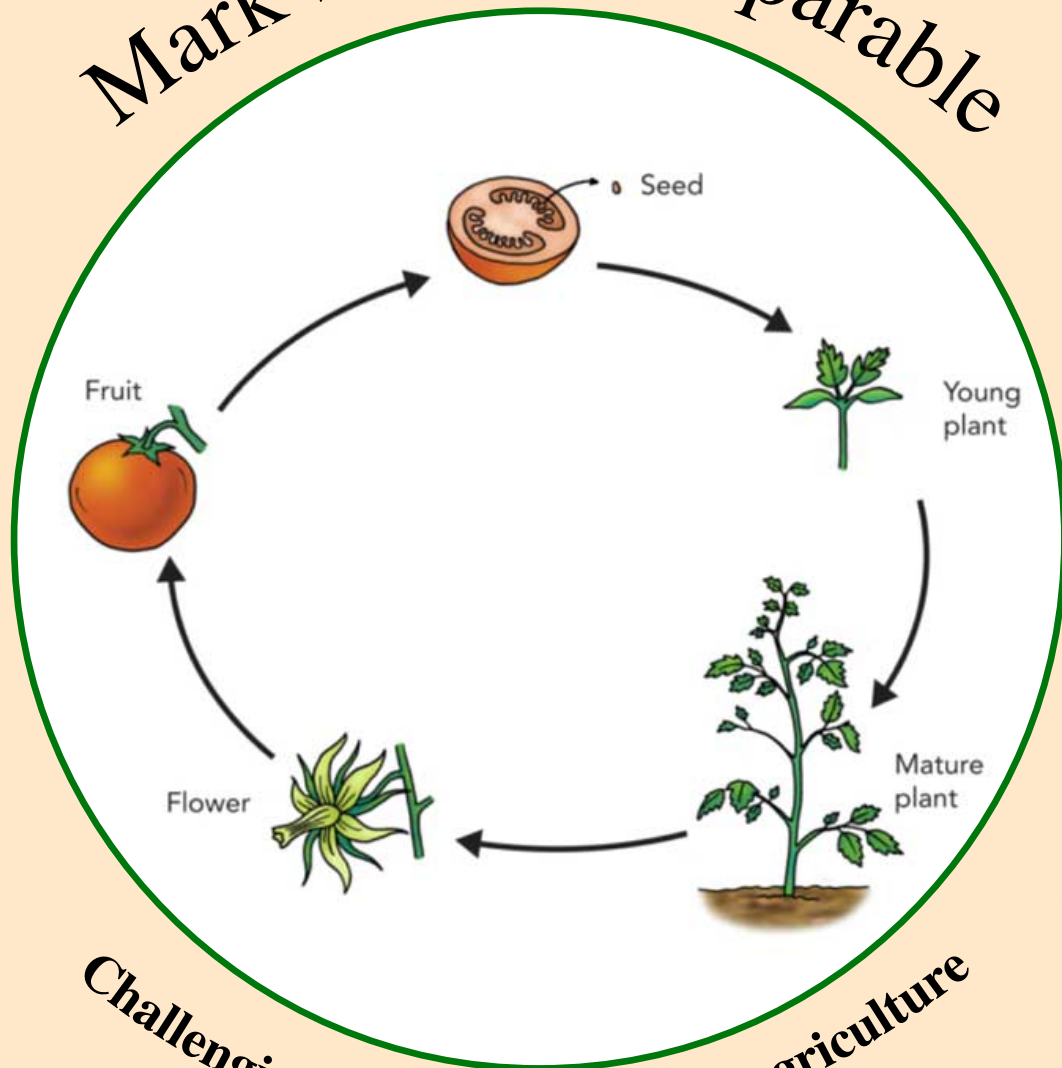




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Mark's exclusive parable



Challenging the Roman gods of agriculture



Introduction

Scriptus means 'having been written', and this *Scriptus Paper* is devoted to Mark's exclusive parable (4:26). This compares with four exclusives for Matthew (13:1, 24, 44, 47), and five for Luke (6:39, 12:13, 13:6, 15:3, 18:9).

Additionally, there are sayings of Jesus that are not identified as parables but by the content, clearly are so. Of these, Matthew has eight (7:24, 26, 17:20, 18:3, 20:1, 24:45, 25:1-13, 14-30), Mark has three (4:26-29, 10:15, 13:32-37), and Luke has five (6:47, 6:49, 13:18, 13:20, 12:35).

Parable defined

'Parable' occurs almost 50 times in the NT. 'Parable' is *parabole*, in which '*para*' means "side by side", and '*ballo*' meaning to throw, hence English words such as ball, and ballistic. Put the two together and you have something thrown alongside something else ([Abarim's Dictionary](#)).

'*Para*' appears in some English words like *paramedic*, which is a a medic working alongside other medics, and 'paragraph,' where '*graph*' means writing or words, and so a paragraph is comprised of writing or words place alongside each other. Also, 'parallel' from Greek *parallēlos*, means 'beside one another' like two railway tracks which are identical and placed beside each other.

Parable purpose

In the first part of His public ministry, Jesus taught directly without parables, but His direct teaching was met with scorn, unbelief, hardness, so He abandoned it for parables. This mystified His disciples who asked asked Him: "Why do You speak to the crowds in parables?" The reason was not to explain spiritual truths to the crowds, but to keep spiritual truths from them, which was a fulfillment of prophecy (Isaiah 6:9-10). However, for the believing disciples, parables were informative about the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but for the unbelieving, parables ensured that "*Seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand*" (Matthew 13:10-11, Mark 4:11-12, Luke 8:10). So, the parable as a teaching instrument withdrew the light from those who loved darkness, and for those who sought the light of truth, it led them to it.

Mark's exclusive parable

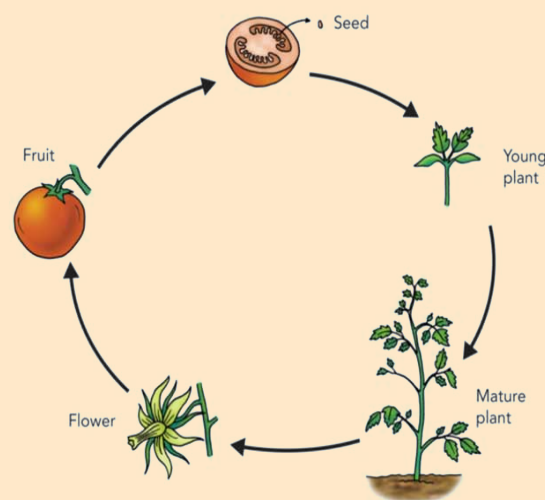
Here is what *the kingdom of God* is like:

A man who throws seeds onto the earth. Day and night, as he works and as he sleeps, the seeds sprout and climb out into the light, even though *he doesn't understand how it works*.

It's as though the soil itself produced the grain *somehow without his help*—from a sprouted stalk to ripened fruit.

But *however it happens*, when the grain is ripe, he gets his sickle and reaps because the harvest has come (Mark 4:26-29).

While Jesus does not call it a parable, it clearly is because He throws the unknown concept of *the kingdom of God* alongside the well-known practice seen in the hearers' country of a man sowing seed.



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The kingdom of God

According to [Gates](#), *the kingdom of God* means that God is its central figure. Agreeing, [Constantineanu](#) asserts that the accent falls not on “kingdom” but on “God”, that God is the king, and every aspect of His kingdom is derived from His nature, character and action. [du Toit](#) also supports this view, arguing that the qualifying genitive “of God” is not simply a possessive genitive or a genitive of origin; it is subjective, indicating that God is actively at work. It therefore qualifies the kingdom as God-determined, as the product of God's personal being and activity. So, as [Santram](#) points out, because it is the kingdom of God there is no capability in humans to bring it about, or to bring it in, or to extend it, as is commonly spoken today. It always is and remains God's kingdom. As the Lord Himself said, *Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom* (Luke 12:32). It is always there as a gift from God. Human beings can only seek, pray for, see, proclaim, receive, accept, enter into, rejoice about and celebrate the kingdom of God.

Also, the label the kingdom of God is similar to the kingdom of Saul (1Chronicles 12:23), which points to Saul as king, as does the kingdom of Ahasuerus (Esther 3:6). Further, the NT equates the Kingdom of God with the Kingdom of Christ in Paul's *the kingdom of Christ and God* (Ephesians 5:5), and John's, *the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah* (Revelation 11:15). These texts confirm Gabriel's words of Him as the Son of the Most High, which is the equivalent of the Hebrew El Elyon, meaning “God Most High” (Genesis 14:18–20). That is, Jesus has the same essence as the Most High God, and ‘most high’ indicates that no being is higher than He. So, the person of the king is both divine and human.

Back to the parable

Here is what *the kingdom of God* is like:

*A man who throws seeds onto the earth. Day and night, as he works and as he sleeps, the seeds sprout and climb out into the light, even though **he doesn't understand how it works**.*

*It's as though the soil itself produced the grain **somehow without his help**—from a sprouted stalk to ripened fruit.*

*But **however it happens**, when the grain is ripe, he gets his sickle and reaps because the harvest has come* (Mark 4:26-29).

The focus of Jesus is not on the sowing of the seed at first, or the harvesting of the crop at the end, but on the intervening process. Presumably, as an experienced farmer, the unspecified ‘man’ knew a lot about sowing and harvesting, but the Lord declares that he knew nothing of the intervening, mysterious process of the growing transformation from seed to mature crop.

In connecting the kingdom of God with the farmer, the Lord implies that He is the God-King actively at work, not only in the mysterious processes of nature, but in the unseen way the good news of the Son of God is heard and received by men, making them citizens of the kingdom of God ([Pett](#)).

Written for Romans

The choice of Mark to take the good news to the Romans was divinely prescient, for Mark is a Roman name meaning “consecrated to the god “Mars”, the Roman god of war and the defender of agriculture ([History Cooperative](#)). Mars as an agricultural deity was an averter of evil, a protector, so he was protector of his people against evils in general ([Rosivach](#)).





Written for Romans continued

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The Roman Empire was an agrarian society. Most of the population tilled the land, but many rural labourers were slaves or tenants who did not own the land on which they worked. Moreover, the traditional ideal of a Roman citizen was as a farmer and as a soldier ([Carlsen](#)). This synchronises with Mars as both the god of war, and and of agriculture.

In addition to Mars, there were many gods of agriculture, listed in the table below.

Roman agricultural deities		
Mars the Roman god of war and the defender of agriculture		
1. gods of preparing the land • Reparator • Vervactor	2. god of seeds • Saturn	3. gods of sowing • Sator • Insitor
4. gods of fertiliser & watering • Jupiter • Sterquilinus • Lympha	5. gods of promoting growth • Segesta • Seia • Hostilina • Lactans • Nodutus • Patelana • Volutina	6. gods of mowing and weeding • Runcina • Spiniensis
8. gods of distributing grains • Annona • Convector • Promitor	8. gods of storing & protecting grains • Conditor • Consus	7. gods of reaping, milling • Messia • Messor • Molae

This table is not meant to be exhaustive, but comprehensive across the growing cycle. My take-outs from this table are:

- The multiplicity of gods. Why not just one?
- This suggests to me a significant level of mistrust by the Romans in the competence of each god to do the job in just one of the eight stages, let alone a capability to the eight.

Notice the that largest number of gods is required to promote growth (box 5). This goes to the heart of Mark's parable. The Lord said that the sower *doesn't understand how growth works*, and it happens *somehow without his help*. So, the Romans assigned more gods to this process to cover their ignorance.

So, what are “gods”?

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“gods “ are idols

Isaiah makes this connection: *Those who trust in **idols** will turn back and be utterly humiliated, those who say to metal images, 'You are our **gods**'* (Isaiah 42:17).

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Our English word "idol" derived from (*eidōs*), means "a visualised thing," which is a convenient representation of the thing that may not be visible itself, but is fully expounded by the representing thing, and fully understandable by its observer. ([Abarim's Dictionary](#)).

Isaiah made the additional point that the gods of the nations are not really gods, but only the product of human hands manufactured from wood and stone, which is why the Assyrians could destroy them (Isaiah 37:19).

Accordingly, such man-made structures *are good for nothing, of no value*, because *the Lord made the heavens* (1Chronicles 16:26). Moreover, *the Lord will emaciate all the gods of the earth*, and in their place, *all the distant nations will worship the Lord* (Zephaniah 2:11).

“idols “ are demons

*God's people Israel sacrificed their sons and daughters to **demons**... to the **idols** of Canaan* (Psalm 106:37-38).

Our word 'demon' (*daimon*) describes the condition of being separate, independent entities, with private wills and intents ([Abarim's Dictionary](#)).

“gods “ are demons

*Israel sacrificed to **demons** that were no **gods*** (Deuteronomy 32:16–17).

“ demons “ are spirits

*In the synagogue there was a man who had the **spirit** of an **unclean demon*** (Luke 4:33).

Normally the expression used is unclean spirit, once by Matthew, seven times by Mark and three times by Luke.

'Unclean' (*akathartos*), means unrefined, unpurged, unpurified, and unsophisticated. These are coarse, primitive, spirits the opposite of social, cultural and scientific sophistication, the spirit of cave-dwelling, infighting, inbreeding muttering brutes as opposed to the spirit of patience, tolerance and verbal, psychological and technical precision ([Abarim's Dictionary](#)).

In sum, then, this is what we have found: “gods “ are connected to idols, to spirits, and to demons. As idols, they are man-made visible forms representing the invisible, God-created demonic spirits (unpurified and independent of God) behind them.



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Mark on Son of God and 'gods'

*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the **Son of God** (Mark 1:1).*

*And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the **Son of God**" (Mark 3:11).*

*And crying out with a loud voice, the unclean spirit said, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, **Son of the Most High God**? I adjure you by God, do not torment me" (Mark 5:7).*

*And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the **Son of God**!" (Mark 15:39).*

The Roman imperial world

The great myth that dominated the Mediterranean world was that Caesar was the divine Saviour, and the king of peace. His public appearances, accession to the throne, his war victories and decrees were promoted as "glad tidings". So, in the Roman imperial world, the 'gospel' was the good news of Caesar having established peace and security, and Romans were urged to have faith in their Lord, the emperor, who would preserve peace and increase wealth.

However, many suffered under Rome's rule. So, Mark's reference to the beginning (*arche*) of the good news could be an allusion to Genesis 1:1, such that with the "good news" of the coming of Christ, God is commencing a "new beginning." There is an alternative meaning that may be intended. While *arche* means beginning, it also refers to rank and preeminence, such as first, chief, ruler, or realm (Colossians 1:18, Luke 20:20, Jude 1:6). In this sense, Christ is chief of good news, or He is the realm of good news, which certainly fits with His miracles and use of the term 'kingdom of God'

Mark calls Jesus the Son of God at the the beginning of His public life (1:1) and at its end (15:39). The origin of the "son of god" title began with Julius Caesar, for after his assassination he was made 'divine'. His adopted son Augustus used his status as Caesar's son to bolster his legitimacy, and called himself "son of god" meaning the son of the emperor, and Mark uses this title to point out that Jesus is the son of another emperor, a heavenly, a point that God's voice made directly from heaven (1:11).

At the end of the Lord's public life, it is the Roman soldier who first express a confession acknowledging Jesus: "*This man really was the Son of God.*" To Mark, the importance of this statement was that it amounted to a testimony by 'a Roman' to Who Jesus is. He is **the Son of God**, a favourite title of his (Mark 1:1, 11; 3:11, 5:7, 9:7, 12:6, 14:61, Matthew 4:3, 6, 14:33, 16:16, 26:63, Luke 22:70). Note that Mark deliberately refers the word 'breathed His last' to both the tearing of the veil and the words of the centurion. He is drawing attention to the fact that both God and Rome testified to Who Jesus is.

In between these two 'Son of God' references to Christ, Mark gives us the reaction to Jesus by the unclean spirits. Whenever they saw him, they fell down before him and acknowledged that He is indeed the **Son of God** (Mark 3:11), Who will torment and destroy them (5:7).

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Conclusion

To the Roman readers of Mark, their whole system of worshipping the Caesars as 'son of god', and the gods of agriculture has just been blown up before their eyes.

Mark's *Son of God* is endorsed by Heaven, by the spirits of the gods, and by one of the important Romans - the Centurion.

Will Mark's Roman audience abandon their numerous gods of agriculture that know nothing and do nothing?

Let Jeremiah have the last word on it:

Can the false gods of the nations cause rain to fall? Or can the heavens themselves send showers? Is it not you, O Lord our God, who does this (Jeremiah 14:22)?

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