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Edwin A. Abbott

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

THE PARABLES OF SOWING

[Mark iv. 1—34]

§ I. *Christ's "parables" or "things hidden"*¹

MATTHEW concludes his exposition of what he calls Christ's "parables" with the words "That it might be fulfilled which

¹ In this chapter it has not been found possible to treat of small differences of expression in the Synoptic texts printed below. One of them—the passage where Luke (viii. 13) substitutes "in time of temptation they *fall away*," for the tradition of Mark (closely followed by Matthew) "When tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, straightway they *stumble*"—will be referred to later on in discussing Mk vi. 3 "and they were offended in him." The present chapter does not enter into verbal detail except where some Marcan phrase omitted or altered by Luke demands consideration.

In the parallel passages printed below, and for the most part in others printed in footnotes, R.V. text is followed (with a very few occasional deviations indicated by brackets) as being convenient for rapid reference enabling the reader to take a broad view of the subject under consideration. But in the detailed study of the Greek text, R.V. text is frequently departed from.

Here and elsewhere the parallel Synoptic texts are printed below in full, not for continuous reading along with the remarks made above, but for the convenience of rapid reference when the reader desires to know the context of any passage under discussion.

Mk iv. 1—20 (R.V.)	Mt. xiii. 1—23 (R.V.)	Lk. viii. 4—15 (R.V.)
(1) And again he began to teach by the sea side. And there is gathered unto him a very great multitude, so that he entered into a boat, and	(1) On that day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side. (2) And there were gathered unto him great multitudes,	(4) And when a great multitude came together, and they of every city resorted unto him, he spake by a parable:

A. L.

I (Mark iv. 1—20)

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was spoken by the prophet, saying, 'I will open my mouth in

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| <p>Mk iv. 1—20 (R.V.)
<i>contd.</i></p> <p>sat in the sea; and all the multitude were by the sea on the land.</p> <p>(2) And he taught them many things in parables, and said unto them in his teaching,</p> <p>(3) Hearken: Behold, the sower went forth to sow:</p> <p>(4) And it came to pass, as he sowed, some [seed] fell by the way side, and the birds came and devoured it.</p> <p>(5) And other fell on the rocky [ground], where it had not much earth; and straightway it sprang up, because it had no deepness of earth:</p> <p>(6) And when the sun was risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.</p> <p>(7) And other fell among the thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit.</p> <p>(8) And others fell into the good ground, and yielded fruit, growing up and increasing; and brought forth, thirtyfold, and sixtyfold, and a hundredfold.</p> <p>(9) And he said, Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.</p> <p>(10) And when he was alone, they that</p> | <p>Mt. xiii. 1—23 (R.V.)
<i>contd.</i></p> <p>so that he entered into a boat, and sat; and all the multitude stood on the beach.</p> <p>(3) And he spake to them many things in parables, saying, Behold, the sower went forth to sow;</p> <p>(4) And as he sowed, some [seeds] fell by the way side, and the birds came and devoured them:</p> <p>(5) And others fell upon the rocky places, where they had not much earth: and straightway they sprang up, because they had no deepness of earth:</p> <p>(6) And when the sun was risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.</p> <p>(7) And others fell upon the thorns; and the thorns grew up, and choked them:</p> <p>(8) And others fell upon the good ground, and yielded fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.</p> <p>(9) He that hath ears (<i>some anc. auth. add to hear</i>), let him hear.</p> <p>(10) And the disciples came, and said</p> | <p>Lk. viii. 4—15 (R.V.)
<i>contd.</i></p> <p>(5) The sower went forth to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden under foot, and the birds of the heaven devoured it.</p> <p>(6) And other fell on the rock; and as soon as it grew, it withered away because it had no moisture.</p> <p>(7) And other fell amidst the thorns; and the thorns grew with it, and choked it.</p> <p>(8) And other fell into the good ground, and grew, and brought forth fruit a hundredfold. As he said these things, he cried, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.</p> <p>(9) And his disciples asked him</p> |
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parables, I will utter [*things*] *hidden* from the foundation [of the

Mk iv. 1—20 (R.V.)
contd.

were about him with the twelve asked of him the parables.

(11) And he said unto them, Unto you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all things are done in parables:

(12) That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest haply they should turn again, and it should be forgiven them.

(13) And he saith unto them, Know ye not this parable? and how shall ye know all the parables?

(14) The sower soweth the word.

(15) And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; and when they have heard, straightway cometh Satan, and taketh away the word which hath been sown in them.

(16) And these in like manner are they that are sown upon the rocky [places], who, when they have heard the word, straightway receive (*λαμβάνουσιν*) it with joy;

(17) And they have no root in themselves, but endure

Mt. xiii. 1—23 (R.V.)
contd.

unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables?

(11) And he answered and said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.

(12) For whosoever hath,... to him...

(13) Therefore speak I to them in parables; because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.

.....

(15) ...Lest haply they should...and should turn again, and I should heal them.

.....

(18) Hear then ye the parable of the sower.

(19) When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, [then] cometh the evil [one], and snatcheth away that which hath been sown in his heart. This is he that was sown by the way side.

(20) And he that was sown upon the rocky places, this is he that heareth the word, and straightway with joy receiveth (*λαμβάνων*) it;

(21) Yet hath he

Lk. viii. 4—15 (R.V.)
contd.

what this parable might be.

(10) And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to the rest in parables; that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.

(11) Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God.

(12) And those by the way side are they that have heard; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word from their heart, that they may not believe and be saved.

(13) And those on the rock [are] they which, when they have heard, receive (*δέχονται*) the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe,

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world]¹.” This is a free quotation from a Psalm of Asaph, “I will open my mouth in a parable², I will utter *enigmas*, or, *riddles* of old³.” The “riddles” appear to be the mysterious dispensations by which God is described in this long Psalm as

Mk iv. 1—20 (R.V.)
contd.

for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, straightway they stumble.

(18) And others are they that are sown among the thorns; these are they that have heard the word,

(19) And the cares of the world (*or*, age), and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.

(20) And those are they that were sown upon the good ground; such as hear the word, and accept it, and bear fruit, thirtyfold, and sixtyfold, and a hundredfold.

Mt. xiii. 1—23 (R.V.)
contd.

not root in himself, but endureth for a while; and when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, straightway he stumbleth.

(22) And he that was sown among the thorns, this is he that heareth the word; and the care of the world (*or*, age), and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.

(23) And he that was sown upon the good ground, this is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; who verily beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

Lk. viii. 4—15 (R.V.)
contd.

and in time of temptation fall away.

(14) And that which fell among the thorns, these are they that have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of [this] life, and bring no fruit to perfection.

(15) And that in the good ground, these are such as in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, hold it fast, and bring forth fruit with patience.

¹ Mt. xiii. 35 ἀνοίξω ἐν παραβολαῖς τὸ στόμα μου, ἐρεύξομαι κεκρυμμένα ἀπὸ καταβολῆς.

² Ps. lxxviii. 2 (LXX) ἀνοίξω ἐν παραβολαῖς (Aq. ἐν παραβολῇ, Sym. διὰ παροιμίας) τὸ στόμα μου.

³ Ps. lxxviii. 2 (LXX) φθέγξομαι προβλήματα ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, Aq. δμβρήσω αἰνίγματα ἐξ ἀρχῆθεν, Sym. ἀναβλύσω προβλήματα ἀρχαία. The Heb. ַּיִּתְּ=אֵינִיגְמָא (4), דִּיגְגָמָא or דִּיגְגָשִׁיס (2), פְּרֹבְלָהָמָא (10). Πρόβλημα (Judg. xiv. 12—19) means (8 times) “riddle.” In Ps. xlix. 4 “I will open my *enigma* on the harp,” the “enigma” appears to be the temporary prosperity of those who fear not God and who are (*ib.* 20) ‘like the beasts that perish.’ Matthew paraphrases “riddle” as

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permitting Israel to rebel against Him and to need His chastening in the course of their national growth. The growth went on, but, along with it, there went apparent waste. Isaiah puts such a “riddle” venturesomely before us when he represents Israel as crying “O Lord, why dost thou make us to err from thy ways, and *hardenest our heart* from thy fear¹?” Isaiah also writes “Thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour²”; and he represents even the Chosen Servant, in apparent discouragement, as saying—or at all events as having once said to the Lord—“I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought and vanity³.”

Jesus is brought before us by all the Synoptists, in the Parable of the Sower, as recognising the danger of converting the God of Israel into “a God that hides Himself.” According to Mark and Luke, He places this danger before His disciples in language borrowed from Isaiah about a judicial sentence of blindness (“in order that, seeing, they may see and yet not

κεκρυμμένα. But Paul retains the thought in 1 Cor. xiii. 12 βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἑσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι—the only N.T. instance of αἰνίγμα.

In Mk iv. 11 ἐκείνους δὲ τοῖς ἔξω ἐν παραβολαῖς τὰ πάντα γίνεται, “for those outside *all things take place* in parables,” τὰ πάντα γίνεται has a force that seems to have escaped Matthew and Luke. The parables were not wholly “parables” (that is, obscure sayings, as in Ezek. xx. 49 “Doth he not speak *parables* (לְשׁוֹר)?”) to those who had some power of spiritual hearing and seeing. Jesus endeavoured to teach with clearness, as the actors in a play try to speak with clearness. But “all things took place in parables” for those who were deaf to the voice of the Spirit that inspired the Teacher. Similarly, for the deaf, in a theatre, “*all things take place* in dumb show.”

¹ Is. lxiii. 17 (where R.V. margin refers us to Is. vi. 10, and Jn xii. 40). Ibn Ezra accepts the words on the ground that “God is the highest, first cause of everything,” but adds other explanations.

² Is. xlv. 15, where Ibn Ezra protests against the paraphrase “an invisible God.” Comp. *ib.* lvii. 17 “For the iniquity of his covetousness...I hid [myself].”

³ Is. xlix. 3—4 “He said unto me, Thou art my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified. But I said, I have laboured....”

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behold")¹. The language seems to represent the teaching by parables as itself causing, and intended to cause, the blindness. Matthew softens this. John, on the other hand, commenting on the reasons why the Jews did not accept the teaching of Jesus, says, "For this cause *they were not able to believe*, because Isaiah said again, *He hath blinded their eyes and he hardened their heart, lest they should see with their eyes and perceive with their heart*, and should turn, and I should heal them²."

This "riddle," or "dark saying," about the "hardening" of Israel's heart by God, is one side of what Paul calls a "mystery" when he says to the Romans "I would not, brethren, have you ignorant of this *mystery*... that a *hardening* in part hath befallen Israel³." But there is another side, expressed in the following words—"until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in"—so that the "mystery," as a whole, means the issue of good out of evil, and of redemption out of stumbling. The recognition of this particular "mystery," is a comfort to Paul as a teacher of the Gospel⁴. A similar recognition of the general "mystery" of the Gospel's success through apparent failure seems to be implied in the Parable of the Sower, or rather in the explanation of it subsequently given by Jesus when He says to the disciples—in Mark—"Unto you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God." Justin Martyr says, in his only reference to this Parable, "As my Lord said, 'The sower went forth to sow the seed, and some fell... and some on good ground'; I must speak, then, in the hope that there may be

¹ So Mk iv. 12 with "*in order that*," ἵνα... μὴ ἴδωσιν and sim. Lk. viii. 10 ἵνα... μὴ βλέπωσιν, but Mt. xiii. 13 with "*because*," ὅτι βλέποντες οὐ βλέπουσιν.

² Jn xii. 39—40. Comp. *ib.* ix. 39 "For judgment came I into this world, that they that see not may see; and that they that see may become blind," with the following question of the Pharisees "Are we also blind?" and Christ's reply.

³ Rom. xi. 25.

⁴ Rom. xi. 25—33 concluding "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God!"

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good ground somewhere¹." And Origen, quoting words peculiar to Mark, "He that soweth soweth the word," says "Who are they that sow? It is those who bring forth the word of God in the Church. Let the teachers therefore hearken...", and the context warns us that the word of God must not be "contaminated by those who sow it²."

These two ancient references warn us against assuming that the Parable of the Sower was intended merely to teach every disciple of Christ to be on his guard against the evil influences that might destroy the seed of the Gospel in his own soul. It teaches that, but it teaches also more than that. It is adapted for him as a preacher of the Gospel—which every disciple of Christ is supposed to be—as well as for him as a hearer of it. In the Psalm already referred to, Asaph begins by saying "Give ear, O my people, to my law," and terminates his "riddles," or "dark sayings," by shewing how Israel, through innumerable failures, was led at last successfully into the fold of its Shepherd³. Jesus, preparing His disciples to proclaim the New Law, teaches them that there are as many phases of failure as of success⁴; and His allusion to Isaiah indicates that He perceived Israel itself, the Chosen People—with its bewildering mixture of arrogance and ignorance, spiritual possibilities and carnal realisations—to be in some sense a failure and a "riddle⁵."

¹ *Tryph.* § 125.

² Origen, *Levit. Hom.* xii. 7 (Lomm. ix. 396). Origen is referring to the "contamination" mentioned in Lev. xxi. 14—15. But his words suggest that the "birds" and "thorns" and other influences that destroy the seed of the Gospel, might be mentioned in warnings to teachers as well as to hearers.

³ Ps. lxxviii. 1, 70—72.

⁴ The three classes of success, recognised in Mk iv. 8 (Mt. xiii. 8), Mk iv. 20 (Mt. xiii. 23) are not recognised in the parall. Lk. viii. 8, 15.

⁵ Compare Pope's sceptical couplet on Man as the angels regard him:—

"Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled,
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world."

Essay on Man, ii. 17—18.

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But every Hebrew prophet knew that there was to be a solution to the "riddle" of Jehovah and a success through His temporary appearances of failure, so that when Isaiah heard the astounding message, "Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears," he answered at once, "Lord, how long¹?" knowing that this was but a means to an end. Jesus could not have fallen below this standard of prophetic hopefulness. The three Synoptists have variously reported His quotation of Isaiah's words, and the Fourth Evangelist has quoted them in his own person in a separate form². These variations must be carefully studied. But we must study them always on the lines of Hebrew and Jewish thought, and always in adherence to the rule that, where the Gospels vary, a difficult and rough Hebraistic tradition is probably truer than a smooth Hellenistic form of it.

 § 2. "Hear ye," in Mark³

Matthew and Luke omit this, and so does the Diatessaron. It might allude to the "hear thou" in Deuteronomy ("Hear thou, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord⁴"). But there would seem to be more appropriateness in an allusion to the Psalm of Asaph above quoted "Hearken thou, O my people, to my law... I will open my mouth in a *parable*⁵." Matthew and

¹ Is. vi. 10—11.
² Jn xii. 40.
³ Mk iv. 2—3 "...and said unto them in his teaching, *Hearken* (ἀκούετε)..." om. in Mt. xiii. 3, Lk. viii. 4—5. Comp. the answers to the question as to which was the "first" or great commandment:—Mk xii. 29 (to "one of the scribes") "The first is, *Hear* (ἄκουε), O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, and thou shalt love..." Mt. xxii. 37 (to "a lawyer") "Thou shalt love..." Luke, in a different context, represents "a lawyer" as replying to Jesus (x. 27) "Thou shalt love..." without the prefatory "hear."
⁴ Deut. vi. 4.
⁵ Ps. lxxviii. 1—2 LXX "attend ye (προσέχετε)," Aq. ἐνωρίζου. The Heb. = forms of ἀκούω (3), ἐνωρίζομαι (26), προσέχω (7).

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Luke may have omitted “Hear ye” as being too strong a phrase to introduce a single parable in a course of parabolic teaching in which Jesus (as Mark and Matthew say) “taught” the people “many things in parables.” But if the parable introduces a new spiritual “law” in which two kinds of “hearing” are distinguished, and the right kind of “hearing” is regarded as resulting in a regeneration of the hearer, then Mark is justified in the prominence that he gives to the Saviour’s initial command to “hearken.”

John—though he never represents Jesus as saying “Hearken ye,” or as quoting the formula “Hear, O Israel”—distinguishes in a very careful and subtle way between passive hearing and receptive hearing¹. When Jesus for the first time mentions “hearing,” it is in a dialogue with Nicodemus to whom He is attempting to explain the doctrine of regeneration through the Spirit². After first stating it in general terms (“except *any one* be born from above”) He insists that it applies to Nicodemus himself and to his associates, the Pharisees, who are deaf to the inner meaning of the Spirit: “Marvel not that I said unto thee that *thou and thy associates*³ must be born from above. The Spirit breatheth, or bloweth, where it willeth⁴, and *thou hearest* [the mere sound of] its voice, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth,” that is to say its source or motive, and

¹ See *Joh. Voc.* 1614 *b—c* on the Johannine ἀκούω with accus. and with genit. In Jn v. 25 Westcott rightly paraphrases οἱ ἀκούσαντες as “those who receive it.” The meaning is “those who take it in through hearing.”

² Jn iii. 3—8.

³ “Thou and thy associates” = ὑμᾶς, in δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν. Ὑμᾶς is made emphatic by its superfluousness. The natural phrase would have been δεῖ γεννηθῆναι, “one must needs be born.” But Jesus means “*You and your friends the Pharisees*, who think yourselves superior to such a need.”

⁴ On the play on the word πνεῦμα, see *Joh. Voc.* 1655, and add that πνεῦμα is taken as the Spirit by Origen *Num. Hom.* xxvii. 13 (Lomm. x. 363), *De Princip.* i. 4 (Lomm. xxi. 76), and by Jerome (*Letters* lviii. 3).

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its object or purpose. This is an appeal as it were to all the Scribes or Teachers of Israel, in the person of Nicodemus, to whom Jesus says “Art thou the teacher of Israel and dost thou not recognise these things¹?”

Later on, an instance of this sound, or voice, of the Spirit, and of its being misunderstood—but on this occasion not by Pharisees, but by the multitude and by others—is presented dramatically: “There came a voice from heaven, ‘I have both glorified it and will glorify it again.’ The multitude therefore that was standing *and heard* [it] said that it had thundered; others said ‘An angel hath spoken to him².’” Here the misunderstood voice follows immediately on a proclamation of the doctrine about the grain of wheat, “If it die, it beareth much fruit³.” This is, in effect, a brief repetition of the doctrine of regeneration through the Spirit and at the same time a suggestion of a new aspect of a detail in the Parables of Sowing. And both the Johannine passages call attention to the importance of the right kind of “hearing”—as Mark does in the tradition under discussion.

§ 3. *When did the disciples “ask Jesus the parables”?*

The Synoptists differ here. Mark writes, “And when he was alone, they that were about him with the Twelve began to ask (or, used to ask) [of] him *the parables*⁴.” Mark has

¹ Jn iii. 10.² Jn xii. 28—9.³ Jn xii. 24.

⁴ Mk iv. 10 και ὅτε ἐγένετο κατὰ μόνας ἡρώτων αὐτὸν οἱ περὶ αὐτὸν σὺν τοῖς δώδεκα τὰς παραβολάς, Mt. xiii. 10 και προσελθόντες οἱ μαθηταὶ εἶπαν αὐτῷ, Διὰ τί ἐν παραβολαῖς λαλεῖς αὐτοῖς; Lk. viii. 9 ἐπηρώτων δὲ αὐτὸν οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ τίς αὐτῆ εἴη ἡ παραβολή. In Mk, Codex D has (instead of τὰς παραβολάς) τίς ἡ παραβολή αὐτῆ, and so have *a*, *b*, *c* etc. (see Swete). Origen (*Comm. Matth.*, Lomm. iv. 193), after quoting Mt. and Lk. correctly, says “Marcus vero sic, ‘Et cum facti fuissent secreti, interrogabant eum discipuli quae esset parabola haec.’” Diatess. also has “And when they were alone.” See p. 45 foll., “Private ‘*expounding*’ in Mark.”