The Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly:
An Exegetical Analysis of Mark 4:26-29

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And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.” (RSV)

Setting

This parable is found only in Mark, which is notable considering the widely accepted assumption that both Matthew and Luke used Mark as one of their primary sources when writing their gospels, along with the fact that the rest of Mark chapter 4 is present in some form in one or both of the other synoptic gospels. Luke completely skips over the parable, while Matthew replaces it with the parable of the tares, which appears only in his gospel.

Within the gospel context of Mark, the parable of the seed growing secretly is located in the midst of the parabolic teaching discourse of Mark 4, which according to the Evangelist takes place while Jesus is speaking to the crowds from a boat. It is preceded in verses 1-20 by the parable of the sower and its application, which is followed by several brief teachings and admonitions including “take heed what you hear” (Mark 4:24; Aland, 1985, p. 118), and “to him who has will more be given; and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Mark 4:25; Aland, 1985, p. 118). The parable is not accompanied by an application, and is followed immediately by the parable of the mustard seed that grows into “the greatest of all shrubs” (Mark 4:30-32; Aland, 1985, p. 118). Note that in each of these three parables the active ingredient is seed, and the emphasis of each is on some form of growth; all of these are also used to reveal some truth about the kingdom of God, which is one of Mark’s primary themes throughout his gospel (Hultgren, 2000).

Within the life of Jesus as we can reconstruct it, this parable was used in the teaching of the crowds during the time of his ministry. It is difficult to pinpoint when in his ministry this
parable was delivered, as it is included only in Mark, and its context is within a teachings discourse which is likely representative of teachings and parables that he delivered at one or more points throughout his ministry. If we take the situational context in Mark literally, the parable was delivered to a large crowd from a boat on the sea (Mark 4:1; Aland, 1985, p. 113-114). Regardless, it is generally believed to have originated with the earthly Jesus, and was likely used in the context of his listeners questioning how the kingdom would manifest (Hultgren, 2000).

Exegetical Analysis

Some terms that require further definition and explanation in order to facilitate a more complete understanding of the parable include *kingdom of God, sleep and rise night and day, the earth produces of itself, at once he puts in the sickle, and the harvest has come.*

*Kingdom of God.* Mark uses the Greek, *he basileia tou theou*, 14 times within his gospel; based on Jesus’ frequent use of the term from the beginning of his ministry, it is assumed that the idea of the kingdom of God was widely known and understood within the existing Jewish culture; however, the absence of the phrase within the Old Testament (OT) canon indicates that the phrase became a common expression in the interval between the OT writings and the first century AD when Jesus lived and taught. However, there is some indication that Jesus’ idea of the kingdom as that of a dynamic but imminent reality contrasted with the commonly held conception that it was a vague picture for the distant future. The kingdom of God is believed to have been the central theme of Jesus’ ministry within the gospel of Mark (Green, McKnight, & Marshall, 1992).

*Sleep and rise night and day.* Within the Jewish culture, the day began at sundown, as evidenced by the Sabbath beginning at Friday at sundown instead of Saturday at sunup. Thus, the
order of this phrase would be more familiar to the listener within the Jewish culture, and would indicate the progression of life as usual (Hultgren, 2000).

The earth produces of itself. Though the growth of a crop in Jewish tradition was attributed to divine power and not to the earth itself, this phrase emphasizes the fact that the sower did nothing to aid the growth of the seed, and thus can take no credit for its development. Hultgren (2000) identifies the meaning of the Greek for “of itself,” automate, as “without visible cause” (p. 387). Williamson (1973) also points out that the phrase may stress the amazing fertility of the earth’s soil.

At once he puts in the sickle. The farmer may not have a role in the growth of the seed, but he can see the signs that it is time to harvest, and he knows it is his responsibility to do it immediately lest the fruit go to waste.

The harvest has come. This phrase in combination with the previous is an allusion to Joel 3:13, which tells the nations to prepare for war, and uses the sickle-harvest illustration to portray the destruction and judgment of “the day of the Lord” (Joel 3:14), which is believed by some to be the OT equivalent to Mark’s “kingdom of God” (Green, McKnight, & Marshall, 1992). The juxtaposition of the peaceful character of the parable with the apocalyptic message of Joel forces one to either reject Jesus’ idea of the kingdom of God or to adjust their understanding of the manner of its coming from violent to passive on the part of humanity.

Message

The essential message of the parable is that, like the farmer going on with his life while the seed grew, the kingdom of God will come in its own time and without our help. It is a work of God, and anything we do to try and bring it about (or to hinder it, for that matter) will have about as much effect as the farmer’s daily life had on the ripening grain—none (Hultgren, 2000;
Williamson, 1973). Some interpret the farmer’s behavior as carelessness or downright sloth—after all, any farmer knows that in order to ensure a good harvest, the field must be tended continually (Scott, 1989). However, it is not so much the farmer’s neglect that is emphasized but rather his passivity—he understands that it is not up to him to make the seed grow, that only time will bring the harvest; and when it arrives, he knows that he needs to “put in the sickle”. Thus, Jesus turns Joel’s apocalyptic vision of the coming of the “day of the Lord”—which advocated violence and prompted the zealot sects of Jesus’ time—on its head to make clear that the kingdom of God is here, its seeds have been sown, and all that is required now is to wait for God’s perfect timing to signal the harvest (NIB, 1995).

For the early church (and for Mark as well), the message of the parable was twofold. First, it was an encouragement—even though their ministries or efforts may seem to be in vain and fraught with persecution, they need not worry but only wait; for the seeds of the kingdom had been sown by Jesus through his life and resurrection, and as much as things might seem the contrary, the kingdom of God was and is growing and will come to fruition in its own time. Second, it was a warning against both zealots and hyperactive Christians—do not try to bring about the harvest by your own labor or designs, for it is only God who can ripen the grain, and all “help” on our parts is futile (Williamson, 1973).

Application

In today’s world, much of the church’s resources are committed to training, education, evangelism, missions, etc.—anything and everything we can think of to pack the pews and fill the coffers. While each of these goals and undertakings is very important in its rightful place, there are times when it seems that we have shoved God out of the picture and think that through all of our programs and seminars, we can bring about the harvest on our own. It is important to
remember, however, that no matter how many members our church has or how many programs we offer, the kingdom of God continues to grow and ripen at its own pace—we go about our daily lives, and the harvest nears, though we know not how.

Thus, while both churches and individual Christians need to seek to align themselves with the will of God so that they can know the time and be ready to “put in the sickle” at the harvest, they also need to realize that their efforts are not necessary for God to bring about the fruition of his kingdom. They can also take heart at the encouragement that, regardless of the pervasive obstacles in the world, God’s kingdom will come, and God’s will will be done.
Footnotes

1. All biblical references are from the Revised Standard Version of the scriptures utilized in Aland’s Synopsis.

2. Note the “law of threes”—there are three segments (he plants, he waits, he harvests); and three phases to the growth of the seed (blade, ear, grain).

This is a superior paper, perhaps the best I have graded so far.

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