MARA RESCIO - LUIGI WALT

# THE ESOTERIC RULE ON PARABLES
## *Mark 4:10-12 and Its Earliest Reception History**

> «Not to move a step is easy; to walk without treading on the ground is difficult»
> (*Zhuangzi* 4.2; transl. J. Legge, SBE 39, p. 209)

Before being rediscovered by modern biblical scholarship as an autonomous work deserving full historical, literary, or theological consideration of its own, the Gospel of Mark lived for centuries in the shadows of the other canonical Gospels. Twenty years ago, intervening on the thorny problem of Mark's reception history, Brenda Schildgen rightly spoke of an absent-presence of Mark, «for the Gospel was present in the canon but essentially absent from attention»[1]. This is particularly apparent if we compare Mark's reception in the first three centuries to that of other New Testament writings, whether in terms of manuscript evidence, patristic citations, or number of commentaries[2]. So, despite its final inclusion within the Christian canon, the Gospel of Mark has often been devalued as a disorderly collection of Jesus' words and deeds (a position we already find in Papias of Hierapolis, in the early second century), if not as an imperfect "summary" of the Gospel of Matthew (following the influential, lapidary judgment later expressed by Augustine)[3]. Now that both these positions

* Preliminary materials for this article have been discussed by Mara Rescio on several occasions: at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland (2012); the CISSR Annual Meetings on Christian Origins in Bertinoro, Italy (2014 and 2015); the Centre for Advanced Studies "Beyond Canon", University of Regensburg, Germany (2019). The final text is, however, the result of a lively and concerted discussion between the two authors. In this way, we want to express special gratitude to Mauro Pesce, who was not simply our *Doktorvater* but also the man who brought us together for the first time. We also thank Dr Eric Beck for improving our English.

[1] B.D. Schildgen, *Power and Prejudice. The Reception of the Gospel of Mark*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1999, pp. 33 and 36.

[2] See, e.g., W. Braun, *The First Shall Be Last. The Gospel of Mark after the First Century*, in P. Pachis - D. Webe (eds.), *Chasing Down Religion. In the Sights of History and the Cognitive Sciences*, Barbounakis, Thessaloniki 2010, pp. 41-57; E.-M. Becker, *The Reception of "Mark" in the 1st and 2nd Centuries C.E. and its Significance for Genre Studies*, in Ead. - A. Runesson (eds.), *Mark and Matthew*. II. *Comparative Readings. Reception History, Cultural Hermeneutics, and Theology*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2013, pp. 15-36; M. Rescio, *Demons and Prayer. Traces of Jesus' Esoteric Teaching from Mark to Clement of Alexandria*, ASEs 31/1(2014), pp. 53-81 at 54-58; and esp. M. Kok, *The Gospel on the Margins. The Reception of Mark in the Second Century*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2015.

[3] See, respectively, Papias quoted by Eusebius, *Hist. eccl*. 3.39.15; and Augustine, *Cons*. 1.2. On ancient traditions about the evangelist Mark, see now D. Furlong, *The John also Called Mark. Reception and Transformation in Christian Tradition*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2020; cfr. also C. Moss, *Fashioning Mark. Early Christian Discussions about the Scribe and Status of the Second Gospel*, NTS 67/2(2021), pp. 181-204.

seem to be re-emerging on the scene, leading some exegetes to question both the primacy and value regained by Mark in modern scholarly attention[4], it becomes even more critical to wondering about the fortune of this Gospel in the context of Christian origins, as well as about the significance of such fortune for an overall understanding of the text. The primary aim of this article is thus to contribute in this direction by briefly re-examining what can be seen as a paradigmatic case in Mark's reception history, namely that of the famous and controversial Jesus' saying about the "mystery of the kingdom of God", which Mark transmits in the form of an esoteric rule on parables (Mark 4:10-12)[5].

Our analysis arises from a few basic methodological considerations. First of all, given the lack of manuscript attestations of Mark until the mid- or late-third century[6], it is evident that any study on Mark's earliest reception must necessarily start from indirect witnesses, and thereby from the use of the Gospel as it appears in other extant sources. In this respect, a central issue to consider concerns the very status of the Markan text, which, at least for the first two centuries, could not be regarded as canonical, for the simple reason that a Christian canon did not yet exist. Any reader or user of Mark was therefore confronted with an autonomous work not yet perceived as "normative" and, perhaps more importantly, not yet stable from a textual point of view. It was only from the mid-second century that Mark began to be received as part of a larger body of writings which had assumed the value of scripture and could no longer be handled or manipulated in total freedom – be it a "fourfold-gospel canon" or what would later be identified as the New Testament[7].

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[4] One may think of the Augustine position reconsidered by advocates of the so-called Two-Gospel solution to the synoptic problem, e.g. in D.B. Peabody - A.J. McNicol - L. Cope (eds.), *One Gospel from Two. Mark's Use of Matthew and Luke*, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge 2002. As for Papias' assessment of Mark, it has now been revived by M.D.C. Larsen, *Gospels before the Book*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018: for a critical discussion of Larsen's theses, see T. Mitchell's review in JETS 62/3(2019), pp. 641-645; and C. Keith, *The Gospel as Manuscript. An Early History of the Jesus Tradition as Material Artifact*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2020, pp. 49-60.

[5] In defining the saying as an "esoteric rule", we refer to esotericism as «the purposeful implementation of the dynamic of secrecy, concealment, and revelation», along the lines recently suggested by D. Burns, *Receptions of Revelations. A Future for the Study of Esotericism and Antiquity*, in E. Asprem - J. Strube (eds.), *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, Brill, Leiden 2020, pp. 20-44, at p. 36; cfr. also K. von Stuckrad, *Ancient Esotericism, Problematic Assumptions, and Conceptual Trouble*, in «Aries» 15/1(2015), pp. 16-20. We will not dwell here on the problem of the so-called "messianic secret" in Mark, which has been the subject of a long tradition of studies. On the motif of secrecy in Mark, see at least G. Theissen, *Die pragmatische Bedeutung der Geheimnismotive im Markusevangelium. Ein wissenssoziologischer Versuch*, in H.G. Kippenberg - G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Secrecy and Concealment. Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, Brill, Leiden-New York 1995, pp. 225-245.

[6] Evaluation in P.M. Head, *The Earliest Text of Mark*, in C.E. Hill - M.J. Kruger (eds.), *The Early Text of the New Testament*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, pp. 108-120.

[7] On this point, cfr. at least H. Koester, *The Text of the Synoptic Gospels in the Second Century*

Secondly, it is also important to note that any investigation of Mark's earliest reception cannot be limited to mere hunting for quotations or allusions, nor can the analysis be reduced to detecting the presence of Markan themes and motifs across early Christian literature. Besides the problem of the adoption and reworking of Mark's materials, we should equally address the problem of their non-use: even silences and omissions, if provable, must be part of a history of reception.

A third and related aspect concerns, finally, the starting point of the investigation itself: when does the reception of our Gospel begin, concretely? If by reception we mean the use of a text by other texts, then there is no need to start an account of Mark's reception from second-century authors and sources, treating the case of its use by Matthew and Luke as a separate issue. In fact, unless we want to radically depart from the basic assumption of Mark's chronological priority, the other two Synoptics are to be simply counted among the earliest users of Mark. This raises a number of questions as to the reasons that led both Matthew and Luke to incorporate Mark into their own texts – and even more so if one accepts the Two-Source hypothesis to solve the synoptic problem (i.e. Matthew's and Luke's dependence upon Mark and the sayings collection of Q)[8]. First and foremost: Did Matthew and Luke intend to supplement or rather replace their primary sources? And if the latter was the case, how is it possible that they both succeeded with Q while failing with Mark? And to what extent shall we speak of a failure, if it's true that their operation ended up relegating Mark to the shadows for centuries?

Limited space will prevent us from tackling all of these issues. The main goal of these pages is just to take a first step towards a reception history of Mark 4:10-12, starting precisely from a re-evaluation of the role played by Matthew and Luke as early readers and users of the Gospel of Mark. This will allow us to establish how some of the most distinctive traits of the Markan Jesus must have been perceived as problematic since

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[1989], repr. in Id., *From Jesus to the Gospel. Interpreting the New Testament in Its Context*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2007, pp. 39-53; D. Moody Smith, *When Did the Gospels Become Scripture?*, JBL 119/1(2000), pp. 3-20; and D. Brakke, *Scriptural Practices in Early Christianity. Towards a New History of the New Testament Canon*, in J. Ulrich et al. (eds.), *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation. Discursive Fights over Religious Traditions in Antiquity*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt a.M. 2012, pp. 263-280.

[8] With regard to Matthew, see e.g. U. Luz, *Intertexts in the Gospel of Matthew*, HTR 97/2(2004), pp. 119-137; D. Sim, *Matthew's Use of Mark. Did Matthew Intend to Supplement or to Replace His Primary Source?*, NTS 57/2(2011), pp. 176-192; A.J. Doole, *What Was Mark for Matthew? An Examination of Matthew's Relationship and Attitude to His Primary Source*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2013; J. Verheyden - G. Van Belle (eds.), *An Early Reader of Mark and Q*, Peeters, Leuven 2016; and M. Goodacre, *The Orthodox Redaction of Mark. How Matthew Rescued Mark's Reputation*, in F. Tucker - D. Frayer-Griggs - N.C. Johnson (eds.), *"To Recover What Has Been Lost". Essays on Eschatology, Intertextuality, and Reception History in Honor of Dale C. Allison Jr.*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2020, pp. 319-336.

the beginning, forcing the other two Synoptics to engage in a softening or silencing manoeuvre that was not without repercussions for the subsequent reception of Mark.

## 1. *The Esoteric Rule on Parables in the Context of Mark 4:1-34*

Mark 4:10-12 is a key passage in the Gospel of Mark, as it alludes for the first time, and in a rather disconcerting way, to the existence of two different levels in the teaching of Jesus: a public level, open to all (including people who do not necessarily follow Jesus); and an esoteric level, reserved exclusively to a chosen group of listeners (i.e. Jesus' disciples or a subgroup within them). The immediate context is that of the so-called parabolic discourse of Mark 4:1-34, the first elaborate speech of Jesus that we find in the Gospel[9]. Mark's fourth chapter starts with a typical scene of public teaching: Jesus is found on the shores of a lake (the Sea of Galilee), and a "large crowd" of people gathers around him. The opening sentence also suggests this was a usual setting for Jesus to teach (cfr. Mark 2:13), and arguably one of his favourites:

«And once again (πάλιν) he began to teach (διδάσκειν) by the sea. And a large crowd gathered unto him, so that he got into a boat and sat in the sea, while the whole crowd was on the land, facing the sea. 2. And he was teaching (ἐδίδασκεν) them many things in parables, and in his teaching (ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ αὐτοῦ) he said to them: 3. "Hear! See, a sower went out to sow his seed..." [*Then follows the parable of the sower*]» (Mark 4:1-3)[10].

Curiously enough, Mark offers no explicit indication regarding the presence or absence of Jesus' disciples (cfr., by contrast, Mark 3:7), but underlines that the crowd was so large that Jesus was forced to get on a boat. Nothing is said about the owner or the size of this boat, nor do we know if Jesus was the only one to climb into it or if there was already someone else on board. The narrator's primary concern seems to be to condense, in as little space as possible, all the information needed to sketch out an exemplary episode in Jesus' life. With a few quick brushstrokes, we are thus informed about the place where Jesus was to be found (outdoor, on the shores of a lake), his main activity (teaching, stressed by three distinct references), the recipients of such activity (a large crowd), and Jesus' peculiar mode of communication (he teaches "in parables"). From this initial scenario,

[9] Among the many studies devoted to Mark 4:1-34 (with a special focus on the passage that interests us), see esp. J. Marcus, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, Scholars Press, Atlanta 1986; and M.A. Beavis, *Mark's Audience. The Literary and the Social Setting of Mark 4.11-12*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1989.

[10] All translations from primary sources are our own.

vv. 10-12 mark an abrupt change, and present us with Jesus now offering a special instruction in private to another kind of audience:

«And when he was alone (κατὰ μόνας), those around him along with the Twelve (οἱ περὶ αὐτὸν σὺν τοῖς δώδεκα) asked him about the parables. 11. And he said to them: "To you the mystery has been given of the kingdom of God, but to those outside (ἐκείνοις δὲ τοῖς ἔξω), everything happens in parables, 12. in order that, seeing, they may see but not really see; and hearing, they may hear but not understand; lest they should turn back and be forgiven"» (Mark 4:10-12).

Here Jesus is no longer with the crowd. Mark, however, does not specify whether the crowd retreated elsewhere or whether Jesus left the boat for another location, such as a house on the lakeshore[11]. The second hypothesis seems by far the most probable, considering Jesus' reference to "those outside". The phrase undoubtedly points to outsiders of a group[12], but nothing excludes that Mark wanted to play with its literal meaning as well. At any rate, what matters most to the evangelist is to emphasise that Jesus is now "alone", which makes it possible to introduce a new set of characters to the scene: "those around him along with the Twelve". As is made clear by the use of the more generic term μαθηταί at the end of the parabolic discourse (4:34), the expression cannot but refer to the wider group of Jesus' disciples, which is not to be restricted to the Twelve[13].

Mark's intention is probably to create a parallelism with the previous episode of the Beelzebul controversy, narrated in 3:20-35: in both passages, we find a contrast between two groups of people, one characterised by being "around" Jesus (cfr. 3:32, 34 and 4:10) and the other by being "outside" (cfr. 3:31-32 and 4:11). The contrast, in ch. 3, is explicitly expressed by a spatial separation between the inside and the outside of a house (3:20), also to underline the final provocative distinction between Jesus' relatives (who remain outside of the house and are therefore assimilated into Jesus' opponents) and the members of what is defined as the real family of Jesus («anyone who does the will of God», 3:35)[14]. So, while at the beginning

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[11] Cfr. also Mark 4:36, where it seems that Jesus got back to the boat after disembarking from it. The passage, however, is tricky to interpret: see the notes on v. 36 in J. Marcus, *Mark 1-8. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Yale University Press, New Haven; London 2000, p. 332.

[12] Cfr. its use in other early Christian writings, e.g. in 1Thess 4:12; 1Cor 5:12-13; Col 4:5; 2Clem 13:1; cfr. also Jos. Ant. 15.314; m. Meg. 4.8 (*ha-hiṣônim*); Iambl. Pyth. 35.252.

[13] *Pace* R.P. Meye, *Jesus and the Twelve. Discipleship and Revelation in Mark's Gospel*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1968, pp. 152-156. In Mark, the company of the Twelve is chosen and distinguished from within a wider group of Jesus' disciples (cfr. Mark 3:13; 9:33-35; 10:32; 14:16-17; and the emblematic case of Levi, who is directly called by Jesus in 2:14 but is not listed among the Twelve); cfr. also the use of "with" (σύν) in 8:34, to connect two distinct groups.

[14] On this, see M. Rescio, *La famiglia alternativa di Gesù. Discepolato e strategie di trasformazione sociale nel Vangelo di Marco*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2012, pp. 115 and 133-144; on the role played by architectural (and especially domestic) spaces in Mark, cfr. also E.S. Malbon, *Narrative*

of ch. 4 spatial connotations have served to convey a sense of distance and separation between Jesus and his listeners (Jesus delivers his speech by sitting "in the sea", whereas the crowd remains silent by standing "on the land")[15], v. 10's reference to Jesus being alone surrounded by a distinct group of people indicates a clear shift towards a more intimate dimension. We might say that the narrative switches from a spatial separation that is also relational ("in the sea" *vs* "on the land"), to a relational proximity that is also spatial ("being around" *vs* "being outside"). It is precisely by virtue of such intimacy that those around Jesus emerge from their silence and may ask Jesus questions (implying that they were previously part of the crowd, and were thus present from the outset).

This is a crucial point for understanding the passage, since it reveals that Jesus' teaching, for Mark, unfolds in two different modes of delivery, according to the audience involved: the first is that of *public teaching*, which is addressed to everyone and takes place "in parables", namely in an enigmatic form requiring interpretation[16], and the second is that of *private instruction*, which is addressed exclusively to a select group of listeners and consists in clarifying the hidden meaning of the public/parabolic teaching. Accordingly, the fact that "those around him along with the Twelve" interrogate Jesus, rather than alluding to their lack of understanding, is essentially meant to signal their awareness of the enigmatic character of Jesus' teaching, as well as their being entitled to access a higher level of instruction. In this respect, their question sounds like a proper response to Jesus' appeal at the end of the parable of the sower, «He who has ears to hear, let him hear!» (v. 9)[17], which, by the way, allows us to exclude any automatic equation between the crowd and "those outside" (cfr. also v. 33: «And with many such parables he [Jesus] spoke the word to them [the crowds], according as they were able to hear»).

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*Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark*, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1986, pp. 106-140; and M. Pesce, *Il Vangelo di Marco, Gesù e le case*, in BeO 58/1-4(2016), pp. 313-336.

[15] Jesus' seated position, here expressed by the verb κάθημαι, is a typical pose of authority, which is seldom emphasised by Mark and only on the occasion of particularly long or important teachings (cfr. Mark 9:35; 13:3). On the common association of this posture with teaching in antiquity, cfr. recently C. Heszer, *Rabbinic Body Language. Non-Verbal Communication in Palestinian Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity*, Brill, Leiden; Boston 2017, pp. 102-106. It is also interesting to note a detail contrasting with the scene depicted in Mark 3:31-35: there, we read of a "crowd" sitting in a circle around Jesus in a house, and this is the only instance in the Gospel where sitting is explicitly mentioned as a posture for people being taught by Jesus. The use of the term "crowd", in that case, is functional to underline the paradoxical reversal between outside and inside, where it is Jesus' relatives who remain "outside".

[16] On Mark's radical conception of parables, intended as riddles, as obscure statements in need of interpretation, see esp. J.M. Robinson, *LOGOI SOPHON. On the Gattung of Q*, in Id. - H. Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1971, pp. 71-113, at pp. 89-95; and E. Cuvillier, *Le concept de παραβολή dans le Second Évangile*, Gabalda, Paris 1993.

[17] Here, as elsewhere, we prefer not to correct gender-biased language in the original Greek text.

Another relevant point is that this is the first occasion in the Gospel when the disciples address Jesus directly by asking him about his own teaching. The detail is hardly accidental and stems from a deliberate narrative choice related to Mark's overall image of Jesus discipleship. What Mark seems to describe is a sort of initiation process, consisting of different stages that the disciples have to pass before gaining access to the master's knowledge. Such stages can be schematised as follows:

1. Direct choice and calling by Jesus (Mark 1:16-20; 2:14);
2. First training level: observation and assistance (Mark 1:21–3:12);
3. In-group internal selection by Jesus: appointment of the Twelve and emergence of the sub-group of the Three (Mark 3:13-19);
4. Second training level: private instruction (Mark 4 onwards)[18].

Immediately after Jesus' choice and call (1:16-20), there follows a trial period in which the disciples merely attend to what the master does and says without undertaking any active or autonomous role. This stage lasts from Mark 1:21 to Mark 3:12 and concludes with a second act of choice on the part of the master where he selects among the members of the group, allocating to twelve of them a special task and authority as well as the privilege of "being close" to him (3:13-19)[19]. Once interpreted as reflecting a kind of initiation process, the conferral of new functions and powers obviously implies a change of status for all the members selected. Mark underscores this change by giving special prominence to a further sub-group composed by three disciples, namely Simon and the two brothers, James and John. Not only do their names appear at the head of Mark's list of the Twelve[20], but they are also the only ones to be given a surname, respectively "Peter (i.e. Rock)", and "Boanerges, that is, sons of thunder" (3:16-17). To receive a new name has long been recognised as a common feature in initiation rites[21], as it corresponds to a fundamental change of identity. In this case, such a name change defines the disciples' new identity and their

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[18] The identification of this "initiation" pattern is the focus of M. Rescio, *Il maestro e i suoi discepoli. Esperienza iniziatica e trasmissione delle parole di Gesù nel Vangelo di Marco*, PhD diss., University of Bologna, 2008 (currently under revision for publication in English).

[19] Jesus' choice of the Twelve implies a more radical form of discipleship, whereby "being close" to the master (εἶναι μετ᾽ αὐτοῦ: Mark 3:14) differs from simply "following" him (as expressed by the verb ἀκολουθέω).

[20] Despite the kinship between Simon and Andrew (who is named fourth in Mark's list), and their joint call in Mark 1:16-18.

[21] Already in A. Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, Mouton, Paris 1969[2] (1909[1]), pp. 88-91; on name-changing in Greco-Roman antiquity, see now T. Corsten, *Name Changes of Individuals*, in R. Parker (ed.), *Changing Names. Tradition and Innovation in Ancient Greek Onomastics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019, pp. 138-152; in cross-cultural perspective, cfr. R.D. Alford, *Naming and Identity. A Cross-cultural Study of Personal Naming Practices*, HRAF Press, New Haven 1988, pp. 85-95.

acquiring of a special status within the newly-formed group[22]. It should not come as a surprise, then, if the Three play a special role in the following narrative, although it is the very role of the entire group of Jesus' disciples that changes radically from this moment on: more specifically, it is only after the appointment of the Twelve that the disciples become the addressees of private teaching by Jesus (4:10ff.) and participate in events from which the crowds are excluded (from 4:35-41: Jesus' calming of the storm). From this point on, Mark's narration is also characterised by a continuous alternation between public and private, between moments when Jesus speaks to everyone and those in which he addresses the disciples alone or a restricted group among them.

For all these reasons, the parabolic discourse of ch. 4 represents a real watershed in the Gospel. What Mark collects here, however, is not so much a unitary speech as a heterogeneous set of materials, assembled in such a way as to form an exemplary didactic scene. Different from the longer eschatological discourse of Mark 13, for example, we do not have a single setting maintained from beginning to end, but a sequence of subtle changes of both scenery and audience. This is evident from what we have already observed with regard to Mark 4:10, as well as from the different formulas that Mark employs to introduce – and so distinguish between – non-parabolic and parabolic material after that point: respectively, καὶ ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς ("and he said to them", i.e. to the disciples: vv. 11, 13, 21 and 24) and καὶ ἔλεγεν ("and he said", i.e. to the crowd: vv. 26 and 30). Furthermore, the content itself reflects considerable complexity: besides some parables centred on sowing imagery (the sower: vv. 3-8; the seed growing secretly: vv. 26-29; the mustard seed: vv. 30-32) and the allegorical interpretation of one of them (the sower: vv. 14-20), we also find the saying about the mystery of the kingdom (vv. 11-12) and some other general statements about revelation and the necessity of attentive listening introduced by two metaphorical sayings about the "lamp" and the "measure" (vv. 21-25). At least from the point of view of the final redaction, there is no doubt that the whole presents itself as a literary unit: the composition is structured around three parables (vv. 3-8; 26-29; 30-32), is openly defined as a parabolic discourse (cfr. vv. 2 and 33-34), and is punctuated by repeated references to "hearing" (vv. 3, 9, 12, 15, 16, 18, 20, 23, 24, 33). Its well-crafted structure has been highlighted by Jacques Dupont, who has proposed to understand it as a seven-part chiastic composition[23]:

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[22] More detailed analysis in M. Rescio, *La famiglia alternativa*, cit., pp. 126-131.

[23] J. Dupont, *La Transmission des paroles de Jésus sur la lampe et la mesure dans Marc 4,21-25 et dans la tradition Q*, in J. Delobel (ed.), *Logia. Les paroles de Jésus / The Sayings of Jesus. Mémorial Joseph Coppens*, Peeters, Leuven 1982, pp. 201-236, at p. 206, note 12. The scheme first appeared in V. Fusco, *Parola e Regno. La sezione delle parabole (Mc 4,1-34) nella prospettiva marciana*, Mor-

A – Narrative introduction (4:1-2)
  B – Parable of the sower (4:3-9)
    C – General statement about parables (4:10-12)
      D – Explanation of the parable of the sower (4:13-20)
    C' – General statements relating to parables (4:21-25)
  B' – Parables about sowing (4:26-32)
A' – Narrative conclusion (4:33-34)

Compared to other proposals[24], Dupont's scheme has the undoubted advantage of illuminating three important elements of the pericope: the distinction between different groups of listeners, the diversity of Jesus' teaching in relation to them, and the implicit connection between vv. 10-12 and 21-25. What emerges is a composition totally centred on Jesus' esoteric instruction (C D C'), which is divided in turn into three sub-units: the opening statement about the mystery of the kingdom (C), the central explanation of the parable of the sower (D), and the closing cluster of sayings about revelation and attentive listening (C').

The whole instruction revolves around a sharp separation between insiders and outsiders. In the opening statement, we find the opposition between "you" (i.e. the disciples) and "those outside"; at the end of the closing cluster of sayings, the parallel opposition is between "haves" and "have-nots": «As for the one who has, it will be given to him; and the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him» (v. 25). What distinguishes insiders and outsiders is their relationship to the "mystery", that is to say the secret, of the kingdom of God[25]: while to the inside-group the mystery «has been given», to the outside-group «everything happens in parables» (v. 11). Such a strong polarisation is further underlined through a paraphrased allusion to Isaiah 6:9-10, centred on the motif of seeing but not really seeing and hearing but not understanding (v. 12)[26].

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celliana, Brescia 1980, pp. 101-102, though under the influence of previous oral communications by Dupont.

[24] For a quick survey, see M.A. Beavis, *Mark*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2011, p. 76.

[25] On the cultural background (and implications) of the Greek term μυστήριον in Mark, see esp. A.E. Harvey, *The Use of Mystery Language in the Bible*, JThS 31/2(1980), pp. 320-336 (responding to the seminal study of R.E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1968); more generally, cfr. also the useful remarks in J.N. Bremmer, *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World*, de Gruyter, Berlin; Boston 2014, pp. 142-165, esp. pp. 149-150.

[26] As has been widely noted, the allusion does not exactly match either the Hebrew or the Greek text of Isaiah, and comes close to later renderings in the Targum and the Peshitta. For a textual analysis, including critical discussion of Mark's use of the passage, see C.A. Evans, *The Function of Isaiah 6:9-10 in Mark and in John*, NovT 24/2(1982), pp. 124-138 at 126-133; C. Focant, *La recontextualisation d'Is 6,9-10 in Mc 4,10-12 ou un exemple de non-citation*, in C. Tuckett (ed.), *The Scriptures in the Gospels*, Peeters, Leuven 1997, pp. 143-175; and T.R. Hatina, *The Telic Conjunctions of Isaiah 6:9-10 in Mark's Mythopoeia*, in L.K. Fuller Dow - C.A. Evans - A.W. Pitts (eds.), *The Language and Literature of the New Testament. Essays in Honour of Stanley E. Porter's 60th Birthday*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2017, pp. 303-327.

Mark's use of these verbs of perception is strategic; the two main verbs of Isaiah, to see and to hear, also occur in Jesus' double exhortation introducing the parable of the sower («Hear! See!», v. 3), while the motif of adequate hearing returns in Jesus' summon at the end of the parable: «He who has ears to hear, let him hear!» (v. 9). It is therefore safe to assume that adequate hearing (and seeing) is the fundamental quality that Mark ascribes to those "around Jesus", sanctioning their distinction from "those outside". As noted above, "those outside" could also refer to an actual space, perhaps a house. A domestic setting, in fact, seems to be confirmed by Jesus' references to the lamp and the measure in vv. 21-25, which bring immediately to mind an indoor context, and are in contrast to the rural metaphors we find in the parables Jesus addresses to the crowd.

Polarisation between insiders and outsiders also informs the explanation of the parable of the sower, where the focus is again on receptiveness and group identity. Just like in the mystery saying, the emphasis falls more upon the failure of outsiders than upon the success of insiders: in the figurative language of the parable, three soils are described as failing and only one as successful. As one would expect to find in an instruction addressed to insiders, this serves the purpose of reinforcing group identity through a contrast-driven cohesion[27]. According to Jesus' own explanation, the three bad soils represent concrete situations in which external opposition prevents Jesus' word (the "seed") from being properly received (through "hearing", "welcoming", and "bearing fruit"). The "good" soil is recognised as such in that it guarantees the full growth of the seed, finally resulting in a triple yield (cfr. v. 20). In this sense, one cannot but agree with J.D. Crossan in observing that the sower works as a metaparable: it is a «parable of parabling the kingdom, [...] a mirror rather than a window parable»[28]. Hearers, in the parable, have been confronted with a pictorial representation of themselves, although in the end it is only one group of them that fully realise that, namely those to whom the mystery/secret of the kingdom has been given. Hence the ironic question that Jesus asks the disciples before giving his explanation: «Do you not understand this parable? How then will you know all the parables?» (v. 13).

[27] As is often the case with minority groups struggling for recognition, where insiders tend to portray themselves as persecuted or surrounded by hostile forces: on the role of conflict in shaping religious identities, still fundamental is B. Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society. Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989.

[28] J.D. Crossan, *Cliffs of Fall. Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus*, Seabury, New York 1980, p. 54. For a brilliant though not entirely convincing attempt to discern in the different soils of the parable the representation of groups or individual characters appearing in the Gospel, see M.A. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel. Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1989 (particularly problematic is the identification of the rocky ground with Jesus' disciples, more specifically with the sub-group of the Three, according to the classic but for us misleading motif of their "incomprehension").

Considering the composite nature of the pericope, it is little wonder that scholars have long been debating over the actual extent of Mark's redactional contribution[29]. The most likely hypothesis is that the evangelist reworked an earlier source of parables, comprising both the parable of the sower and its explanation, first by editing the disciples' question of v. 10, and then inserting vv. 11-12 together with the little collection of sayings of vv. 21-25. In the case of vv. 11-12, the insertion is suggested by Jesus' counter-question at v. 13a («Do you not understand *this parable*?»), which logically implies that Jesus had been previously asked about one parable rather than about parables in general (as it appears in the actual disciples' request). As for the addition – if not the creation – of the little cluster of sayings at vv. 21-25, this is proven by the fact that most of the sayings collected in it can be found scattered in other early Christian writings, which is a sign of their originally independent circulation[30].

Both these changes, along with other minor redactional interventions, seem to reflect a precise authorial intent: that of reorienting an exemplary episode in the life of Jesus from an esoteric point of view[31]. This reorientation becomes even more palpable if we pay attention to the redactional use of a narrative pattern of prophetic/apocalyptic derivation, which the evangelist will adopt systematically from this chapter onwards to underline the most esoteric dimension of Jesus' teaching. In its basic form, the pattern includes:

1. an enigmatic utterance disclosing "heavenly secrets", which may take the form of an oracle, a vision, or a parable;
2. a request for clarification;
3. a critical rejoinder/exhortation to understand (not always present);
4. a plain explanation finally offered by the revealer[32].

The underlying assumption of the pattern is that figurative language in oracles, visions, and parables can function as «a means both of revealing

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[29] See J. Marcus, *Mystery*, cit., pp. 80-87 and 129-140.

[30] See M. Rescio, *I doppi detti sulla lampada e la misura. La composizione di Mc 4,21-25*, in M. Pesce - M. Rescio (eds.), *La trasmissione delle parole di Gesù nei primi tre secoli*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2011, pp. 119-142.

[31] Against scholarly contentions that most of these changes came to Mark from his source (even reflecting ideas alien to him), see M.A. Beavis, *Mark's Audience*, cit., pp. 87-105.

[32] See E.E. Lemcio, *External Evidence for the Structure and Function of Mark IV,1-20; VII,14-23; and VIII,14-21*, JTS 29/2(1978), pp. 323-338, for the discussion of some of its earliest attestations (Ezek 17:1-24; Zech 4:2-14; 1Enoch 24-25; 2Bar 13-15); cfr. also P. Patten, *The Form and Function of Parables in Select Apocalyptic Literature and their Significance for Parables in the Gospel of Mark*, NTS 29/2(1983), pp. 246-258, who identifies other examples in Jewish apocalyptic literature in which "parables", as in Mark, are the special media of revelation. A similar pattern also occurs in ancient Greek philosophy, e.g. in Plato, *Theaet*. 152c, and should be distinguished from the rabbinic form of public retort and private explanation identified by D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, Athlone Press, London 1956, pp. 141-150.

and concealing divine truths»[33]. In the parabolic discourse of Mark 4, this dual function intersects, on the one hand, with the alternation between Jesus' public and private teaching, and on the other with the peculiar theory of parables that Jesus expounds in vv. 11-12. The focal point of this theory is that parables are primarily used by Jesus to maintain a harsh duality between insiders and outsiders. However disturbing this may sound, it is only to Jesus' disciples that parables reveal the mystery of the kingdom, paving the way for deeper instruction. For "those outside", parables serve to keep them in the dark, preventing them from any possibility of receiving the mystery («*in order* that, seeing, they may see but not really see; and hearing, they may hear but not understand»: v. 12a). Both this harsh duality and the distinction between public and private teaching are effectively recapped by Mark in the narrative conclusion of the pericope: «Without parables he [Jesus] did not speak to them, but in private, to his disciples, he explained/solved everything (ἐπέλυεν πάντα)» (v. 34b, where πάντα recalls the "everything" of v. 11). As we shall now see, such an idiosyncratic view of Jesus' parabolic teaching did not go unnoticed to the first readers of the Gospel, and prompted both Matthew and Luke to engage in a substantial reworking of the Markan text.

## 2. *Re-reading Mark 4:10-12 in the Context of Matthew and Luke*

From what has been said so far, it should be clear that Mark 4:10-12 plays a crucial role in developing Mark's narrative strategy, providing readers with a key theoretical rationale for the double dimension the evangelist attributes to Jesus' teaching method. But what remains of such a tactical function in the other two Synoptic Gospels[34]? In this respect, it is already quite telling that neither Matthew nor Luke, though substantially adhering to the backbone of Mark's storyline, decided to present the parabolic discourse of Mark 4 as Jesus' first speech. In its place, we find two long discourses addressed to the crowds in the presence of Jesus' disciples: the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (5:1–7:29), which follows the first calling of disciples (4:18-22), and the parallel Sermon on the Plain in Luke (6:17-49), reported immediately after Jesus' choice of the Twelve (6:12-16). In this way, both Matthew and Luke deprived the material collected in Mark's ch. 4 of any programmatic character and also broke, on the whole,

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[33] Thus P. Patten, *Form and Function of Parables*, cit., p. 252.

[34] In what follows, we will not delve into all the exegetical issues raised by a synoptic reading of the passage: for a first overview, see K.R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent. A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2008, 2018², pp. 145-178, esp. pp. 156-157 and 173-175.

the initiation scheme laid down by Mark. This entailed, inter alia, a partial or total re-contextualisation of the mystery saying. The saying is still framed, as in Mark, between the parable of the sower and its explanation, but no part of the instruction appears in their texts exclusively addressed to Jesus' disciples, and the general narrative context undergoes some other relevant changes.

At first glance, Matthew seems to retain the main elements of the Markan scenario on the lakeside, with Jesus addressing the crowd from a boat. However, the presence of a specific temporal reference at the beginning of the passage, as well as the notable use of the verb λαλέω ("to speak") instead of διδάσκω ("to teach") to designate Jesus' action, contribute to take away from the episode any paradigmatic value:

«On the same day, Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. 2. And great crowds gathered unto him, so that he got into a boat and sat there [...]. 3. And he told (ἐλάλησεν) them many things in parables, saying: "See! A sower went out to sow his seed..." [...]. 10. Then the disciples came close (προσελθόντες) and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"» (Matt 13:1-3, 10).

Unlike Mark, who points out that Jesus was used to going to the lakeshore for the specific purpose of teaching, Matthew presents us with an occasional event, one among others in the same day, in which Jesus, after leaving a house, simply begins to "speak" from a boat because of the gathering of "large crowds" around him[35]. Telling parables also seems adventitious, and is no longer presented as a distinctive feature of Jesus' public teaching. In addition, there is no element implying a change of scene or audience: Matthew just depicts the disciples as approaching Jesus immediately after he has told the parable of the sower, suggesting that the master neither got out of the boat nor withdrew from the crowds (v. 10). The disciples' movement preludes their question to Jesus, whose answer will be presumably heard by most if not all of the people present.

In fact, we will have to wait until Matt 13:36 to witness an actual change of scene: «Then, having dismissed the crowds, he [Jesus] went (back) into the house». In no way, therefore, does Matthew seem to want to confer an esoteric background to Jesus' mystery saying: this is placed in a context in which Jesus tells a twofold set of parables about the kingdom of God, first to the crowds (vv. 3-35) and then to the disciples alone in a house (vv. 36-51), with both sections including an explanation of at least one parable (vv. 18-23: about the sower; vv. 36-43: about the tares in the field) as well as an

[35] From what precedes in the narrative, it is not at all clear which and whose house that was. In Matt 12:15 we are only told that Jesus left a synagogue (probably in Capernaum) to go to an unspecified place: it can be assumed that at some point he reached a house from the reference in Matt 12:46.

appropriate narrative conclusion[36]. The first of these conclusions, concerning the speech Jesus addressed to the crowds, differs significantly from the one provided by Mark at the end of his parabolic discourse: whereas Mark 4:34 underscores again the dual level of Jesus' teaching method, Matthew specifies that «Jesus said all these things to the crowds in parables; and without a parable he said nothing to them» (Matt 13:34), but eliminates any reference to the master offering explanations *only* to the disciples. In other words, distinction between two classes of hearers seems to be settled a priori, but it is not a result of Jesus' different mode of communication.

Even more radical is Luke's rewriting:

«And it came to pass afterwards, that he [Jesus] was travelling from town to town and village to village, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the Twelve were with him, 2. as well as some women [...] 4. As a large crowd was gathering, [...] he spoke by a parable (εἶπεν διὰ παραβολῆς): "A sower went out to sow his seed..." [...]. 9. Then the disciples asked him what the parable meant» (Luke 8:1-2a, 4-5a, 9a).

As we can see, Luke omits Mark's lakeside setting (already used in Luke 5:1-3) and locates Jesus on a missionary journey together with the Twelve, accompanied by a large group of women who were "supporting/serving" them (cfr. Luke 8:2-3). Here too, one gets the impression of an occasional event, though not entirely unexpected. The absence of a precise spatial and temporal location suggests that Jesus is still on the move, and that it is the sudden arrival of a crowd (supposedly due to the success of his mission) that gives him the occasion for an impromptu preaching. In this new context, the materials of Mark's parabolic discourse are reduced to just one parable, the parable of the sower (Luke 8:5-8), followed by the mystery saying (8:9-10), the explanation of the sower (8:11-15), and some general statements relating to the theme of revelation (8:16-18; par. Mark 4:21-22, 24a, 25). To some extent, Luke follows the outline of Mark, but he carefully avoids mentioning any change of scene or audience after Jesus has told the parable. The whole narrative is thus compressed to the bare essentials: the disciples do not even need to approach the master to ask their question. By doing so, the third evangelist eliminates at the root any possibility to distinguish between different classes of hearers, and thereby to intend Jesus' reply to the disciples as part of a distinct esoteric instruction. This is also why Jesus' appeal to hearing at the end of the parable is presented by Luke as a loud exclamation (ἐφώνει, "he called out": Luke 8:8c). The intention seems to be to emphasise not only the public nature of Jesus'

[36] On the structure of Matt 13, see discussion in P.Y. Oppong-Kumi, *Matthean Sets of Parables*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2013, pp. 99-117.

teaching, but also his willingness to be heard by everybody. Equally telling is the conclusion that the evangelist sets up for Jesus' discourse, which is no longer centred on parables. Unlike Matthew, who remains more faithful to Mark's storyline, Luke moves the vignette about Jesus' relatives to the end of this section (Luke 8:19-21; cfr. Mark 3:30-35), creating a link between the seed of the sower, which represents in his text the "word of God" (Luke 8:11), and the ideal members of Jesus' family, who are declared to be all those «who welcome the word of God» (Luke 8:21; cfr. Mark 3:35, where Jesus' real family are those «who *do the will* of God»; cfr. also Matt 12:50)[37].

Turning back to the image of Jesus' disciples, we can observe that in all three synoptic accounts they are singled out as questioners, but it is only in Mark that their question acquires special weight, being the first time that they take the initiative to ask the master directly. In Matthew and Luke, their question has more of a routine flavour and introduces a teaching that has no exclusive character. It is also important to note that both Matthew and Luke replace Mark's convoluted phrase, "those around him along with the Twelve", with the generic term "disciples" (μαθηταί)[38]. They probably perceived the Markan phrase as a problematic designation, due to the implicit parallelism it created with the insiders and outsiders of Mark 3:20-35. The main problem, of course, was Mark's depiction of Jesus' relatives as "outsiders": neither Matthew nor Luke would have been interested in bringing out a negative portrait of Jesus' family (if only for their infancy stories), and in fact both tried to correct Mark on this point as well, omitting the most disturbing elements of his narrative (first of all, the allusion to Jesus' relatives who deemed he was "out of his mind": Mark 3:21). The attempt to normalise the Markan text also emerges from the different wording of the disciples' question: in Matthew, like in Mark, the question still concerns parables in general (even if Jesus has told only one parable), but it is rephrased in an explicit and direct manner so as to eliminate Mark's ambiguities and anticipate what will be the focus of Jesus' reply. Luke, for his part, turns the question into a straightforward request to explain the parable of the sower, leaving to the reader the task to understand how this relates to what immediately follows.

Let us then have a look at the different versions of Jesus' reply:

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[37] In Luke 8:20, we also read that Jesus' relatives were "standing outside", but there is nothing in the text suggesting a previous change of setting.

[38] It is not so easy to determine the precise identity of these "disciples" in Matthew and Luke. While Matthew does not seem interested in distinguishing the Twelve from the whole group of Jesus' disciples, so much so that the two designations are often overlapping in his Gospel, Luke could equally refer either to the Twelve or to a wider circle, comprising the Twelve and the women of vv. 8:2-3 (though he offers no unequivocal hint as to identify the latter as disciples).

| *Mark 4:11-12* | *Matthew 13:11.13* | *Luke 8:10* |
|---|---|---|
| And he was saying<br>to them, | And answering he said<br>to them, | And he said, |
| "To you the mystery<br>has been given<br><br>of the kingdom of God, | "Because to you<br>it has been given<br>to know the mysteries<br>of the kingdom of heavens, | "To you<br>it has been given<br>to know the mysteries<br>of the kingdom of God, |
| but to those outside,<br>everything happens<br><br>in parables, | but to them<br>it has not been given. [...]<br>13. This is why I speak to<br>them in parables, | but to the rest<br><br><br>in parables, |
| 12. in order that,<br>seeing, they may see<br>but not really see,<br>and hearing,<br>they may hear<br>but not understand, | because,<br>seeing,<br>they do not see,<br>and hearing,<br>they do not hear,<br>nor do they understand". | in order that,<br>seeing,<br>they may not see,<br>and hearing,<br>they may not<br>understand". |
| lest they should turn<br>back and be forgiven". | | |

As the synoptic table clearly shows, Matthew and Luke offer a version of Jesus' reply that is considerably different from Mark's. In particular, as far as the first part of the reply (Mark 4:11a) is concerned, they agree in: a) replacing Mark's singular "mystery" (μυστήριον) with the plural "mysteries" (μυστήρια); b) adding the verb "to know" (γνῶναι) as the subject of the perfect passive δέδοται ("it has been given"); and c) moving the phrase "it has been given to know" before "the mysteries of the kingdom of God (in Matthew: of heavens)"[39].

As for the second part of Jesus' reply (Mark 4:11b-12):

a) Mark's contrast with "those outside" is softened. In Matthew the antithesis no longer refers to a specific group (i.e. the outsiders), but to an indistinct "they" (ἐκείνοις), which applies to the crowds to whom the parable of the sower has just been told (cfr. also the disciples' question in Matt 13:10). In Luke we find the ambiguous "to the rest", "to the others" (τοῖς δὲ λοιποῖς), which most likely refers to those who do not welcome the word of God and cannot be read as a direct reference to the crowd to whom Jesus is speaking.

b) Both Matthew and Luke seem to have problems with Mark's phrase "everything happens in parables" and its radical conception of parabolic

[39] All of these (a, b, c) are typical instances of the "minor agreements" between Matthew and Luke against Mark: for a classic treatment, see F. Neirynck, *The Minor Agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark, with a Cumulative List*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 1974.

language, implying that the whole activity of Jesus (words as well as deeds) discloses the mystery of the kingdom in an enigmatic way for "those outside". Matthew resolves to expunge the phrase, reducing the second member of his saying to a mere reversal of δέδοται[40]. Luke retains only "in parables", attenuating the force of the Markan contrast and diminishing its epistemological implications.

c) Before the closing statement (Mark 4:12), Matthew alone provides a supporting argument for the preceding you/them contrast, inserting the saying about the haves and have-nots which in Mark 4:25 served as a conclusion to Jesus' esoteric instruction (this is also the only saying from Mark 4:21-25 that Matthew incorporates in this context).

d) in the closing statement, both Matthew and Luke reproduce Mark's paraphrased allusion to Isa 6:9-10[41]. According to the majority of scholars, the initial ἵνα in Mark is to be understood with a final or telic value ("in order that")[42]. Only Luke follows Mark in retaining the introduction with ἵνα and keeping the verbs in the subjunctive mood, while Matthew turns the whole clause into a causal sentence, introducing it with "because" (ὅτι) and declining the verbs in the indicative mood. The result is that incomprehension, for Matthew, is not caused by Jesus' parables.

e) Both Matthew and Luke, again following Mark, reverse the order of the verbs "to hear" and "to see" that we find in all versions of Isa 6:9-10. Nonetheless, they agree in using one and the same verb (βλέπω) to express the contrast between seeing and not seeing, whereas Mark uses two (βλέπω and ὁράω, like in the LXX). The difference is slight but not insignificant, as in Mark the contrast alludes, in a subtle way, to two different modes of perception, empirical sight on the one hand and a more intellectual kind of vision on the other (the same applies for Mark in the field of hearing: here the verbs are ἀκούω and συνίημι)[43]. All this get partially lost in Matthew and Luke, whose texts point to a mere contrast between ability and inability. In other words, in Matthew and Luke "they" / "the others" are simply unable or made unable to see and hear, whereas in Mark "those outside" can indeed see and hear (cfr. also Mark 12:12), but are prevented from attaining deeper perception. It is also worth noting that both Matthew and Luke remove the Markan link between the verbs of Isaiah and those used by Jesus to introduce the parable of the sower (cfr. Mark 4:12a: "Hear! See!"; Matt 13:3 has only "See!"; Luke 8:9 omit both imperatives).

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[40] He will use "in parables" at v. 13, again in connection with the verb λαλέω.

[41] Shortly afterwards, at vv. 14-15, Matthew quotes the full text of Isa 6:9b-10 in a different textual form (LXX), introducing it with a fulfilment formula.

[42] See esp. C.A. Evans, *The Function of Isaiah 6:9-10*, cit.; and T.R. Hatina, *The Telic Conjunctions of Isaiah 6:9-10*, cit.

[43] Full discussion in M. Rescio, *La famiglia alternativa*, pp. 59-70.

f) Finally, both Matthew and Luke omit Mark's shocking final clause, «lest (μήποτε) they should turn back and be forgiven», for which the purpose of Jesus' parables is to prevent "those outside" from understanding and even deny them the possibility to convert and be forgiven[44].

Quite predictably, scholars have proposed several solutions to account for all these differences. One solution, for example, has been to assume that Matthew and Luke may have used a version of Mark that was substantially different from the text that later become canonical[45]. A much more economical solution, however, would be to suppose that the other two Synoptics just knew an alternative version of the mystery saying (or at least of the first part of it), whether in oral or written form. In favour of this is the technical usage of the term μυστήριον in ancient Jewish and Christian literature to indicate the disclosure of heavenly secrets[46] as well as the parallel saying in Gospel of Thomas 62:1, where the plural "mysteries" is significantly used to introduce a section of the text transmitting parables[47]. It is equally possible, finally, that Matthew and Luke modified Mark wherever his text appeared more problematic to them. This appears even more plausible, if only because Mark's combination of the term "mystery" with the verb "to give" could sound rather odd: ancient sources usually tell us about mysteries/secrets that are brought to light, made known, or revealed, but not "given". It has also been rightly observed that Mark's notion of mystery has something of a paradox: the mystery of the kingdom can indeed be received, but this does not imply that it is "known"[48]. Jesus' disciples, as a consequence, are distinguished from "those outside" not because they already "know", but rather because they are given the privilege to receive

[44] The harshness of Mark 4:12 has generated endless debates, leading to a number of attempts at softening the meaning of its final clause: for a survey, see D.E. Hartley, *The Wisdom Background and Parabolic Implications of Isaiah 6:9-10 in the Synoptics*, Peter Lang, New York 2006, pp. 7-54.

[45] So, e.g., H. Koester, *History and Development of Mark's Gospel (From Mark to Secret Mark and "Canonical" Mark)*, in B.C. Corley (ed.), *Colloquy on New Testament Studies. A Time for Reappraisal and Fresh Approaches*, Mercer University Press, Macon 1983, pp. 35-58 at 50-52 (hypothesis of a pre-Markan Mark); and A. Ennulat, *Die "Minor Agreements". Untersuchungen zu einer offenen Frage des synoptisches Problems*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 1994, pp. 124-126 (hypothesis of a deutero-Markan Mark).

[46] On this, see esp. H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels. Their History and Development*, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg 1990, pp. 100-101 and 279; on Paul's use of the term μυστήριον (e.g. in Rom 11:25; 1Cor 4:1; 13:2; 14:2; 15:51), cfr. also L. Walt, *Paolo e le parole di Gesù. Frammenti di un insegnamento orale*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2013, pp. 190-199 and 211.

[47] One cannot exclude, however, that Mark himself may have known an alternative version of the mystery saying: this would explain his own substitution of the singular "mystery" for the plural "mysteries" as well as the suppression of the verb "to know" (colliding with Jesus' question in Mark 4:13). The strongest objection to this view is that both the expression "mystery of the kingdom" and the combination μυστήριον + δέδοται constitute hapax in Mark and cannot be taken as sure redactional elements.

[48] See L.C. Sweat, *The Theological Role of Paradox in the Gospel of Mark*, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, London 2013, pp. 50-62.

special instructions by Jesus. So what Mark has in mind is an ongoing process much more than a *fait accompli*. Suffice it to recall Jesus' rejoinder in Mark 4:13b: «How then will you know (γνώσεσθε) all the parables?». The reading of Mark 4:13 might well account for the common choice by Matthew and Luke of the verb "to know". At the same time, this would also explain their common omission of the verse, which they both perceived to be in stark contrast to their view of the disciples as "knowing the mysteries".

In short, if we accept the idea that Matthew and Luke had at hand a copy of Mark not too dissimilar from the one we can read today, we should also be ready to admit that they both proceed in a free rewriting of the Markan text according to their own ideological agendas. They both agreed to eliminate the programmatic value of Mark 4 and, a fortiori, to reduce the impact of the mystery saying, which no longer appears in their texts as an esoteric rule on parables.

## 3. *Hiding the Esoteric Jesus: A Common Trend in the Earliest Reception of Mark*

Once read within the different narrative frameworks of Matthew and Luke, the Markan saying about parables and the mystery of the kingdom appears patently devoid of any structuring function. As we have seen in the first part of the analysis, the saying allowed Mark to provide a rationale for Jesus' double register of communication. Therefore, the exclusivistic stance of Jesus' words essentially served a pragmatic and circumstantial purpose. If we look again at the scene described in Mark 4, the contrast does not concern the crowd that has just listened to Jesus' parables, but only a sub-group within it formed by all those who do not have "ears to hear". Far from reflecting elaborate theological disputes, the passage depicts the situation of a small marginal group whose identity is still in the making. The insider-outsider dichotomy is simultaneously the premise and the goal of the group's leader, who uses parables (i.e. coded language) both to avoid being understood by his opponents and to test his audience and decide who will be given further instruction.

Relying upon a recent and useful categorisation proposed by A.M. Melzer, we could qualify the first as a form of self-defensive esotericism, and the second as a form of pedagogical esotericism[49]. Indeed, when Jesus

[49] Cfr. A.M. Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines. The Lost History of Esoteric Writing*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2014, pp. 125-284. From this point of view, we totally agree with E. Miquel's insightful suggestion to read Mark in the light of J.C. Scott's distinction between public and hidden transcripts in communication strategies of subordinate groups: see E. Miquel, *Para que no entiendan. Discurso resistente disfrazado en Mc 4,1-34*, in «Salmanticensis» 66(2019),

states that the mystery of the kingdom has been given to his disciples while «to those outside everything happens in parables», the difference lies in the fact that only one of these groups realises they are confronted with an actual mystery, demanding and then receiving an explanation. The disciples stand out because they "can understand", they "have intellect" (cfr. Jesus' sarcastic rebuke in Mark 7:18), although this will not automatically prevent them from misunderstanding. Their spiritual journey is yet to be written and will be the subject of the rest of the narrative. Conversely, the group of "those outside" is simply condemned to remain trapped in its inability to perceive: for them, the mystery of the kingdom will remain a secret in the proper sense of the term, and the fact that Jesus addresses them only "in parables" is just meant to confirm their status as outsiders[50].

Little or nothing of this can be found in the other two Synoptics. Their version of the mystery saying still maintains a strong sense of duality, but it is more of an abstract kind with no relation to Mark's methodological distinction between public and private teaching. This explains why it is so difficult to make sense of their use of the statement, especially when it comes to the problem of identifying what is the outer group contrasted to Jesus' disciples. In Matthew, the group of "them" seems to be an image of «Israel's failure to see and to hear», which «for Matthew is an established fact [...] and is not caused by Jesus' parables»[51]. In Luke, however, "the rest" or "the others" may only loosely allude to those who «have seen and heard in vain [...] the word of God»[52] – yet how this can be reconciled with the purposive "so that" introducing the Isaiah allusion is a mystery that one is forced to add to the mysteries of the kingdom.

At a closer look, what the two evangelists were not willing to accept was the strong esoteric accent of Mark's portrayal of Jesus. It was not merely the evangelist's radical theory of parables that troubled them, but also the communication pattern behind it. One only needs to consider all the passages where the pattern of public teaching and private explanation is replicated throughout the Markan narrative. In most of these cases, while

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pp. 51-85, referring to J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1990.

[50] The hypothesis is supported by Mark's use of παραβολή, which refers less to a specific literary form than to its discursive properties: cfr. Mark 7:19, where the term is referred to the sapiential saying of v. 15; and Mark 8:32, where the opposite of speaking "in parables" seems to be qualified as plain speech (παρρησία). Similar conceptions also recur in other early Christian writings, most notably in the Gospel of John (cfr. the opposition παροιμία / παρρησία in John 10:6; 16:25, 29) and the Apocryphon of James (cfr. esp. Ap. Jas. 7.1-9; 8.1-9): on this, cfr. esp. D. Brakke, *Parables and Plain Speech in the Gospel of John and the Apocryphon of James*, in JECS 7/2(1999), pp. 187-218.

[51] So, e.g., U. Luz, *Matthew 8-20. A Commentary*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2001 (or. Neukirchener Theologie, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1990), p. 246.

[52] So, e.g., F. Bovon, *Luke 1. A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2002 (or. Labor et Fides, Genève 1996), p. 313.

rewriting Mark, both Matthew and Luke proceeded along the same lines they have shown to follow with respect to Mark 4:10-12 by suppressing any allusion to the double dimension of Jesus' teaching. If we take, for example, Mark 7:14-23, where we find exactly the same pattern as in Mark 4, we can see that the parallel episode in Matthew (15:10-20) retains the definition of "parable" the disciples give to Jesus' public teaching on defilement (cfr. Mark 7:17 and Matt 15:15) but eliminates both the change of scene (Mark 7:17: in a house) and the private setting for the explanation that follows; the episode is totally omitted by Luke. Another case is that of the exorcism narrated in Mark 9:14-29 (par. Matt 17:14-21 and Luke 9:37-43): here too, Matthew retains the disciples' question of Mark (9:28; cfr. Matt 17:19) but eliminates both the change of scene (in a house) and the special instruction on demons and prayer offered by Jesus in private. Luke, as often is the situation, is more radical and reports just the exorcism scene[53]. Again, in the case of Jesus' teaching on divorce reported in Mark 10:1-12, Matthew preserves the disciples' question, deletes the change of scene (Mark 10:10: in a house), and presents Jesus' explanation as part of his public exchange with the Pharisees (cfr. Matt 19:1-9); Luke transmits only Jesus' divorce saying, albeit in a totally different context and probably drawing the text from Q (cfr. Luke 16:18; par. Matt 5:32).

To all these cases, we might add a few passages where the esoteric dimension of Jesus' teaching is underlined by Mark through internal distinctions within the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, so that the Twelve or a selected group among them become recipients of special instruction. Beyond the problematic episode of Jesus' Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-13 and parr.), the two most striking instances are represented by Mark 9:33-50 and Mark 13:1-37. In the first passage, Mark sets up a "radical lesson" on leadership and discipleship, introduced by a change of scene (in a house) and exclusively addressed to the Twelve, who are carefully distinguished from the rest of the disciples (cfr. Mark 9:33b); this is dismembered by Matthew and Luke in different instructions to the disciples with no attention paid to intra-group dynamics (cfr. Matt 18:1-5 // Luke 9:46-48; and Matt 20:26-27 // Luke 22:24). As for Mark 13:1-37 (par. Matt 24:1–25:46; Luke 21:5-38), we can only note that Jesus' discourse about the end times (an esoteric topic par excellence) is addressed exclusively to the chosen sub-group of the Three (Peter, James, and John, here named together with the "intruder" Andrew) in the secluded location of the Mount of Olives. Matthew, while following Mark in setting the discourse outside the Temple and away from the crowd, omits any reference to the restricted audience and turns everything into a teaching addressed generically to the disciples (cfr. Matt 24:1).

[53] See the analysis in Rescio, *Demons and Prayer*, cit.

In Luke, conversely, we find what looks like a real public teaching, even delivered within the Temple area and with the potential involvement of crowds (cfr. Luke 20:45); Jesus' words, moreover, do not stem from a direct question of the disciples but from remarks attributed to an unidentified "some" (cfr. Luke 21:5, 7).

It goes without saying that each one of these cases would benefit specific treatment. Taken together, however, they seem to confirm the existence of what we could identify as a first trend in the earliest reception of Mark. It will only be for further analysis to ascertain how and to what extent the surgical removal of the esoteric aspects of Mark undertaken by Matthew and Luke actually influenced the later reception of the Gospel itself. But this is an issue that goes beyond the afterlife of an individual text. Taking another look at Mark's reception history, in the wake of Mauro Pesce's seminal research on the transmission of Jesus' words[54], could shed new light not only on the social and cultural dynamics that led to the construction of divergent portraits of Jesus in early Christianity, but also on the rise and development of esoteric tendencies in the broader scenario of the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman world[55].

Mara Rescio
Universität Regensburg
mara.rescio@gmail.com

Luigi Walt
Universität Regensburg
luigi.walt@gmail.com

[54] Starting from M. Pesce, *Le parole dimenticate di Gesù*, Fondazione Lorenzo Valla-Mondadori, Milano 2004.

[55] See recently the important contribution of M.E. Stone, *Secret Groups in Ancient Judaism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018; and the essays collected in I. Dorfmann-Lazarev (ed.), *Apocryphal and Esoteric Sources in the Development of Christianity and Judaism. The Eastern Mediterranean, the Near East, and Beyond*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2020.