

HE TAUGHT THEM BY PARABLES

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND POPULAR EDUCATION

In our practice of Theological Education one of the greatest problems lies in being able to reconcile the advances in Biblical criticism with the practice of a popular reading of the Bible. Starting from our pastoral experience with the poor people in Latin America we have perceived the tremendous need in our congregations for the practice of a method of Bible reading that has liberating dimensions in the broadest meaning of the term. There is no doubt that the Bible contains a message of complete liberation for its people, but how can we make this accessible to our people?

This study has two parts. The first is a series of critical considerations with respect to the editorial work and the theological orientation of Mark 4:1-34. The second part contains some brief reflections of a theological-pastoral nature which seek primarily to help us in our ministry of proclaiming the Kingdom of God in our time.

I. MARK 4:1-34. Critical analysis.

The section 4:1-34 is an example in Mark of how the Lord taught his followers. It is a block of material in parables grouped under a central theme: the announcement of the Kingdom of God (1:14-15). In this central theme the teaching is placed in direct relation with the proclamation of the Gospel, in such a way that both constitute "**evangelization**" in the full sense of the term.

We will not do a complete exegesis of the whole section, because what interests us is rather to investigate the significance of the parables as a

method of popular education regarding the announcement of the Kingdom in the Gospel of Mark.

1. Introduction.

Vs. 1-2. The account begins with an introduction to relate what precedes it with what comes afterwards. Jesus appears as rabbi who teaches everyone and everywhere that he is received. This narrative prologue introduces all the didactic material of the section, which is composed of three taken from country life: the sower (3-9), the seed that grows (26-29) and the mustard seed (30-32). To this material there has been interpolated a **logion** (10-12) about why parables are spoken, an allegorical interpretation of the first parable (13-20) and two judgments (21-25). The section ends with a concluding summary (33-34).

2. The parables (3-9; 26-29; 30-32).

With respect to the first parable, the Sower (3-9), we probably have here a literal Greek version of a parable of Jesus, in which the abundance of semitisms indicates its closeness to an Aramaic original (1). This parable has a parallel in Matthew 13:1-9, and in the Gospel of Thomas it is only a saying of Jesus without comparison to the Kingdom of Heaven. Nevertheless, it is more probable that in Mark we have a faithful reflection of the original version. After a first editing in Aramaic, it was translated into Greek in a pure narrative style and without application, but later some interpretative additions were incorporated (2).

The second parable (26-29), the growth of the seed, is material peculiar to Mark. Matthew has replaced it with the parable of the wheat and the weeds (13:24-30). But, in both Mark and Matthew, the parable is inserted in a marked eschatological context related to the announcement of the Kingdom. For his part, Luke has omitted it.

The third parable (30-32), the mustard seed, has its parallels in Matthew 13:31ff, Luke 13:18ff, and also appears in the Gospel of Thomas 20. According to Black, it is also possible to trace its origin in Aramaic material from which it was probably translated to Greek. In the same way it is possible to detect its "**sitz im leben**" in the Palestinian situation, the same as the other two parables (4).

In summary, with respect to their origin, their life situation, and their composition, we can conclude that the three parables are collections earlier than Mark. Taking them from the Palestinian environment, Mark has compiled them from their Aramaic origin and translated them into Greek.

The three parables have some other characteristics in common which help to explain the editorial logic in grouping them. The three are related to the Kingdom of God. They refer to it specifically, even though

the introduction (1-2) says that **"he taught them many things in parables in his teaching (or doctrine)"**. That is, the teaching is much more extensive, because it doesn't mean that the teaching in parables referred only to the Kingdom. In the context of this section, the teaching in parables refers to the Kingdom, but the introduction of verses 1-2 prepares for a more extensive instructions which will cover the entire text of the Gospel. The three parables, in the second place, have a marked eschatological accent which is related to the imminent nature of the arrival of the Kingdom (1:15) and the urgent call to people to turn their lives in that direction.

But thus in our analysis we must say that the eschatological connotation is still on the level of the pure parables, that is, without reference to the allegorical interpretation of the first parable to which we referred separately. The sense of contrast in the three parables accentuates the eschatological tone, as J. Jeremias says, **"the insignificant beginning and the powerful ending, from the small to the great, from the beginning to the end"**.(5) The Kingdom, apparently having failed in the present, in the preaching of Jesus offers great possibilities for the future, but that depends on people who trust that God is coming, hidden, in silence, disputed, but with power (6).

3. The intention of the parables (10-12).

This small logion is of great importance, because it characterizes, together with 33-34, the intention of Mark regarding the use of the parables. For this same reason, understanding them poses numerous difficulties for the exegetes, with respect to their interpretation and meaning in the text. According to J. Jeremias, vs. 11-12 belong to a context earlier than Mark and come from the palestinian tradition (7). The logion, then, in its origin does not refer to the parables regarding an explanation of them, but to the style of teaching in parables, that is, they are applied by extension but come from another context in which it is said that the teaching by parables characterizes the style, the customary practice in Jesus' preaching.

As for the origin of the logion and supporting what J. Jeremias says, M. Black is of the opinion that:

"so far as Mark is concerned, what we have in iv. II, 12, in a 'saying of Jesus', is not a simple and straightforward translation of Aramaic, though that Mark is dependent on Aramaic sources is clear from his Targum reading: what is before us is a Greek literary work which is an author's own interpretation of a saying in an Aramaic source, at some idea of which in its original form we can fortunately arrive by a study of the Synoptic parallels"(8).

The analysis that Black has made, retranslating the quotation from Isaias 6:9, seeks to reveal the obscure meaning which the quotation offers just as it is. Only in this way, understanding the rather free use that Mark made of the quotation from the prophet, not from the Septuagint but from the Palestinian Targum, is it possible to harmonize the meaning of these parables with the total context of the work. In fact, the greater context presents instead an enthusiastic and admiring multitude that follows attentively the master's teachings, and this does not justify the fact that suddenly with harsh words access to the mystery of the kingdom of heaven should be denied to them. This textual explanation seems to us sufficient and coherent with the greater context.

In summary, if we pick up again what we said at the beginning about Mark's thesis 1:15, the logion refers to the announcement of the only mystery, which is the Kingdom of God. The teaching by parables, although characterized and externally as instruction, in essence is closely related to the announcement and eschatological proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom.

4. Interpretation of the parables (13-20).

The parables have in general in the Synoptic Gospels a double historical place. The first **"sitz im leben"** is the preaching of Jesus, and then the life situation is transferred to the experience of the early church. For this reason there are some cases in which we have readings which are evidently interpretative and later than the original teachings, incorporated into the same text. An example of this type is the passage 13-20. This minor passage is an allegorical interpretation of the early church added to the parable of the sower. Its non-Hebrew style and the use of a vocabulary different from that used in the parable itself show an interruption with respect to what precedes. We are before a secondary tradition which responds to a situation later than that of Jesus. The discourse of the allegory presupposes existence of a Christian community, concerned now about the continuity of the mission. In the allegory the eschatological accent which characterizes the original parable has been lost, and the emphasis has been changed from the eschatological to the ethical (9).

Father Félix Casá offers a simple and interesting explanation of how the change of meaning in this section is produced (10). The tertium comparationis of the parable is: one must never despair in evangelization, and it refers to the ministry of Jesus. Therefore, it is a Christological parable (3-9). The allegorization (interpretation) in the following verses (13-20) turns the teaching toward a problem which is now in the early church: to seek an explanation about what happens to those who receive the message or those who do not receive it. There is a second **"sitz im leben"**. Now the ethical focus deals with the guilt that falls on the hearers and it

doesn't show a concern about who it is that is preaching the Kingdom. We are the presence of an ecclesiological interpretation of a parable.

5. Two judgments (21-25)

We have here, in addition, two brief judgments that appear to be incorporated into a context where they don't belong (11), taken by Mark an independent source, not necessarily Q, or perhaps from an oral tradition (12). We are inclined to believe that in Mark we have the original aramaic source of the judgments, which in the Synoptic paralels has suffered a transformation due to a second "**sitz im leben**" Vs. 22 and 25, as conclusions of the judgments, explanations of what comes before, show also a process of broadening the meaning, of which the original sense would be in vs. 21 and 24, as a first interpretation.

6. Conclusion (33-34)

These verses constitute an editorial passage with which the whole section concludes. Various explanations have been given about the meaning of this little narrative text. We are inclined to believe that it is an editorial passage of Mark, based on a tradition in which the common practice of Jesus of speaking inparables is reflected, and which has been reinterpreted by the church. There is a change in "**sitz im lebem**", from a first existential situation corresponding to the tradition according to which Jesushad the habit of teaching in parables, to a second situation which reflects the experience of the early church. In the theological intention of the editor he wants to strengthen the assurance and the commitment of the community, in the face of what is coming.

7. Summary

We have before us a collection of material earlier than Mark, which, in small units, circulated in the early church with a catechistic-kerigmatic purpose, on the subject of the proclamation of the Kingdom and in the literary style of the parables. The origin of this material can be traced to its Aramaic roots, through a study of the style, vocabulary and structure of the editing. The majority of the exegetes arrive at this conclusion (14), although a few others, with little support, assume another story with respect to the presence of this section in the account of Mark (15).

Weighing the evidence, we are inclined to accept the first possibility, because of the explanation given in the development of the passages that make up the section.

On the other hand, as for the total structure of the section, it is evident that it is a composition, as has been explained, and because of the presence of some contradictory elements in the complete discourse. For example, the most evident is the change in audience. In v.1 it says that

there are many people who have gathered to listen to Jesus' teaching, but then in v.10 we are abruptly told that Jesus is only in the company of a few and with the twelve. Evidently there was an isolated first account that concludes in v. 9.

The whole section in its present form and desarranging the process of formation, supposes at least three stages in its prehistory:

- a. that of Jesus,
- b. that of the early church, and
- c. that of the editing in Mark (16).

There has been, therefore, a process of development prior to Mark, and before arriving at the editing of the Gospel writer, we have had an earlier collection of material that Mark has put in order with the intention of supporting his thesis in this section: Jesus taught the mysteries of the Kingdom by means of parables. For this deduction the key verses are v.1 ("erxato didáskein"), v.2 ("kai edídasken autous en parabolais polá"), v.11 ("umin to mistérion dédotai tes basileías tou zeou"), v. 33 ("kai posútais parabolais polais elálei autois ton logon"), v.34 ("Jorís de paraboles ouk elálei autois...").

II. THEOLOGICAL-PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

1. Parables and popular education

There is no liberating education, except beginning from the people's own vital experiences. It is daily practice that provides the methodological elements through which people are educated. If we seek to approach a definition of popular education in this way, it is evident that, with respect to the dimension of faith, this is related to our study of the parables. Beginning with the consideration of the section on the parables in Mark, the importance that these have in the proclamation of the Gospel and the extension of the Christian faith is undeniable. It is not just by chance that the material of the parables occupies a great deal of space in the Synoptic Gospels. We have seen that behind the texts as we have them today one can see this habitual methodological practice in Jesus, and it was just as common before him in the rabbis and teachers in Israel. The early church followed this same line, re-reading and re-interpreting Jesus' teaching through the parables. What does this teach us?

For the present, let it be said that the parables, the ones recorded in the canonical Synoptics, in the extra-canonical material and even all the related classes of alegories, provebs, wisdom sayings, metaphors, etc., reflect the daily life of the people that produced them and used them for

their own education. The methodological instruments came from the people, and especially the poor people. The explosion of meaning that these images transmit to the people, permit the most profound truths to be placed, not on a theoretical conceptual plane, but on the level of the experience of the people.

Since the parables -as an expression of the life experiences of the people- were what provided the method par excellence for the announcement of the mysteries of the Kingdom. In this simple way, the poor people, according to the testimony not only of the Gospels, but of the history of early Christianity, were the first to approach the Kingdom, perceive the eschatological presence of the Messiah and participate in the hopes and potential transformations inherent in the mysterious and powerful presence of the Kingdom.

The use of parables can be a marvellous example of socratic mayeutic (gr. maieuo) that is, of how the people themselves became the mid-wives of the Kingdom. Through the parables the people become the subject and not the object of their own evangelization. The people teach themselves, by their own methods, on the way to understanding the mysteries of the Kingdom. By means of the parables, taken from daily experiences, there is created in the Christian community a process of self-understanding as a missionary community in its eschatological projection. In its midst there is planted the seed, which germinates, grows and bears fruit. In the reading and re-reading of the parables in the synoptic texts and their interpretation, we have seen that a process is begun in which understanding the Gospel is related to understanding themselves as a people, and completing the circle, their self-understanding as a people results in their grasp of the meaning of the Gospel for them.

The incarnation in Jesus Christ, the only means of the revelation of God in the midst of the life of human beings, means understanding and accepting people and participating with them on the road toward the Kingdom. The people and God incarnate in the midst of them -are pilgrims, on the eschatological journey to the understanding of the Kingdom, and this journey necessarily involves the dialectic of understanding in order to continue advancing. On this journey both revelation and concealment are produced, to progress toward the future or fall behind. According to this, to educate is to be educated on the way, or to be fashioned in the way of the Kingdom, beginning with the insertion of one's own experiences of daily living. Life is a constant pilgrimage in which to educate is to be educated on the way, continually, because only by advancing is the hidden revealed. That is why the tension between concealment and revelation characterizes so much of the work of Mar. There Jesus orders the healed to keep silence, but they do not obey (1:43-45; 7:36). There is ample instruction for everyone (4:1-2,33), but then he speaks to a small group of

disciples (4:34) who finally end up not understanding (14:50). The dialectic of revealing and concealing, understanding and not understanding, is present in the entire work. In the discourse of Mark's text, it offers the theological meaning of the continuous search for the God who only reveals himself to people on the road, in service and in sacrifice. As José Millares says: **"in the greatest concealment of God (crucifixion) is found also the most solemn manifestation proclaimed by the faith of the centurion (15:39)"** (17).

The tension between concealment and manifestation is the expression of the rejection and the following. Hence the critical element implicit in the parables as methodology of the proclamation of the Kingdom: starting from their use from the levels of the most elementary experience, it is impossible not to understand the light of the Kingdom. There is no alternative: you reject the Lord or you follow him (Mark 4, 9, 11, 12, 33, 34).

2. Catechesis and evangelization

Catechesis is a dimension of evangelization as far as its relation to the announcement of the Kingdom is concerned. This can be demonstrated at least by the section on parables that we have examined in Mark, although their explanation can be extended to the whole New Testament. Normally, catechesis is not separated from evangelization, as a later step or with respect to what it does to explain and understand what has been previously accepted by faith.

The parables were originally directed to the crowd, as a proclamation of the eschatological Kingdom. In a second instance, as a result of the rejection and obstinacy of the hearers, they were changed to parables for the disciples on the understanding that these were the ones who received and kept the word. Such is the meaning of verses 33, 34, and the use of the quote from Isaiah 6:9-10 in verse 12. In this context **"hear"** (*akouete*, v.9, 10) does not mean only **"pay attention"**, but also **"understand"** (v.33), **"make comprehensible"** to the point of motivating a response. In this way, the announcement by parables is not only that, although it incorporates, but above all, proclamation of the Word. Catechesis is not the step following evangelization, but rather method of evangelization. As we verified in the editorial process of the passages studied in Mark, the separation between kerygma and **didache** corresponds to a later stage in the life of the early church, concerned about the response of the hearers to the announcement of the Gospel. Originally at least as Mark shows in his text, there is a close relation between teaching and evangelization, that is, the response to the **didachein**, to the explanation of the Kingdom by means of parables, is the following, the discipleship. In the parables it is not knowledge (gnosis) that is transmitted, but **didache** (v.2b). **Didache**

translated as **"instruction doctrine"**, also means to indicate to someone the road to follow. Therefore, **"to speak in parables"** (v.33) is to announce in time the imminent coming of the Kingdom. Let us note that in 1:14-15 there is a parallelism between **kerusson to evangelion** (preaching the Gospel) and **legon, peplerotai o kairos** (saying, the time has been fulfilled).

The parables have their predecessors in the **masal** of the Old Testament and constituted the teaching in public of the rabbis, before the times of Jesus. In the same way, the dialogical style of explaining with figurative images from daily life, has its origins in the rabbinical practice in the times of Jesus and then in the Judeo-Christian controversies. Consequently, it is not understood why the communication of the Gospel must always be **"a discourse"** in sentence style. On the contrary, it included primarily a dialogical style of questions and answers. For example, we can find this practice in the Gospel of Thomas. There it is Jesus who proposes the parables, but there are also cases of the disciples in turn proposing questions.

The dialogical style of evangelizing catechesis is perceived as an example of it in the section that we have studied in Mark 4:1-34. This practice without doubt stimulates the continuity of the teaching as a way introducing the mysteries of the Kingdom, which, given its eschatological perspective, is on the way to consummation. It is what we could perhaps call a **"catechetical circle"**. New questions provoke or demand new answers in parables, which then in turn provoke new questions. We can say that the parable is in a sense a way of not giving definitive and complete answers, but rather provoking the reflective interiorization of the Gospel in the life of the persons, starting with the reality of their own daily experience. That is, in the parable, instead of giving a final answer and saying **"this is the way"**, the intention is rather to illuminate the living space in order to seek and follow the road in a continuous search. There are rhetorical and motivating questions (4:21; 4:30) which provoke dialogue and motivate reflection, but the Kingdom, even knowing that it is there, is a mystery, that is, it must be sought continually and always in the company of others on the road. In the parabolic style there is dialogue and correlative thought in a context of reciprocal communications relationships. There is a relation between meaning and significance, a fusion between theory and practice; there is a succession of thoughts which progressively clarify the meaning.

Finally, we must say that the text used as an example orients us - above all in the editorial process- with respect to the importance of not separating the teaching in parables from the eschatological announcement of the Kingdom. The prehistory in the text tells us what use Jesus made of the parables. He used them to announce the imminence of the Kingdom. But we see that the church then rereads the texts and focuses them on the moral

consequences. It is necessary to recover the early meaning of the use of the parables in the announcement of the Kingdom, because only in this way will the church free itself from the moralizing tendency resulting from the allegorization of the parables, and from the historicizing temptation as a simple reading of the historic past. The announcement of the Kingdom of God is made in an eschatological context, and in this perspective catechesis and evangelization fuse.

3. Parable and pastoral theology

The other aspect of the teaching in parables regarding the method of proclamation, has to do with the receivers. To whom are they directed, or with whom can they be applied with the greatest effectiveness? Is the parable a good method of catechesis only or preferably for the uncultured, illiterate and/or uneducated? Will it perhaps be necessary to discard the parable as a method of exploring dogmatic theology?

In pastoral practice this occurs in an unconscious, perhaps unconfessed way. But, in general, we assume that for the popular sectors, the reading of a parable and partially explaining it, constitutes a sufficient and adequate method. On the contrary, if we want to explore deeply the mysteries of the faith, we must go to Paul or to the Gospel of John. This methodological dichotomy or discrimination underestimates the capacity for understanding of those who have not access to formal education. But at the same time, it stratifies the methods to be used; the parable by nature only serves for those who can raise themselves to levels of philosophical speculation.

The proceed in this way is to not comprehend the paradox of the Kingdom, nor accept the scandal of the cross. Let us remember the conclusion of Mark in the section studied (4:33-34). The first level of listeners consists of all the people present, not to obscure for them the mysteries of the Kingdom, but to make them more visible to them. Vicent Taylor says:

"The purpose of teaching in parables is clear: to explain a truth and not to obscure, and even less to hide a problem or serve as punishment. Nevertheless, we are not to suppose that the original application was clear. The parables wanted to stimulate thought, encourage reflection and facilitate the way to human decision" (18)

In reality the mystery of the Kingdom in Mark, or stated in another way, the incomprehension of the parables, is due to the fact that they are not read through faith in Christ. That is the difference that the Gospel writer wants to make between the people and the disciples. Many people come, because the proclamation of the Lord is for all (4:1-33), but not all

were able to understand. In the same way, the "hear ... let him hear" (4:9,23) is because external hearing has no meaning if it is not changed into a personal appropriation which leads to obedience.

Neither must forget that the Bible, as Carlos Mesters says, is a great parable (19). In it we have history, but a history that involves a paradigmatic characteristic with respect to our own present history, and this can be read and interpreted by everyone, insofar as they can see themselves portrayed in it. To read the Bible as the great parable of life is not only to determine the literal meaning that the words have, but beyond that, to seek what that history has for us.

Stated another way, we must look for the way in which we ourselves, all of us, are portrayed in that history which is ours. Therefore, we do a retrospective reading in that symbolic history, looking beyond the text for the meaning that it contains for us. Mesters says that speaking of the Bible as a great parable in which we can all find ourselves;

"... is more in accord with the mentality of our people, whose capacity for speaking and expressing themselves in parables and comparisons is so innate and natural for them that no one notices it" (20).

It is very possible that under the influence of a verbalistic and educated culture in which the values of a culture based on the accumulation of intellectual knowledge are exalted, we have lost the capacity to read life in parables. How much more have we lost the capacity to speak in parables and teach in parables, when we do theology, practice the pastoral ministry or theological teaching. Another false dichotomy among those that we have perhaps accumulated. There is no such thing as a pastoral and less profound catechesis over against a more theological and learned method for the knowledgeable. In the parable we are taught that there is no such division. After all, the Gospels give testimony that Jesus of Nazareth chose the parables and not a lecture course to introduce the people in the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

- (1) Jeremías, J., **"Las parábolas de Jesús"**, Ed. Verbo Divino, España, 1974, p. 284. También Black, Matthew **"An Aramaic Approach to Gospels and Acts"**, Claredon Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 162.
- (2) Bultmann, R., **"History of the Synoptic Tradition"**, Harper & Row Fud., 1976, ps. 175, 200, 202, 326.
- (3) Black, M., op. cit. p. 123ss.
- (4) Jeremías, J., op. cit., p. 180.
- (5) Op. cit. p. 187, 188.
- (6) In the text of Mark, the total structure of Jesus' ministry offers the picture of a temporarily failed ministry. The beginnings in Galilee are not good (1:14), and much less the conclusion of the account of the passion (11:1ff). Even though there appears a multitude which follows him faithfully, even his immediate followers abandon him (14:50). Only on the cross is his mesianic condition to be revealed (15:39), and the confession of faith is not to be in the mouth of his disciples, but of the gentiles. This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God (compare 1:1 with 15:39).
- (7) Jeremías, J., op. cit. p. 22
- (8) Black, M., op. cit. p. 216
- (9) Wellhausen, J., Weiss, J., Bultmann, R., Dibelius, M., Dodd, C.H., interpret along this line. Nevertheless, other exegetes do not discard the possibility that these are authentic words of Jesus, for example, Lagrange, Plummer, Bruce, Swette. We prefer the first interpretation, since an analysis of the editing of Mark shows the differences between both passages.
- (10) Casá, Félix, **"Iniciación a las Parábolas del Nuevo Testamento"**, Cuadernos CIB, Córdoba, Argentina, 1976, p.48-50.
- (11) Jeremías, J., op. cit. p. 113 thinks about double parables rather than a collection of sayings **"because they present the same ideas in different expressions"** (p.111).
- (12) Taylor, Vicent, **"Evangelio según San Marcos"**, Ed. Cristiandad, Madrid, 1979, p. 299.
- (13) Black, M. op. cit. p. 309.

- (14) For example: Jeremías, J., Zimmermann, H., Black, M., Bultmann, R..
- (15) Vaganay, L., **"Le problème synoptique"**. Desclée et. Cie Tournai, 1954, y Troadec, H., en **"Comentario a los evangelios sinópticos"**, Ed. Fax, Madrid, 1972.
- (16) Jeremías, J., op. cit. p. 16, 18.
- (17) Miralles, José, **"Notas para una lectura del Evangelio de Marcos"**, Selecciones de Teología 58, 1976, p. 119-126.
- (18) Taylor, V., op. cit., p. 283.
- (19) Mesters, Carlos, **"El misterioso mundo de la Biblia"**, Ed. Bonum, Buenos Aires, 1976. By saying that the Bible is a parable, it is affirmed that the story narrated in the Bible has become exemplary or symbolic for us **"who are experiencing the end of time"**. All of that **"happened"** and **"was written"** for us who live our faith today in the midst of the obscurity which characterizes it. p. 248.
- (20) Mesters, Carlos, op. cit. p. 250.

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Santiago, Chile, July 2, 1987.

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Dear Friend:

Enclose herewith you will find copy of my paper
"He taught them by Parables". I hope you get it time.

Sincerely,


Dagoberto Ramírez F.