100.

50. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 230-39. Cf. Matt 15:13. See also Gerhard Lohfink, "Die Metaphorik der Aussaat im Gleichnis vom Sämann (Mk 4, 3-9)," in *A cause de l'Évangile: Études sur les Synoptics et les Actes* (Paris: Cerf, 1985), 211-28.

51. See my "Reading and Overreading the Parables in *Jesus and the Victory of God*," in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God* (ed. Carey Newman; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 61-76.

approach does not presuppose that Mark 4:1-20 was originally a unit;<sup>52</sup> it presupposes only that Isa 6 is the origin of the thinking that led to the creation of the parable.

Some debate the degree to which Jesus' audience would identify the intent of the seed, but an examination of the metaphor shows the correctness of Wright's approach. Israel's promised restoration after exile is frequently expressed in terms of planting and sowing.<sup>53</sup> Seeds, which are not mentioned explicitly in either the parable or the interpretation, are used metaphorically in the OT and Judaism often to refer to people being sown,<sup>54</sup> less frequently to instruction, whether God's word (or law) or human teaching,<sup>55</sup> or even evil being sown,<sup>56</sup> and obviously at times the seed refers to the Kingdom.<sup>57</sup> J. Marcus suggested that the seed is a fixed metaphor for God's word and that people would not have needed an explanation,<sup>58</sup> but this is the less-frequent use. M. Boucher argued that the audience would not know the intent of the seed metaphor until it was explained.<sup>59</sup> Possibly, but so many OT texts point to God planting or sowing his people that the first thought—for those with ears to hear—is that the sowing is a metaphor for God's activity of restoring his people.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, that

52. Contra W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 2.377.

53. A point made by Paul Garnet ("The Parable of the Sower: How the Multitudes Understood It," in *Spirit Within Structure* [ed. Edward J. Furcha; Allsion Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1983], 39-54, esp. 41) and Michael P. Knowles, who suggested that *Jub.* 11:10-24 provides a background for the Parable of the Sower ("Abram and the Birds in *Jubilees* 11: A Subtext for the Parable of the Sower," *NTS* 41 [1995]: 145-51). Numerous texts describe Israel and especially its restoration as God's plant. See Exod 15:17; 2 Sam 7:10; 1 Chr 17:9; Ps 1:3; 44:3; 80:8-19; Isa 5:1-7; 40:24; 60:21; 61:3 (is there a connection between the terebinth in this text and the terebinth in 6:13?); Jer 18:9; 24:6; 31:27; 32:41; 42:10; Ezek 17:22-24; 31:8-11; Hos 2:22-23; Amos 9:15; Zech 10:8-9; *Pss. Sol.* 14:3-4; *Jub.* 1:16; 7:34; *I En.* 10:16; 62:8; 93:10; 1QS 8:5; and 1 QH 6:15-17.

54. In addition to texts listed in the previous note, see Matt 13:38; 2 Esd 5:48; 8:41-45; in 2 Bar 70:2 the seed seems to be the actions of evil and good people.

55. 2 Esd 9:31-37; cf. Isa 55:10-11; see also Hippocrates III; Quintilian, *Inst.* 5.11.24. Burton L. Mack points to these and other texts and argues with reference to Hellenistic hearers that cultivation is the foundational analogy for culture in general ("Teaching in Parables: Elaboration in Mark 4:1-34," in *Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels* [Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge, 1989], 155-56). See also the discussion and texts listed by Lohfink ("Die Metaphorik der Aussaat im Gleichnis vom Sämann) who suggests that the use of the metaphor "seed" to refer to the word appears to be Greek (p. 223).

56. 2 Esdras 4:28-32.

57. Matthew 13:31-32//; Mark 4:26-29.

58. Marcus, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 50.

59. Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable*, 47-48.

60. Craig Evans (*To See and Not Perceive*, 57) and others have argued on the basis of 1QIsa<sup>a</sup> 6:13 that the Qumran community saw themselves as the holy seed.

God "sows" his people presupposes their responding in obedience to the message of God (e.g., Isa 60:21; Jer 18:9-10; 24:6-7).

Two issues of Mark 4 are already implied: (1) the ambiguous relation of the work of God and the response of people—both divine causation and human responsibility are kept in tension; (2) the language of both the word and the people being sown (Mark 4:14-15). This fluidity is inherent in the logic of the metaphor—both the seed and the ground are sown—and is present in Col 1:6 and 10, where the same words are used to describe both the gospel and the people as bearing fruit and increasing.

One might think that the terms "mystery," "those outside," and the use of the harsh sounding ἴνα and μήποτε still point to a hardening theory for Mark, but the evidence is otherwise. "Mystery" in the Semitic world does not refer to what is mysterious and unknown but to revelation, to what would be unknown if God had not revealed it.<sup>61</sup> To say "the mystery of the Kingdom of God has been given to you" is to say that *revelation* from God about the Kingdom has been given to you. (Cf. Matt 13:16-17/Luke 10:23-24)<sup>62</sup> The content of the revelation is surely the present working of the Kingdom in the ministry of Jesus.<sup>63</sup>

Those outside are not some predetermined group but those who have not responded with obedience to the message of Jesus (3:31-35). People place themselves inside or outside by the way they respond to the message, and their position is not then permanently determined. The same language of hardness of heart and of having eyes and not seeing and having ears and not hearing is used of the *twelve* in 8:17-18 (cf. 6:52 and also 3:5). The issue is whether people—disciples or otherwise—respond to the message or are guilty of a hardness of heart that prevents understanding. In fact, given the rest of Mark's Gospel, the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower seems to be *a warning to the disciples as much as it is a description of Jesus' ministry generally*. Note that two of the three sowings that fail describe people who respond positively to the message. They even hear the message with joy, but their hearing is still superficial.

The harsh language of v. 12 is not to be read in a crassly literal way, but neither does it need to be lessened. Its purpose is not to describe a ministry of preventing understanding but to sound the res-

61. In addition to Raymond Brown's *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), see Bowker ("Mystery and Parable," 305-9), who views "mystery" in rabbinic use as referring to something uniquely given and entrusted to Israel by God.

62. Although Luke has a different context for this saying, like Matthew he has placed it in a context dealing with revelation.

63. See Davies and Allison, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 2.389.

onances of traditional language about hardness of heart to serve as a challenge and a warning about how people respond to the message of Jesus by which God is doing his sowing work of restoration.<sup>64</sup> What Mark really intends is quite clear when one sees how the whole passage works. Verse 3 with its call to hear summons attention. The parable's ending—"Let the one who has ears to hear hear"—urges the hearer to depth-listening, to move beyond the surface of the words to understand what is really being talked about. Verses 10-12 describe what typically happened—note the imperfects<sup>65</sup>—when people did respond to the message of the parables by joining themselves to Jesus and seeking further understanding. To them further revelation and explanation about the Kingdom is given; to those who do not do depth-listening but remain at a superficial level, no further revelation comes. They are left with parables that were intended to enlighten, not obfuscate, but their lack of attention to the communicative intent of the parables prevents further progress.

That this is Mark's intent is verified by two other parts of the text. Mark's summary statement in 4:33-34 indicates that Jesus was telling parables *even as people were able to hear*.<sup>66</sup> The parables were intended to meet people at their level and draw them to a deeper message. Verses 21-25 must be understood as commentary on the teaching in parables.<sup>67</sup> The statement that a light is not to be hidden but is to enlighten and the parallel statements that nothing is hidden except that it should be revealed refer to parables. Nothing is hidden in parables but that it should be made clear. This is the nature of parables: they hide in order to reveal<sup>68</sup>—or as Kierkegaard observed, they deceive you into the truths.<sup>69</sup> It is fair to say that v. 22 is the intent of the whole section on parables; nothing is hidden in parables except that it should be brought into the open.

64. The passage is about the hardness of hearts, not the wholesale rejection of Israel.

65. See Moule, "Mark 4:1-20 Yet Once More," 101-2.

66. Contra Ambrozic (*The Hidden Kingdom*, 73-74), I do not accept that 4:33 and 34 represent different stages of the tradition, with v. 34 correcting v. 33.

67. Matthew 13:12 and Luke 8:16-18 parallel Mark 4:21-25 in intent, but Matt 5:15 and Luke 11:33 have sayings similar to Mark 4:21 with reference to discipleship and understanding, respectively. Mark 4:24 is paralleled by Matt 7:2/Luke 6:38, but both of the other evangelists apply the saying to judging others.

68. As any number have argued. See Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable*, 53; Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark*, 120; Wright, *Jesus the Victory of God*, 174-82; and Priscilla Patten, "The Form and Function of Parable in Select Apocalyptic Literature and Their Significance for Parables in the Gospel of Mark," *NTS* 29 (1983), 246-58, esp. 249-52.

69. Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 1.288.

Once again, in v. 23 people are urged to move beyond the surface of the words to really hear. Verses 24-25 warn that people must be careful how they hear, for how they hear will determine their fate. With the measure they measure, it will be added to them. The person who has will be given more, but the person who does not have will lose even what he or she has. This on-the-surface unfair treatment is describing exactly what vv. 10-12 describe, the process of hearing. The way that people respond to the parables determines whether additional revelation is given. Those who respond with real hearing receive added revelation. For those who respond with superficial hearing, even what they have heard is of no effect. The relation between God's work and human response is indeed ambiguous, for the Spirit is the one who enables hearing.<sup>70</sup> Divine enabling and human responsibility for hearing are kept together always. As M. Boucher points out, God assists people in the choices they make.<sup>71</sup> Be careful how you hear.

Is not this the way it always is with any hearing and especially with revelation. Deeper understanding is conditioned upon adequate understanding at elementary levels. No one goes deeper in any subject without appropriate response at the beginning stages.

So far little attention has been given to the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower. Jülicher's rejection of allegory generally and of this interpretation specifically has often derailed consideration. But Jülicher's restriction of parables will not work. Allegorizing is obviously an abuse of communicative intent, but many parables have more than one point of correspondence and must have to perform their task of mirroring reality. However, parable exegesis is not about determining points of correspondence; it is about determining how the analogy works. Parables are analogies. Whether one distinguishes allegory and parable as separate genres is debated. At least one must admit that much of the ink spilled attempting to distinguish the two is less than convincing. It is preferable not to view allegory as a genre at all but merely as a way of thinking.<sup>72</sup> In any case, Jülicher's wholesale rejection of allegory should not be followed. Multiple correspondences exist in a variety of parables and other forms requiring interpretation (such as the visions of Dan 2 and 7).<sup>73</sup> Several other points tell strongly in favor of the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower stemming from Jesus:

70. Cf. Deut 29:4[3 in Hebrew]; Ps 143:8; Isa 50:4-5; see also Deut 30:12-20; and 1QH 1:21: "You have unstopped my ears to marvelous mysteries."

71. Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable*, 60-63. Cf. Rom 1:24-28.

72. See Boucher, *ibid.*, 17-25; and John W. Sider, *Interpreting the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 18-26.

73. For obvious examples see the parables given by Nathan and the wise woman of Tekoa to David (2 Sam 12:1-7 and 14:1-20) and the Prodigal and Elder Son (Luke 15:11-32).

1. The pattern of revelation, lack of understanding, and explanation is paralleled in apocalyptic literature and is a natural teaching device.<sup>74</sup>

2. Without the interpretation, the intent of the parable is unclear, and the alternatives offered to the canonical interpretation are not convincing.<sup>75</sup> Jeremias's explanation emphasizes the eschatological dimension and asserts that despite failure God brings forth his promised triumphant end,<sup>76</sup> which is true, but this diminishes the bulk of the parable. Scott concluded the parable means that in failure and everydayness lies the miracle of God's activity.<sup>77</sup> Surely the parable means more than this.

3. Often those who reject the interpretation as secondary still affirm that it is correct or suggest a meaning close to it.<sup>78</sup>

4. Jeremias's attempt to say that the language of the interpretation is that of the early church, not of Jesus, does not stand up under investigation.<sup>79</sup>

5. The Sower is not identified.

6. This parable is different from most in that it actually is a multiple parable, each part functioning quite naturally.<sup>80</sup>

74. See Eugene E. Lemcio, "External Evidence for the Structure and Function of Mark iv.1-20, vii.14-23 and viii.14-21," *JTS* 29 (1978), 323-38; Patten, "The Form and Function of Parable in Select Apocalyptic Literature," 249-52; see the discussion of a similar form in rabbinic literature by David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone, 1956), 141-50. Mark does have a technique that, no doubt, was true of Jesus' teaching. He records that Jesus taught publicly, and his dose adherents asked for and received further instruction in private (cf. 7:17-23; 9:28; 10:10; and 13:3-4; but also Matt 13:36; 15:12; 17:10, 19; 19:23; Luke 10:23; 11:1; 17:22).

75. Bultmann thought the meaning was not recoverable (see n. 19). Scott (*Hear Then the Parable*, 358), following W. O. E. Oesterley, granted that the parable is pointless without an explanation.

76. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 150-51.

77. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 361-62.

78. Note Davies and Allison, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 2.376 and 398. Cf. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 193.

79. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 77-78. See the critique by Moule, "Mark 4:1-20 Yet Once More," 111-12; and Bowker, "Mystery and Parable," 316. Bowker argued that much of the language results almost inevitably if the passage is related to Isa 6. One should note that Jeremias--not Mark--identified ὁ λόγος in the interpretation as a technical word for the gospel. Λόγος occurs with the article to refer to teaching (mostly Jesus') in Matt 15:12; 19:11 (with a variant), 22//; Mark 1:45; 2:2; 8:32; 9:10. Many of the words that Jeremias lists as *common* in the rest of the NT occur infrequently, as his own footnotes attest.

80. Moule, "Mark 4:1-20 Yet Once More," 109. Jack Kingsbury (*The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13*, 53-54) correctly pointed out that each aspect of the interpretation is a miniature parable in its own right. Moule's point is that any one of the descriptions as an isolated pericope would not have caused a problem.

7. The interpretation fits the parable well, if indeed the issue is hearing.<sup>81</sup> (Compare with *m. 'Abot* 5:15, which lists four types of people who listen to the sages.)

The interpretation is shaped by Mark to the needs of the church, especially in v. 19, but that the parable originally is about how one hears the message of Jesus is, I think, evident.

The striking contribution made clear by the interpretation is that some hearing seems positive when in fact it is without value. Even hearing the word with joy is not sufficient. Temporary hearing, even accompanied by right feeling, is not enough, nor is hearing that looks right but remains unfruitful, surely a metaphor for lack of obedience. The only hearing that is valid hearing is hearing that results in productive living, a hearing that is faithful and obedient.

Mark does not use the word "heart" in this context, but the issue in the whole section is whether one is guilty of a hardness of heart that prevents hearing or whether one will really hear the word and take it into one's being (4:20 and 15). We find that depth-listening has a double intent. Not only does it mean that one listens beyond superficiality, listens deeply to the message of the text, it also means that one listens deep within oneself in the controlling center of one's being. As an Egyptian proverb puts it, "The heart makes of its owner a hearer or non-hearer"<sup>82</sup>

## REFLECTIONS

A variety of questions concerning this parable and its context have not and cannot be treated in the confines of this paper, but that the whole section is instruction about hearing is beyond doubt. Jesus has woven a set of relations as he called on the resonances of Isa 6 to speak about response to his own ministry. Mark has woven his own set of relations as he has framed several parts of Jesus' teaching to provide commentary on his own text.

From this chapter of Mark alone it is clear that hearing is no light task. The text points to other messages that choke out the hearing God seeks. As has always been the case with humans, but even more so in our technological age, we are bombarded with messages, some of which are hazardous to life. Further, life is always busy so that we

81. Bowker, "Mystery and Parable," 310; Gerhardsson, "The Parable of the Sower and Its Interpretation," 186-93; Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable*, 45-53; Moule, "Mark 4:1-20 Yet Once More," 109-13.

82. Quoted by Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark*, 192. The words that precede those quoted are: "He who hears is beloved of god, he whom god hates does not hear."

hardly have time to hear. But, as Jesus told Martha, one thing is needed, and that one thing is hearing (Luke 10:38-42).

The Kingdom is a Kingdom of the Word. It is not *only* a Kingdom of the Word, for Jesus by specific acts embodied the Kingdom, but it is a Kingdom of the Word. The Kingdom message projects a world and holds forth a promise. This message and promise demand hearing and response. Faith does indeed come from hearing.

Mark's section on parables underscores the importance of hearing and distinguishes most of the layers of a hermeneutics of hearing. There is hearing that is not much more than hearing sounds, and then there is really hearing (v. 12). Hearing is a choice that one makes to pay attention (v. 3) and involves going beyond surface issues (v. 9). We choose what we will hear, even if we cannot block out noise. We need to "watch" how we are hearing (literally in v. 24), self-observant in our hearing and aware of the dangers in failing to hear. Such watching is a matter of the heart. Hearing is not a temporary exercise but a life of being faithful. Then, as in the OT, real hearing results in obedience (v. 20).

One of the major problems of our churches, of our version of Christianity, is our stultifying passivity. Most pastors would be elated if people heard their preaching with joy. The Parable of the Sower says, "That is not enough." You must produce. The parables call us for Christ's sake—literally—to do something! Really hearing the parables will not lead to the "mild morality" about which Kierkegaard often lamented but a radical cross-bearing, God-imitating response worthy of the name *conversion*. This is the goal of a hermeneutics of hearing.