



Bible Plants

Mustard

This is an exceptionally large mustard plant (probably *Sinapis alba* or *S. arvensis*). But is it large enough to support birds?

The parable of the mustard seed

Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-32,

Luke 13:18-21

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A Bible expositor is usually not a trained botanist, nor is the average botanist trained in Bible exposition. Botanical expertise is usually not a problem in Bible exposition except when it comes to explaining Bible portions in which plants play a prominent part, e.g. in some of the parables told by our Lord. The largely agrarian audience addressed by Jesus can be assumed to have enough knowledge of plants to understand the substance and nuances of his teachings involving plants.

Most modern Bible readers, on the other hand, may miss or misinterpret some of these teachings through a lack of acquaintance with nature in the Holy Land. "With many authors a wall of partition has been erected between nature and Scripture, this double divine revelation," as has been correctly observed⁽¹⁾. This conflict has occasioned the present writers, a Bible scholar and a botanist, to cooperate in the study of Bible plants, resulting in a series of booklets, "Plants of the Bible"⁽²⁾, and numerous other publications in Dutch, English, and French. This paper is the result of our on-going research into plants of the Bible.

Mustard in the teaching of Christ

The Lord Jesus is the perfect Teacher! Through parables, He was able to present profound spiritual truths to simple people. His examples were always relevant and He was quick to identify with His audience by using familiar examples from everyday life. The mustard plant, mentioned only in the New Testament, is one of these examples. It would have been abundantly clear to Jesus' audience what He meant - they had asked questions about the tares, but not the parable of the mustard seed.

For modern, western readers the parable of the mustard seed may be harder to understand. While mustard is one of the best known of all Bible plants, there is no indication of how ancient Hebrews actually used it⁽³⁾. From interviews of Palestinian farmers, it seems to follow that they use the seeds or eat the vegetative portions of the plant similar to ways we have seen relatives of mustards used in Jordan⁽⁴⁾. Perhaps the leaves were used as a vegetable like many members of the mustard family, a family which includes such well known plants as cabbage, turnips, and broccoli.

Botanical problems: what is meant by mustard?

The Greek word for mustard is *sinapi* (Matth. 13:31; 17:20; Mark 4:31; Luke 13:19; 17:6), and the Hebrew equivalent would be *chardal*. Mustard would be, according to Theophrastus and Pliny⁽⁵⁾, grown in gardens, but would not need any cultivating, as it sprouts all by itself (*nulla cultra, quoniam semen cadens protinus viret*).

The Jewish tradition (in the Mishnah⁽⁶⁾), however, states that it is not a garden vegetable, but that it is grown in fields. It has been suggested that *Salvadora persica* is meant⁽⁷⁾ as the Arabs are reported to call this tree *chardal*. But there are very strong arguments against this thesis.

First, *Salvadora persica* is a shrub very much unlike any member of the mustard family.

Second, it is never cultivated although the shoots and leaves can be eaten by humans and camels⁽⁸⁾.

Third, it has a very restricted distribution in the Holy Land, being found only in deserts.

Lastly, the fruits are large and would hardly fit the picture of being among the smallest of seeds as the imagery intended by the parable.

The most probable candidates which remain are the black mustard (*Brassica nigra*), the white mustard (*Sinapis arvensis* or *Sinapsis alba*) and possibly *Sinapsis juncea*. All four belong to the Cruciferae (also known as the Brassicaceae), the mustard family. All four have small seeds and are characterized by rapid germination and seedling growth and are annuals which flower in the late spring. Modern commercial mustard is prepared by grinding the seeds of black and white mustard and mixing them together.

Fonck⁽⁹⁾ quotes Maldonatus about his findings in Spain as to *Sinapsis*: *In calidioribus locis longe supra humanan staturam assurgit, ut ubi copia est, silva esse videatur*. But it can (as Bruijelij rightly remarks⁽¹⁰⁾) hardly be yellow mustard, as this is not sown in gardens or fields. So the logical conclusion seems to be, as many experts agree, that the parable points to *Brassica nigra*.

The seed of both black and white mustard is similar in size, about 1.0 to 3.0 mm (1/8 inch)⁽¹¹⁾ so it is not the smallest seed but it is the smallest seed of those which "you plant in the ground" clearly indicating that the Lord was not comparing the mustard seed to all plants but only to those which were commonly grown. There would be numerous plants familiar to His audience with smaller seeds, of which the best example would be the seed of the black orchid. But there are few plants which grow so large in one season as a mustard, and few plants would be characterized by such rapid germination of the seed. Mustard planted one day could begin growing the next.

A grown black mustard would still be a herb, botanically speaking, but sometimes a very big herb, popularly considered a shrub. There are wild mustard plants over ten feet tall near the Jordan River, and even in moderate climate a mustard plant may grow that tall, provided it gets enough sunshine. It must, moreover, be remarked that generally trees in most parts of the Holy Land do not reach a large stature. The stem of a mustard plant also becomes dry and wood-like, which gives it the aspect of a tree. Many have pointed to another problem: that this plant, or any mustard, could not support roosting birds. It seems questionable whether the Gr. *Kataskènoun* has to mean

this, as many have thought, partly also on the argument that *kataskènoosis* in Matth. 8:20 & par. does unquestionably mean "nest."⁽¹²⁾ But a very important point is overlooked: by the end of the summer, when the plant has reached its peak in growth, the time for building nests is long past.⁽¹³⁾ The word may simply mean 'rest' or 'lodge',⁽¹⁴⁾ which is the more probable as Mark 4:32 says 'under its shadow.'

In summary, the three features of the mustard plant emphasized by the Lord are the small size of the seed, the large size of the plant in relation to the seed, and the rapid growth. This will help us as we consider the controversies that have arisen as to the exegesis of this parable.

Normal growth, or aberrant?

What did the Lord Jesus mean by this parable? Does it speak of the miraculous, Divine growth of the Kingdom of God, as many exegetes⁽¹⁵⁾ have contended? Many dispensationalist expositors on the contrary, following a line suggested by J. N. Darby and C. I. Scofield, have made a strong case for a negative meaning: 'a garden-shrub out-doing itself';⁽¹⁶⁾ 'the mustard-seed shows an unnatural, an abnormal growth and the birds lodging there bring defilement. Such is Christendom with its worldly ambitions and its unsaved masses.'⁽¹⁷⁾ 'Christianity ... becomes in the hand of man a great power on the earth.'⁽¹⁸⁾ 'The birds are used as a picture of evil powers,'⁽¹⁹⁾ with a reference to Rev. 18:2, where Babylon is said to be a cage for every unclean and hated bird⁽²⁰⁾. The position is well summarized by William Kelly in a paper published in his magazine *The Bible Treasury*⁽²¹⁾.

Thus the Lord lets us know in this parable that, in the face of His revealed will, Christendom would soon manifest a portentous change, and from its primitive low estate vie with the powers of the world in earthly grandeur and influence.

More recent exegetes in the dispensationalist school are not as strong⁽²²⁾, but still do not confront the real problem, which is, to our mind: what is the force of the imagery that is used in this parable?

The problem in the parable of the mustard seed is whether (as the older dispensationalist exegesis runs) the growth of mustard into a

tree is really abnormal. If the Lord wanted to speak of something aberrant, grotesque, why did He use a picture of a mustard tree? Surely his hearers would not consider the growth of such a plant into the stature of a tree unnatural. It should be noted that it does not say that the mustard seed became bigger than all the trees, but the biggest among herbs, and growing into a tree, i.e. approaching the size of a tree.

If the Lord would have wanted to say that the Kingdom had to remain in its incipient beauty and smallness, than a lily of the field would be a much more telling figure of speech - especially in view of the oriental love for hyperbole. Moreover, the mustard seed does not grow tall by the hands of man, as the explanation would presuppose: it only does so by an extraordinary amount of sunshine and by other favorable circumstances⁽²³⁾.

A small beginning

In the old English of the so-called *Pepysian Gospel Harmony** the Parable of the mustard-seed is summarized in a way which might well be the real meaning⁽²⁴⁾:

(...) and afterwards he seide it ferd of hem as of a greyne that groweth wonderlich heighe, theigh it be litel whan it is a kyrnel.

Surely the mustard seed was not really the smallest because the seed of the black orchid is smaller, as already noted in medieval times by, e.g., Albertus Magnus. But the mustard seed was, in Jewish tradition, proverbial for smallness⁽²⁵⁾

. It does not seem, though, that growth towards greatness is so much the point. D. A. Carson has convincingly argued that the greatness of the Kingdom would be no surprise for Jesus' audience - they were born and bred in a religious background where this Messianic magnificence of the age to come was taught with much emphasis. On the contrary, a real novelty in the teaching of Jesus was the perspective of the smallness of its beginning⁽²⁶⁾. This line pervades the whole chapter: a sower sows a small seed, the enemy introduces tiny germs of evil, a minute lump of leaven permeates the whole loaf, an invisible treasure turns out to be the real value of a piece of ground, one very precious pearl is worth more than all the possessions of a merchant, an invisible net is drawn through the depths of the sea, and

(in the eighth parable⁽²⁷⁾) a scribe discovers things hitherto unseen in his treasure. Things that seem small, inconspicuous, hardly worth observation, invisible, turn out to be by far the greatest things. The strangeness of the symbolism, according to Dupont,⁽²⁸⁾ is just the point that Jesus makes. One does not need to think of birds (in the parable of the mustard-seed) or leaven (in the next parable) to be suggestive of evil; this may be the meaning of such symbolism elsewhere, but not necessarily here. Carson, in quoting Dupont, points to a similar imagery: the coming of the Kingdom like the coming of a thief in the night (Matth. 24:43). The birds may well be indicative of Gentile nations (Ezek. 17:23; 31:6,13; Dan. 4:12, 14 [12:21 MT])⁽²⁹⁾, and thus point to the shelter found by many beneficiaries in the Kingdom. The parable of the mustard seed would, then, point to the extensive growth of the Kingdom, while the parable of the leaven would speak of its intensive growth⁽³⁰⁾. The contexts in Mark and Luke seem to favor this interpretation. In Mark 4 the point seems growth, connected with the previous parable of the seed growing untended. In Luke 13, the Lord is speaking in the context of a healing in the synagogue, as contrasted to the judgement on the fig-tree in the vineyard (clearly speaking of Israel); and after these parables, Luke adds the saying of Jesus as to the narrow door through which one can enter into the broadness of the Kingdom, where they will come from east and west and north and south.



* A **gospel harmony** is an attempt to compile the canonical gospels of the Christian New Testament into a single account.[1] This may take the form either of a single, merged narrative, or a tabular format with one column for each gospel, technically known as a **synopsis**, although the word harmony is often used for both.[1] Harmonies are constructed for a variety of purposes: to provide a straightforward devotional text for parishioners,[2] to create a readable and accessible piece of literature for the general public,[3] to establish a scholarly chronology of events in the life of Jesus as depicted in the canonical gospels, or to better understand how the accounts relate to each other.[4]

Among academics, the construction of harmonies has always been favoured by more conservative scholars. Students of higher criticism, on the other hand, see the divergences between the Gospel accounts as reflecting the construction of traditions by the early Christian

communities.[5] In the modern era, attempts to construct a single story have largely been abandoned in favour of laying out the accounts in parallel columns for comparison, to allow critical study of the differences between them.[6]

The earliest known harmony is the Diatessaron by Tatian in the 2nd century and variations based on the Diatessaron continued to appear in the Middle Ages.[7][8] The 16th century witnessed a major increase in the introduction of Gospel harmonies and the parallel column structure became widespread.[9] At this time visual representations also started appearing, depicting the Life of Christ in terms of a "pictorial gospel harmony", and the trend continued into the 19th–20th centuries.

The *Pepysian Gospel Harmony* was reprinted by Margery Goates in 1922 by Oxford University Press.

<https://www.revolvy.com/main/index.php?s=Gospel%20harmony>

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