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Vincent Parkin

We can be confident that when Mk wrote his gospel in Greek he wrote this passage in the words in which we have it, and that the verses occupied their present position. But there are good reasons for thinking that their position is due to Mk's editorial activity, and that the verses came to Mk from a source different from that of the rest of the chapter.

The phrases "when he was alone", "those about him with the Twelve", "those outside" and the word musterion (mystery RV, secret RSV) are not found elsewhere in the gospel, and "all things are done in parables" necessitates a meaning for "parables" different from that which it bears anywhere else in the NT.

Further, there are awkwardnesses about people and situations. In vv 1 and 2 there is a crowd which Jesus addresses from a boat. In v36 there is still the crowd which Jesus leaves behind when he crosses the lake in a boat. But in vv 10-12 there is no crowd and no boat without there having been any indication of change of venue.

But these verses not only seem to have had an origin different from that of the rest of the chapter, they themselves show signs of mixed origin. "And he said to them" (v11) is, as J. Jeremias pointed out, one of Mk's typical phrases linking together different units, cf 2.27; 4.2,21,24; 6.10; 7.9; 8.21 9.1. /1

Verses 11,12 were then probably a separate unit, and v10 may have been originally the introduction to the interpretation of the Sower, and was adapted for its present position by changing a singular parabolē into a plural to fit "parables" in v11

This meant that although the Hebrew word mashal, translated "parable" had a wide range of meanings (proverbs, riddles, allegories, similitudes, dark saying), the parables of v11, in the context in which Mk put them, were thought of only as story parables like that of the Sower.

This in turn affected the understanding of mustērion. For Mk the mystery probably was, as in Jewish apocalyptic, God's plan which had been hidden from men but now had been revealed by God. To those chosen to receive this revelation the secret was an open secret. The content of the mystery was that God's salvation had come to men in the person of Jesus. Jewish contemporaries did not recognize this because the truth

was hidden from them by the injunctions to silence which veiled his actions (1.25,44) and by the mysterious stories (parables) in which his message was presented (4.34). But some of Mk's readers did not fully understand his use of "secret". Mt and Lk both altered Mk's account to read "secrets" (plural), so making the word refer to the esoteric truths hidden in the details of the story (understood as allegory) of the parable. No doubt other early readers of Mk made mentally the same "correction" as Mt and Lk.

Probably some readers thought of mystery in terms of the mystery cults of their day, in which participation in, and knowledge of, the sacred rite was limited to those who had been initiated.

Some of Mk's readers may also have been familiar with Paul's use of mystery of the hardening of God of part of Israel (Rom.11.25) This fitted admirably with the view that Jesus prevented the Jews from understanding the truth by hiding it enigmatic stories. It was easy for the readers to give the verses contemporary relevance. "Those about him with the twelve", represented the Christian community, and "those outside" were the unbelievers who opposed them.

Mk does not identify the source of the quotation in v12 and in this it is like a number of his quotations from scripture. But even without identification it would be recognized as a prophetic oracle because of its oratorical style. Since therefore the obduracy of the Jews and of contemporary unbelievers was in fulfilment of prophecy, it was recognized as having been divinely ordained.

It has been stated that "The Semitic mind was notoriously unwilling to draw a sharp dividing line between purpose and consequence" (2). But it is improbable that many of Mk's readers were familiar with the workings of the semitic mind since they were ignorant of the Aramaic language, as we know from Mk's translating Aramaic words for their benefit at 5.41 and 7.34. It is therefore unsafe to suppose that they took hina in v12 to indicate consequence. It is much more likely that they understood it in its usual sense as indicative of purpose, and that this understanding was reinforced by the mēpote clause. We may therefore disregard the possibility that mēpote meant "perhaps", as it does at 2 Tim.2.25. Like hina it denotes purpose, "In order that they should not be forgiven".

The readers concluded that Jesus, who had revealed the saving knowledge of God's plan to his followers had, in fulfillment of scripture, hidden that truth from "those outside" in enigmatic stories, so that they should not understand and should remain unforgiven.

But what did vv11,12 mean before Mk put them into their present context, and how and when did they originate? According to Jeremias the logion is early and originated in Palestine, because of the antithetic parallelism of 11b, the avoidance of the divine name by the employment of the passives "has been given" and "be forgiven", and the conformity of the quotation with the Targum against both the Hebrew text and the LXX. /3 This is consistent with the tradition that Jesus is the speaker, as he is in every reference in the gospels to this and similar passages (cf Mt 13.13-15; Lk 8.9f; Jn 9.39; 12.39f; Mk 8.17)

But there is a serious objection to regarding Jesus as the speaker: it is unthinkable that he should have deliberately excluded some of his hearers from God's forgiveness! But if, as Moule said, purpose and consequence were not sharply distinguished by Semites we may feel that what appears to be intention in v12 is actually a description of consequence. And the difficulty of the saying is further reduced if we accept the view of Jeremias that the Aramaic word underlying mēpote was understood in the Targum of Isaiah 6.10 as "unless". This will give to the clause the meaning "Unless they turn and God will forgive them".

It may be, however, that the best evidence we have of the way in which some Semites understood these supposed words of Jesus is provided by Paul, a "Hebrew born of Hebrews" (Phil 3.5) In 2 Cor 4.3f Paul attributed the blindness of unbelievers to Satan (the god of this world) but in Rom 11.8 it was "God gave them eyes that should not see." So the immediate cause of the blindness of unbelievers was Satan, but instead of this frustrating God's plan of salvation, it was actually part of his plan. (We may compare 2 Cor 12.7 where the thorn in the flesh, an angel of Satan, served God's purpose in protecting Paul from over-elation.) If Paul had known that Jesus had described his rejection by the Jews in the words of Isaiah 6.9f, he would have recognized that the rejection was firmly within the purpose of God, but he would not have regarded Jesus as the immediate cause of unbelief, rather, as in Mk 4.15, the one who snatched away

the word so that no fruit was borne was Satan.

Jesus also rejected the view that he was doing the works of Satan, as some had blasphemously suggested (Mk 3.22-26) He who had summoned men to repent (Mk 1.15) would not seek to prevent them from repenting. It was Satan, not Jesus, who was divided against himself! So the words of Jesus, adapted from Isaiah 6.9f, were more than poetic and sorrowful, or indignant recognition of the effect of his work. They were a declaration that both his work and its consequent rejection were within the sovereign purpose of God.

In Jesus' free quotation from Isaiah 6.9f first place is given to those who fail to see what they see, unlike the Hebrew text and the LXX where failure to understand what is heard comes first. And in the similar passage in Mk 8.17f those who had failed to understand the sign of the loaves are first reprov'd for their lack of vision. So, in speaking of those who had rejected him, Jesus was referring not just to those who failed to understand the message. He was speaking of those for whom all that he did as well as what he said was a tissue of riddles or parables.

It is not possible to say exactly when Jesus spoke these words. It could have been at any time when rejection by the majority was clear. Perhaps the recognition that, in contrast to the misunderstanding of the many, the secret of the kingdom had been granted to the disciples (Cf Lk 13.32), suggests a time after Peter's confession (Mk 7.27-30). The saying could appropriately stand in close relation with the passion, when the simultaneous operation of God's will and the power of evil in the same events is in sharpest focus. "The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. (Mk 14.21)"

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Notes

1. J. Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus, 11f
2. C.F.D. Moule, An Idiom Book of the NT, 142
3. Jeremias, op.cit. 11f
4. *ibid*, 15