

Episode 191

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Ruben Zimmerman

Hi. I'm Ruben Zimmerman. I'm a professor at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz in Germany. And I'm teaching New Testament.

David Capes

Dr. Ruben Zimmerman, Ruben, great to see you. Welcome back to *The Stone Chapel Podcast*.

David Capes

In our last podcast, we gave a little bit of background and history to you. So we'll not repeat that again today. But we talked about your book in that podcast, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretations*. It's a very good book published by Fortress Press. It's also available in our library for those who want to see it. Or you can get your own copy. It's available in Spanish as well. And in German.

Today we're going to be looking at two parables as emblematic of your method and how you decide yes, that's a parable. And then on the second account, how do you go about interpreting the meaning of the parable. We're going to take two parables that are well known. The first one is better known probably than the second, but it's the parable of the mustard seed. It's in Matthew 13:31 and following. I'm going to read it, and then we're going to discuss it together.

And He, Jesus, put before them another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown, it is the greatest of shrubs, and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and make nest in its branches.

Ruben, is that a parable?

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes, it's already named in the Greek biblical text as a parable. *he put before them another parable*. And so this is *parabole*. The Greek term is used here so we know from the evangelist that this is meant to be a parable?

David Capes

It meets your criteria as well.

Ruben Zimmerman

That's true and I also suggested, from my criteria, that there might be an integrative method of how to read the parables. I think we should pay attention to the text's iteration itself. And then to the reality of

what's going on there. What do we learn about mustard? What do we know about mustard seeds in antiquity, and then the tradition. This is what I call exploring stock metaphors and symbols, because it is a metaphorical text, and mostly refers to other metaphors already known in the Bible. And finally, meaning. What is the meaning? I do not want to limit or narrow it down to one single meaning so I said, it's more of opening up horizons of interpretations.

These are the four steps. And if we have a look at the mustard seed here, we realize it is a very short text, but still, something happens. There is someone who took it into his field, and it grows up at the end. There is a development. Also, birds of the air come and make nests. You can realize there is a whole process of growing and developing of this mustard seed. At the same time, it's a sharp contrast between the smallest of the seeds. And when it has grown, it will be the greatest of shrubs, and become a tree. This contrast in the core of this little narrative is important.

David Capes

Some people have said to me, is the mustard seed really the smallest of all seeds. Isn't that a problem with this parable? Because Jesus probably knew that there were smaller seeds than the mustard seed. I'm assuming that it's a standard mustard plant, but maybe it's not. Maybe it's some other plant.

Ruben Zimmerman

If you have a closer look at reality, according to ancient agrarian handbooks, and things like that we realize there are three different types of mustard. There is the yellow mustard and the black mustard, and also the white mustard. And there are different sizes of the seeds. The black mustard has really very small seed, maybe not the smallest according to our botanic knowledge or the knowledge of some Roman agrarian theorists. I think in Palestine of that day and according to the knowledge of ordinary people, that was known as a very small seed.

David Capes

Yes. Now the small seed doesn't stay small. Something happens when it goes into the earth.

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes, the process of growing is important. And this is not the only parable on growing. We also have the self-growing wheat and weeds. This draws our attention to the dying grain, which is also something that develops. So "growing parables" also form a kind of group of parables. But let us stay with this parable here, and we realize that it becomes a shrub or bush. And it can be documented by many sources, that there were a lot of mustard bushes around the Sea of Galilee. In antiquity and they are still there now. Scholars like Gustaf Dalman said there are a lot of mustard bushes up to three meters high.

David Capes

That's about 10 feet.

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes, it's quite high. But it does not become a tree. We would only say they are bushes. We ask why Matthew refers to a tree here when there are no mustard trees in the area. And that brings me to the third approach that I call exploring stock metaphors. We realized that this mustard plant is not talked

about in the Hebrew Bible. Important plants are mentioned there. We find the cedar tree, the oak tree, and many other important plants. But not mustard. And so that's also a signal that Jesus had an eye for ordinary things, and not just for the important plants like the fig tree or vineyard. But the mustard may be just considered a weed.

But there are still some references which can be mentioned here where the tree becomes a space for the birds of the air. And that's a type of apocalyptic writing. For instance, in Daniel or Ezekiel it's used for a political symbol. And it's what we call the tree of the world, representing an empire that is brought down and a new tree that will be growing. And in this new tree, the birds of the air will nest. So that might be a reference to Ezekiel 17, for instance as a reference of hope. I would say this political aspect is also at stake here.

David Capes

Perhaps then, and this is probably a new thought for some people, that what Jesus is talking about here is the kingdom of heaven taking the place of an empire. Maybe the Roman Empire, which was the empire that they knew, at that time.

Ruben Zimmerman

Of course. The Romans were everywhere in Palestine, and also as a military power. And they committed a lot of violence against the people. Not only in the Jewish war, but also before it was a province. And people suffered under this military power of the empire. It could also be a message of hope, to see there will be a time coming, when even this empire has no power anymore. At the moment maybe Jesus followers, the group of disciples are very small, like this mustard seed. But the time is coming. This is what we call the eschatological aspects, that is there is something you can hope for.

David Capes

This is an interesting reading of that parable. Now, before we go, is there anything else that we need to say about that parable before we move on to the parable of the dying seed?

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes, I think there are different ways of reading it. The political reading is only one of them. But it's also an encouragement for the people, for the individuals. If you feel small and weak, then you are encouraged that something can happen if you stay in the faith.

David Capes

I've loved this parable for so long. And it just reminds me that what we're part of as Christians, as followers of Jesus. We're not part of something small and insignificant. It started that way. In the backwater of Nazareth, it started as a small thing. But it has filled the earth, hasn't it? I mean, there are more Christians on this planet than there is probably any other religion. There's not enough. We still have the mandate to go make disciples of the nations. But it has spread its wings a long way.

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes absolutely. And yet at the moment in Europe, at least but also in Germany, there's a decreasing number of Christians. According to the counting, only half of the people belong to a church officially.

And so, some of the next generation like my children sometimes feel like they are part of a small number going to church. And so, it might also be an encouragement once again.

David Capes

We might find that encouragement today in Europe and in the United States. Well, that's a fascinating reading. Within the time that we have left, let's shift. And let's talk about another parable, an agricultural parable. But here, it's the parable of the dying grain in John's Gospel. It's John 12:23-24. ginning in verses 23, and 24.

Jesus answered them, the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very, truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Ruben Zimmerman

Many scholars do not include John as the source for parables. But I think according to the criteria that can be said, it's a matter of for it's something which has to do with Jesus, but also with agriculture. And it's also a description of a grain, which grows up and bears fruit.

David Capes

Just a single seed, right?

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes, that's true. And what is not so well known is people in antiquity thought that a seed had to die first before it can grow again. Dying does not have a symbolic meaning here, but it's a natural meaning. So we find this in Plutarch, and in other sources saying the seed must rot before new life can come out of it. And in that way, dying is not a symbolic part of the parable. It's a realistic part. Therefore, it fits even more to the death and resurrection of Jesus. And we know Paul also uses this agriculture metaphor in 1 Corinthians 15.

He talks about the grain dying and coming up again. That's daily life experience for the people. This helps them understand what is difficult to understand, that Jesus would die and there's a need of dying in order to give new life. This can be learned with this parable. On the other hand, agricultural cults were also well known in the mystic cults, the mysterious cults. For instance, the Eleusinian mysteries about Persephone, the ear of the grain played an important role. And in the Isis and Osiris cult, we also find what we call the Osiris mummies. They put grain in a mummy. And after a certain period of time, when the feast started, the grain grew out of the mummy. And they put the mummy in the streets and say, Oh, look, there's new life from the mummy. And the people knew that, and I think this framing of this chapter 12 is about the Greeks.

David Capes

Oh, that's right. They come to Jesus.

Ruben Zimmerman

They come to Jesus and want to learn about him? And this might also be a reference to this mystery cult. But the message is that it is not the cult but Jesus who gives life.

David Capes

Fascinating. First of all, I'm grateful that you are moving against the grain, we would say in English, of scholarship, who by and large ignore John when it comes to parables. They say the Johannine Jesus or the Jesus in John's gospel is not really a parable-telling fellow because he doesn't include any of the parables in the synoptics. And there's other reasons as well, but it seems to me that this certainly fits your criteria of what a parable is.

Ruben Zimmerman

And it's not all about the criteria, but also, John was excluded because of the historical Jesus research. Most scholars think it's the latest gospel and has preserved only a few [authentic] sayings of Jesus. But they're also scholars like Paul Anderson, for instance, who think John might be seen on the same level as Mark. But at the end, I also think John, at least has preserved memories on the historical Jesus, and therefore it cannot be excluded. And they are very fine parables.

For instance, in John 16:21, the childbearing woman. It tells about a woman who is expecting a baby, has labor pain, and then after giving birth, it turns into joy. It's a daily life experience also. People did not go to a hospital in that time. So, you would hear mothers crying out during childbirth, and the birth pains. People had a clear understanding of that. And then in the context of the Farewell Discourse, it is transferred once again, to the disciples who have pain because Jesus is not here. And so once again, a realistic daily life scene is transferred to a religious scene. So it's a parable.

David Capes

Here there seems to be a real apocalyptic center. It begins by saying that the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. We are talking eschatology, we're talking the death of Jesus, we're talking the resurrection of Jesus. And that image of the dying and rising grain is just a perfect way of depicting what is going to happen to him. Now the disciples are clearly still puzzled by that, because they don't see Jesus dying. They see Jesus instead leading the charge for the kingdom of God. This is one way I think of him describing what is truly going to be in the near future for them. And they needed to see that.

Ruben Zimmerman

Yes, so as you said, there are different avenues of interpretation here. And I would fully agree that there is a Christological interpretation of this text. Because a man has come into the world, it said, and that's also in the parable itself. And so, who is this? That's Jesus, of course, who is born into the world. And on the other hand, as you mentioned, the eschatological perspective of the disciples who do not understand why Jesus must have died. And there may be another interpretation, which focuses on the women. Because this experience may be from an observer's point of view. The husband or father can be part of it but it's mostly a women's experience. And women always play an important role in John. So, they are portrayed among the men. There are a lot of ambiguous believers like Nicodemus and Thomas. But women are always referred to as the true believers. For instance, the Samaritan woman,

and also Martha and Mary, in John 11. This childbearing woman is also an interesting aspect among these positive notions of women.

David Capes

And then the very first person to the tomb, those who encounter Jesus, is a woman, Mary Magdalene.

Ruben Zimmerman

Absolutely, yes.

David Capes

So women occupying such a great role. Well, we've got to call this to an end but it's been a delight to have you here at the library and to be able to share this time with you today, here on *The Stone Chapel Podcast*.

Ruben Zimmerman

Thank you so much for this talk.

A Nugget of Wisdom from Ruben Zimmerman

The parables teach us that God reveals Himself in daily life experiences. So, open your eyes to discover God's work.