

The Q Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven: Half-Baked and Garden-Variety Metaphors?¹

Abstract

The parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven have received countless interpretations over the years. Out of these, interpretations that relate these parables to categories of either impurity or growth (but also contrast) predominate. This article will critically evaluate these approaches before proposing a novel avenue of interpretation.

Introduction

The parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven each include a number of elements that may be relevant to their application, which explains not only why they have received such different interpretations over the years, but also why a number of scholars have argued that they each have more than one application. Funk (2006:39-43, 96-98, 103, 108), for example, describes these parables as “plurisignificative”, by which he means that they highlight more than one aspect of God’s kingdom (cf. Meier 2016:233). The present analysis will focus on the parables as they appear in Q. Scholars overwhelmingly agree that these parables stem from Q (see Foster 2014:255-285).² Scholars also agree that both parables derive from the historical Jesus.³ Since the two parables probably featured together in Q, the current discussion will also treat them together (see Kloppenborg 1995:305-308). This is neither to ignore the differences between them (cf. e.g. Hunter 1971:44; Snodgrass 2008:219, 233), nor to deny that they probably circulated separately before being joined in Q (see Scott 1989:322-323). The International Q Project reconstructs and translates Q 13:18-21 as follows in their *Critical Edition of Q* (Robinson, Hoffmann & Kloppenborg 2000:400-405; 2002:128-131):

¹⁸τῖνι ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τῖνι ὁμοίωσα αὐτήν; ¹⁹ὁμοία ἐστὶν κόκκῳ σινάπεως, ὃν λαβὼν ἄνθρωπος ἔβαλεν εἰς [[κῆπ]]ὸν αὐτοῦ· καὶ ἠὔξησεν καὶ ἐγένετο εἰς δένδρον, καὶ τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατεσκήνωσεν ἐν τοῖς κλάδοις αὐτοῦ.

¹ Since this article was written by the Editor of *Neotestamentica*, the peer review process was handled by the journal’s Administrator, Petra Dijkhuizen.

² Virtually all parable, Jesus and Q scholars can be listed here as examples. For the minority opinion that these parables do not derive from Q, see e.g. Burkett (2009:54).

³ Virtually all parable and Jesus scholars can be referenced as examples. Meier (2016:239-240) accepts the parable of the Mustard Seed as one of only four authentic parables. Bultmann (1968:172) regards the parable of the Leaven as a “secondary accretion” to the parable of the Mustard Seed.

²⁰[[καὶ πάλιν]]· τίνοι ὁμοιώσω τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ; ²¹ὁμοία ἐστὶν ζύμη, ἣν λαβοῦσα γυνὴ ἐνέκρυψεν εἰς ἀλεύρου σάτα τρία ἕως οὗ ἐζυμώθη ὅλον.

¹⁸What is the kingdom of God like, and with what am I to compare it? ¹⁹It is like a seed of mustard which a person took and threw into his [[garden]]. And it grew and developed into a tree, and the birds of the sky nested in its branches. ²⁰[[And again]]: With what am I to compare the kingdom of God? ²¹It is like yeast, which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was fully fermented.⁴

The impurity angle

A number of interpreters mention that mustard and leaven were impure items in ancient Judaism.⁵ Some of them make the professed impurity of these items the most important key to unlocking the meaning of one or both of these parables (e.g. Scott 1989:321–329, 373–387; 2001:21-34; 2002:21–23, 24–25; Crossan 1991:276–279, 280–281; Van Eck 2016:81-82).⁶ Not only was the mustard plant, according to these scholars, considered to be a weed in the ancient Jewish world, but to plant mustard in a garden would violate the Jewish law that prohibited two types of crop from being planted in the same plot of land. For further support, they typically reference Kil’ayim 3.2 in the Mishnah, arguing that mustard was supposed to be planted in fields, not gardens. The word “garden” (κῆπος) in Q 13:19 is therefore fundamental to this avenue of interpretation (Roth 2018:306). As far as leaven is concerned, these scholars typically point out that leaven was banned during certain religious festivals, including especially Passover. Likewise, ancient sources, including the Bible, often use the image of leaven negatively, mostly to express the idea of a corrupting influence.⁷ Scott (1989:324) describes the culinary reasons why leaven came to have this negative association: “Leaven is made by taking a piece of bread and storing it in a damp, dark place until mold forms. The bread rots and decays, unlike modern yeast, which is domesticated”. Apart from the actual leaven, the fermentation process itself was also off-putting. The process is vividly described by Levine (2014:122): “the idea of sour smell combined with a bubbly mixture created by the process of fermentation – that is, enzyme decay – does not immediately strike me as palatable. To the contrary, there’s an ‘ick’ factor at play”. The obvious conclusion for these interpreters (not Levine; see below) is that the parables associate the kingdom of God with the uncontrollable and undesirable defilement that usually results from

⁴ All reconstructions and translations of Q in this article are from the *Critical Edition of Q*.

⁵ E.g. Dodd 1961:143; Donahue 1988:67-68; Scott 1989:324, 381; 2001:25; 2007:101; Crossan 1991:280; Jacobson 1992:205; Funk & Hoover 1993:195, 347, 523; Vaage 1994:64, 65; 2001:486; Allison 2000:136–137; Valantasis 2005:177–180; Funk 2006:102–105; Beutner 2007:60-61; Ford 2016:59, 62; Ra 2016:160; Van Eck 2016:81-82.

⁶ Funk and Crossan interpret only the Parable of the Leaven as a parable about defilement, but they do regard the mustard plant to be a weed.

⁷ E.g. Matt 16:6; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1; 1 Cor 5:6-8; Gal 5:9; Plutarch, *Quaest. rom.* 289F; Ignatius, *Mag.* 10; Justin, *Dial.* 14.2; Ps.-Clem. Hom. 8.17.

mustard and leaven. In more clinical terms, the argument is that these two parables compare the kingdom of God to an impure element that is introduced to an otherwise neutral or positive source, with the inevitable result of contaminating the whole source (e.g. Scott 2001:28-29, 33-34; Oakman 2008:116). The mustard shrub does this to the garden, and the leaven does this to the flour. As Scott (1989:324; 2001:26; 2002:23) cleverly paraphrases, God's kingdom is likened to a rotten apple that spoils the barrel. Hence, the kingdom of God is to be found at those instances where the introduction of a contaminant, in the ancient Jewish sense, causes purity and normativity to be wholly displaced by impurity and undesirability (Funk 1996:157). This understanding of the parables is then taken one step further by relating it to what is otherwise known about the ministry of Jesus, including not only the attitude of Jesus towards socially undesirable figures like tax collectors and prostitutes (cf. Matt 21:31), but also the likelihood that Jesus proclaimed his kingdom message specifically to the peasantry and poor (cf. Q 6:20), who were generally in the ancient world regarded with contempt by the socio-economic and politico-religious well-to-do (e.g. Scott 1989:329, 386-387; 2001:34; Funk & Hoover 1993:60, 484-485; Vaage 1994:64, 65; Funk 2006:103, 104, 118-119; West 2009:411).⁸ Thus, according to these readings, the vision of God's kingdom subverts traditional Jewish expectations and conceptions of God's rule on earth, which included most fundamentally the Temple system of the great tradition, with its division of reality into hierarchies of religious purity and socio-economic class (see Funk 1996:157; 2006:103, 105-107; Van Eck 2016:77-78, 81-82). Instead of being holy and pure, God's kingdom is inherently defiled.

True as these more general observations about the ministry of Jesus may be, scholars like Liebenberg (2001:318-321, 336-339), Schellenberg (2009:527-543) and Levine (2014:117-137, 165-182) have argued convincingly against the association between impurity and the items discussed in the parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven. As we saw, in the case of the parable of the Mustard Seed, the word "garden" (κῆπος) is crucial to interpretations that regard the mustard plant as impure. Yet, this word is arguably the least secure aspect of the parable, since it occurs only in Luke (Bock 1996:1227). According to Matthew, the seed was sown in a "field" (ἀγρός). The *Critical Edition of Q* opts for the word "garden", but it flags this choice as uncertain by featuring the word between double square brackets (Robinson, Hoffmann & Kloppenborg 2000:400-401; 2002:128-129; see also Crossan 1992:48; Hoffmann & Heil 2013:132). Whatever the case, an interpretation of this parable on the levels of Q and the historical Jesus should be careful of reading too much into the specific use of the word "garden" instead of "field".

⁸ This is not to deny that "the peasantry" probably also included people and groups who were not economically destitute or socially judged (see Mattile 2010:291-313; cf. Rollens 2014:12, 21, 36). Making up the majority of people in antiquity, the peasantry was no doubt a diverse group of people.

Even if the Q parable did speak of a garden, it is not clear that Jews would necessarily have associated this with impurity, whether in the first place or at all. As we saw, the rabbinic tradition in Kil'ayim 3.2 is used by scholars to argue that mustard was not allowed in a garden. Danby (1933:31) translates the text as follows: "Not every kind of seed may be sown in a garden-bed, but any kind of vegetable may be sown therein. Mustard and small beans are deemed a kind of seed and large beans a kind of vegetable". The text starts off by saying that not "every kind" (בְּלִי מִין) of seed may be planted. It then goes on to say that mustard is considered a seed. The nature of the link between the initial prohibition and the subsequent statement is not clear in this translation. It is only if one assumes that the regulation names mustard as an example of the type of seed not permitted that the same interpretation follows. However, the passage nowhere says that mustard may not be planted. Moreover, the regulation has to do with a "garden-bed" (הַגֵּרְתָּהּ), which is not necessarily equivalent to Q's "garden" (κῆπος) (Liebenberg 2001:319; Snodgrass 2008:220; Schellenberg 2009:535; Levine 2014:177). The former Hebrew word differs from the word that is usually used for a "garden" in the Old Testament, namely הַגָּן, indicating that something different and more specific than a normal garden is in view here. The Septuagint uses κῆπος to describe a generic garden, often as a translation of the Hebrew הַגָּן, adding words like λαχανεῖα/λάχανον ("vegetable") and καρύας ("nut") when it wants to indicate the type of garden more specifically (see Liebenberg 320 incl. n. 166). A better translation of Kil'ayim 3.2 is perhaps the one by Sefaria: "They may not sow different species of seeds in one bed, but they may sow different species of vegetables in one bed. Mustard and small polished peas are a species of seed; large peas are a species of vegetable".⁹ As this translation makes clear, the issue is not with sowing mustard seed in a garden, but with sowing different species or kinds of seed in the same garden bed (see Schellenberg 2009:533-536). Unlike seeds, it is permitted to sow more than one kind of vegetable in the same garden bed. In this context, the word "seeds" refers to plants cultivated specifically for their dried seeds (Scott 1989:383). This distinction between seeds and vegetables has the potential to cause confusion, since there are some individual plants that may legitimately be classified in either category. To clear up the confusion, Kil'ayim 3.2 continues to explain that mustard and small peas should be classified as seeds, while large peas should be classified as vegetables.

These observations are confirmed by the larger literary context of Kil'ayim 3.2 in the Mishnah. Kil'ayim 2.8 says the following: "They may not flank a field of grain with mustard or seed of safflower, but they may flank a field of vegetables with mustard or seed of safflower" (translation from Danby 1933:30). According to this text, it is the presence of mustard in a *field of grain* (specifically) that Kil'ayim 2.8 flags as potentially problematic (cf. Oakman 2008:114). Scott (1989:382) explains that "the tall mustard plants with their yellow flowers would look too much

⁹ Available online: https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Kilayim.3.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.

like ripened stalks of grain". Conversely, the presence of mustard in a vegetable garden or plantation is not just acceptable, but standard practice (Levine 2014:176). According to Schellenberg (2009:536), Kil'ayim 2.5 "explicitly permits surrounding the vegetables in a garden bed with mustard or safflower". In Kil'ayim 2.9, the rabbis debate about how many patches of field with mixed plants may include mustard as well, with opinions ranging from no more than three to no more than nine (Levine 2014:176).

Hence, the version of the parable that speaks of a "field" is actually more relevant in the context of purity regulations (cf. Oakman 2008:114-115). Oakman (2008:113-115) maintains that the original parable spoke of a "field", which he then regards as a cultivated field of grain. This interpretation, however, reads elements into the parable that are not present. To begin with, one must assume that the seed ended up in the field either without human involvement or by mistake to make sense of the parable, which is precisely what Oakman argues (see also Crossan 1991:278). Yet, in Matthew, Luke and Q, there is no doubt that the seed is sown deliberately by a person. Mark does not mention the sower, but his twofold use of the verb "sow" (σπείρω) does imply deliberate human activity (*pace* Crossan 1991:278; Kloppenborg 1995:306). It is only in the Gospel of Thomas where the verb "fall" (πίπτω) and the absence of a human actor imply that the seed ended up in the field without human intention. More importantly, regardless of which version you follow, nothing at all is said of there being any other seed or plant, in addition to mustard, in the field (or garden) (Levine 2014:177). There is no indication that the sower is mixing two different types of seed in the same piece of land, if it is an agricultural piece of land to begin with (cf. Liebenberg 2001:324). This would be an important piece of information to include if the intention is to introduce impurity as a motif. Also, there is no indication that a field of *grain* is specifically in view. Even if Jews strictly followed the law that different types of seed should not be planted as part of the same crop, violating this law would not mean that the mustard is intrinsically corrupt, but rather that the act of mixing two types of seed in the same field introduces impurity. As Levine (2014:168, 176) indicates, mustard itself is totally kosher, then as now. It carries "no greater threat to purity and order than any other seed" (Schellenberg 2009:534). Adding mustard to gardens or fields does not seem to be an issue at all for ancient Jews, provided that it is not done too much or in combination with grain. Snodgrass (2008:221) is therefore correct when he says: "Halakhic regulations have no relevance for this parable". Finally, the tradition in Kil'ayim 3.2 post-dates the ministry of Jesus, representing a later time when traditional purity laws were elaborated by specifying and regulating minutiae (Levine 2014:175).

The idea that Jesus used the image of mustard because it was regarded as a weed in antiquity is also spurious (Schellenberg 2009:537; Roth 2018:306). If Jesus wanted to tell a parable about weeds, he would undoubtedly have used the term "weed" (ζιζάνιον), as he does in the parable

of the Weeds in Matthew 13:24-30 (Levine 2014:172). Scholars usually reference the following comment by Pliny the Elder on mustard: "...though it will grow without cultivation, [it] is considerably improved by being transplanted; though, on the other hand, it is extremely difficult to rid the soil of it when once sown there, the seed when it falls germinating immediately" (*Nat.* 19.54; translation by Bostock 1855:4197). Pliny does not call the mustard plant a "weed" in this text, but merely points out that the plant is not easy to control (Schellenberg 2009:532; Roth 2018:306). In a different context (*Nat.* 19.58), Pliny praises the mustard seed for its durability. As we will see, the positive attributes of mustard, which Pliny discusses at much greater lengths in the same writing, by far outweigh this one comment about mustard being difficult to remove from the soil.¹⁰

Leaven was also not intrinsically corrupt. It is true that Exodus 12:15 instructs Jews to remove leaven from their homes during Passover, but that just goes to show that leaven, far from being impure during the rest of the year, was a staple ingredient in Jewish houses (Levine 2014:126). This is supported by traditions in the Hebrew Scriptures that instruct people to bring *leavened* bread to the Temple, the most holy place in Judaism, as thanksgiving and first-fruit offerings to God (Liebenberg 2001:337; Snodgrass 2008:233; Roth 2018:316; see Levine 2014:126-127; cf. Lev. 7:13; 23:17; Amos 4:5). Levine (2014:126) takes this argument one step further: "If yeast [or leaven] were impure, bread would be too; that very point should demonstrate why purity is the wrong category". Snodgrass (2008:233) likewise says: "Leaven is not to be used with burnt offerings, but neither is honey. No one concludes that honey is negative". The negative metaphorical references to leaven in the Gospels specify the *type* of metaphorical leaven that is bad (Levine 2014:124). This is supported by the following statement of Ignatius: "Set aside then, the evil leaven, old and sour, and turn to the new leaven, that is, Jesus Christ" (*Magn.* 10.2; translation from Liebenberg 2001:338). There are in fact a number of positive references to leaven in Jewish literature that balance out the negative references mentioned above (see Liebenberg 2001:337-339; Schellenberg 2009:538-541). In *Special Laws* 2.184, Philo speaks of leaven as the "most perfect and entire food, than which one cannot, among all the things of daily use, find any which is better and more advantageous" (translation from Yonge 1995:585; cf. also *Der. Er. Zu* on Lev. 26:6). It is hard to imagine a more positive description. Philo continues to say in the next verse (2.185) that "everything that is leavened rises, and joy is the rational elevation of the soul" (translation from Snodgrass 2008:229). It is hard to square these positive references with the idea that leaven was unilaterally associated with impurity in ancient Judaism (Levine

¹⁰ It is nonetheless possible that the image of the mustard plant hints at the kingdom as something that spreads easily and automatically, that is, without requiring much effort or interference from humans (cf. Carlston 1975:161; Liebenberg 2001:296, 329; Schellenberg 2009:532; Zimmermann 2015:253; Van Eck 2016:81, 83). The same idea might be present in the image of leaven, which ferments the flour/dough spontaneously and automatically once introduced (Ford 2016:55, 57, 62; cf. Dodd 1961:144). This accent is not, however, the main point of the parable. At most, it is merely implied as a recognisable attribute of God's kingdom.

2014:128). Instead, it seems that although leaven could be used as a negative metaphor in some cases (as Philo also does; e.g. *QE* 1.15), it was understood in literal terms as a (or perhaps, *the*) staple food necessary for survival, which partly explains why it also sometimes functioned as a positive metaphor. Schellenberg's (2009:539) comment is apposite: "Leavening is an unambiguously positive process when concrete food is discussed". Metaphorical openness is a feature of leaven in both Judaism and the ancient world generally, where it was used both positively and negatively to describe a variety of phenomena. A number of interpreters regard the reference to leaven in the parable of the Leaven as a positive metaphor (e.g. Bock 1996:1228; Fleddermann 2005:671; Schellenberg 2009:542; Gathercole 2014:547). As such, impurity would have been the furthest thing from the minds of the first Jewish audience(s). This is not to deny that mustard and leaven were atypical and non-traditional items to use as metaphors about God's kingdom, which is probably part of the reason why these parables were remembered and preserved.

The growth angle

Growth and development are often emphasised as important themes in the interpretation of the parable of the Mustard Seed.¹¹ Snodgrass (2008:220) goes as far as to say that "for the meaning of the parable all characteristics of the mustard seed are irrelevant except that it grows so high from such a small seed". Within this camp, opinions differ about whether the emphasis is on the developmental process itself or on the contrast between the beginning and end of that process (see e.g. Hunter 1964:43-45; Jeremias 1972:147-149; Carlston 1975:28, 161; Davies & Allison 1991:415-417, 419, 421-424; Bock 1996:1225, 1228; Robinson 2003:31; Snodgrass 2008:222, 225, 233). Recently, there has been a tendency to include both of these accents as part of the same interpretation (Snodgrass 2008:225; e.g. Fleddermann 2005:669, 670; Meier 2016:232-233; Roth 2018:303, 310).

How valid is this avenue of interpretation? In Mark (4:31), Matthew (13:32) and the Gospel of Thomas (20), Jesus explicitly states that the mustard seed is the smallest of all existing seeds. In Mark (4:30-32) and Matthew (13:31-32), Jesus further states that the mustard plant is the largest of all garden shrubs. The Gospel of Thomas does not include these comments, but does call the resulting plant "large" (μέγας). Interpreting the parable of the Mustard Seed as a parable of growth or contrast is therefore valid when considering its performances in Mark, Matthew and Thomas (Schellenberg 2009:542; e.g. Carlston 1975:26-28, 157-159; Zimmermann 2015:251-258). The same is not necessarily true for Luke or earlier versions of the parable, like those on the levels of Q and the historical Jesus (see Scott 1989:322-323; Crossan 1991:276-277; Van Eck

¹¹ See the summary of scholarship in Van Eck (2016:64-66).

2016:71-75). The side-line comment that the mustard seed is the smallest seed is most likely an elaboration by Mark, which was then followed by the Gospels of Matthew and Thomas (see Scott 1989:323, 373, 378, 379; 2001:36-37, 40; Fleddermann 2005:665-666; Van Eck 2016:71-75, 79-80).¹² The reference to the smallness of the mustard seed was not in Q (Scott 1989:323; 2001:40; Crossan 1992:48; Roth 2018:311; see Dodd 1961:141-142). Matthew gets it from Mark and Luke does not include it. It is unlikely that the historical Jesus interrupted his telling of the parable to make a botanical remark about the size of the mustard seed (Luz 2001:258). The same is true of the comment in Mark and Matthew that mustard is the largest of all garden plants. Both of these comments should be seen as secondary elaborations by Mark, through which he determined the interpretation of the parable, making it about growth from small to large (see Scott 1989:322-323, 373, 378, 379-380; 2001:35-36; Van Eck 2016:71-75, 79-80). When adding these parentheses, Mark used an insertion technique that is typical of him and easy to spot (Dodd 1961:142 n. 11; Van Eck 2016:73 incl. n. 42; see Scott 1989:378; 2001:36; Crossan 1992:45-46).¹³

Since the comments about the smallness of the mustard seed and the largeness of the mustard plant are not present in Luke or Q, some scholars look for ways to import the same interpretation to these texts. To substitute the comment of the mustard seed's smallness, on the one hand, scholars claim that the mustard seed was *proverbially* known in antiquity and Judaism for its smallness.¹⁴ Even if Luke and Q make no mention of the mustard seed being small, this is assumed to have been common knowledge at the time and implied by these two texts (e.g. Liebenberg 2001:313-314; Fleddermann 2005:665; Snodgrass 2008:222). To substitute the comment of the mustard plant's largeness, on the other hand, some interpreters point out that in Luke and Q the mustard seed grows into a "tree" (δένδρον) (e.g. Jacobson 1992:204; Bock 1996:1225-1226; Fleddermann 2005:669-670; Meier 2016:233; Van Eck 2016:82; Roth 2018:307). The word "tree"

¹² Although the Gospel of Thomas probably includes authentic traditions, it was also subsequently influenced by the canonical Gospels (Howes 2014:226). Fleddermann (2005:666-668) argues convincingly that Thomas was influenced by the Synoptic traditions in the parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven (so too Davies & Allison 1991:421, 424). The fact that Thomas uses the Matthean term "kingdom of heaven" (βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν) in his version of the parable of the Mustard Seed suggests that Thomas was here influenced by Matthew in addition to Mark (Fleddermann 2005:667). After a fairly detailed discussion of the relationship between Thomas and the Synoptics, Meier (2016:111-115, 231) finds that the Gospel of Thomas represents a conflation of all three Synoptic Gospels. Scott (1989:323, 377) argues that the parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven in the Gospel of Thomas are not dependent on the canonical Gospels, but rather on oral tradition that was influenced by the proverbial smallness of both mustard seeds and leaven (see also Liebenberg 2001:349). This is unlikely, since the smallness of the mustard seed, though recognised, was not proverbial, and leaven was not known for its smallness at all (see below).

¹³ Liebenberg (2001:302-304) discusses some of the practical and theological reasons why Mark might have repeated the phrases "when sown" (ὅταν σπαρῆ) and "on the earth" (ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς). Although some of these reasons are convincing, they do not disprove the likelihood that the clumsy language results from Mark adding material to his inherited tradition.

¹⁴ Virtually all scholars who discuss this parable mention the proverbial smallness of mustard seeds in (Jewish) antiquity. Examples often cited include Matt 17:20 // Luke (Q) 17:6; m. Naz. 1:5; m. Nid. 5.2; m. Ṭehar. 8.8; y. Ber. 5, 8, 36; b. Ber. 31; Antigonus of Carystus 91; Diodorus Siculus 1.35.2.

is emphasised here, since the mustard shrub was not in antiquity (nor is it today) classified as a tree (Hedrick 2004:93; see Scott 1989:376-377, 383-384; 2001:37, 38; Liebenberg 2001:311-312), even if it could grow to be quite large (Jeremias 1972:148; Etchells 1998:62; Oakman 2008:114; Snodgrass 2008:220; Zimmermann 2015:246, 247; Van Eck 2016:76). Thus, the use of the word “tree” is deliberately provocative, contrasting the insignificant beginning with the unexpected end result (Allison 2000:136). This contrast is ultimately related to the kingdom of God, which started out small and inconspicuous, but then grew (and continues to grow) into something that is larger than life (e.g. Tuckett 1996:143; Kirk 1998:303; Järvinen 2001:521). For some of these interpreters, the function of the birds in the narrative is little more than to confirm the plant’s extravagant size (e.g. Etchells 1998:64; Snodgrass 2008:224).

These arguments are not as convincing as they may seem at first. The extra-biblical *Jewish* texts used by scholars to show that the mustard seed was associated particularly with smallness in antiquity post-date the ministry of Jesus (Schellenberg 2009:537; see Levine 2014:170-171). *Non-Jewish* authors like Antigonus of Carystus (91) and Diodorus Siculus (1.35.2) did indeed make reference to the smallness of the mustard seed before the ministry of Jesus, but apart from the fact that these references are not Jewish, they are not very common. As we will see, other observations about the mustard seed were much more prevalent in the ancient world. In no unclear terms, Levine (2014:170) states: “the smallness of the mustard seed is not proverbial in Greek, Roman, or Jewish culture – at least as far as we know”. Mark’s parenthesis, placed in the mouth of Jesus and duplicated by Matthew, that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds, is precisely what one would expect if the smallness of the mustard seed was *not* proverbial in the ancient world, having to be pointed out by the author (cf. Liebenberg 2001:297). By the same token, the fact that Mark deliberately points out that mustard is the largest garden plant speaks against the size of the mustard plant being proverbial in antiquity (*pace* Liebenberg 2001:298, 300, 329; Zimmermann 2015:247).

The only Jewish reference to the smallness of the mustard seed that does not post-date the ministry of Jesus appears in Q 17:6, which has been reconstructed by the International Q Project as follows: “If you have faith like a mustard seed, you might say to this mulberry tree: Be uprooted and planted in the sea! And it would obey you”. It is not a given that the association is with the smallness of the mustard seed, since the attribute of smallness is not mentioned explicitly. Yet, smallness does seem to be the most obvious point of comparison in this particular saying (Kloppenborg 1995:316; Kirk 1998:300; Fleddermann 2005:670; Roth 2018:307; see Schellenberg 2009:536-537). This implies that the smallness of the mustard seed was indeed one of its identifiable features in ancient Judaism, like it was in the ancient world generally (Scott 1989:381; Etchells 1998:62; Meier 2016:233; Roth 2018:311). Yet, this is not the same as saying that the smallness of the mustard seed was *proverbial*. Being small does not seem to have been the most

important or commonly recognised feature of mustard in either Judaism or antiquity, as we will see. Recognising that Q 17:6 alludes specifically to the smallness of the mustard seed does not require such smallness to be a proverbial quality of the mustard seed in ancient Judaism. Instead, it requires a proper understanding of the saying *in toto*.

If the mustard seed is not chosen because of its smallness, what about the fact that it grows into a “tree” (δένδρον)? The first important factor to consider here is that the word “tree” does not appear in all versions of the parable. Mark 4:32 features the word “shrub” (λάχανον) instead of “tree”. A number of scholars maintain that Mark is more original at this point (e.g. Jeremias 1972:147; Scott 1989:387; Crossan 1991:277; 1992:48; Funk 2006:101, 108, 115; Zimmermann 2015:245-246).¹⁵ The Gospel of Thomas (20) likewise features “shrub” or “branch” (κλάδος) instead of “tree”. Matthew features both “shrub” (λάχανον) and “tree” (δένδρον). The only Gospel that features only a “tree” is Luke. As such, interpretations of the parable on the level of the historical Jesus should not place too much stock in the specific word “tree”, since the word might not have been part of the original telling(s) of the parable (Crossan 1992:48). Yet, it seems likely that Q featured only a “tree”, considering not only that the word is shared by Matthew and Luke, but also that Matthew’s version is an obvious amalgamation of Mark’s “shrub” and Q’s “tree” (Perrin 1967:157; Carlston 1975:26, 158; Donahue 1988:36).¹⁶ Even so, the use of the word “tree” might not be intended to say anything about its size. There are other possible reasons for using the word “tree” instead of “shrub”. For example, a tree might have been regarded as a more appropriate image to describe the nesting of birds, especially under the influence of Jewish tradition and scripture (see below; cf. Crossan 1992:48; Jacobson 1992:204). In any case, the Greek word δένδρον was sometimes used loosely to refer to a large plant (Scott 2001:37).

A number of interpreters take the significance of the word “tree” a step further by recalling Ezekiel 17:22-24, where the future kingdom of Israel is likened to the cedar of Lebanon, a traditional Jewish symbol of mighty earthly empires. The same metaphor is used to describe the Egyptian and Assyrian empires in Ezekiel 31:1-9 and the Babylonian empire in Daniel 4. According to some, the mustard shrub is a burlesque of the cedar, deliberately substituting it with an unimpressive (and unclean) plant as a more appropriate metaphor of God’s subversive kingdom (e.g. Funk 1966:203 n. 7; 1996:157; 2006:101-102, 117; Scott 1989:385-387; 2001:39; 2007:105;

¹⁵ For the opposite view that Q’s “tree” is original, see Davies & Allison (1991:416); Luz (2001:258); Fleddermann (2001:29 n. 27; 2005:665).

¹⁶ Scholars generally agree that Matthew conflated Mark and Q to produce his version of the parable (e.g. Dodd 1961:141-142; Bultmann 1968:172; Marshall 1978:560; Scott 1989:322, 373, 379; 2001:36; Davies & Allison 1991:416, 418; Horsley 1999:90; Liebenberg 2001:325; Oakman 2008:113; Snodgrass 2008:218, 222; Meier 2016:232, 233; Roth 2018:299-300).

Vaage 1994:64; 2001:486; Zimmermann 2015:256-258).¹⁷ Hence, the kingdom of God ends up being a complete reversal of expectations (Valantasis 2005:178; Ra 2016:160; see Allison 2000:136–137, 221–222). Instead of being mighty, forceful and violent like earthly kingdoms, it is insignificant, peaceful and accommodating (see Scott 2001:30-31, 39; Zimmermann 2015:250-251, 256-258).

In my view, it is entirely likely that the audience would have noticed an allusion to the so-called “world tree” when hearing the parable of the Mustard Seed. Even if the verbal overlap between Q 13:18-19 and the Jewish texts mentioned above is not extensive (Snodgrass 2008:224; Meier 2016:235, 236),¹⁸ the ideational overlap is quite strong (Dodd 1961:142; Kloppenborg 2006:220; Roth 2018:309). All of these texts refer to birds nesting in the branches of a tree as a metaphor for a kingdom (Heil 2001:657 n. 50; Scott 2001:38; Roth 2018:309). Granting that the lower classes might in general not always have been familiar with official traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures or the so-called “great tradition” (Oakman 2008:112, 113; Meier 2016:235; Van Eck 2016:80), the idea that earthly kingdoms are comparable to massive trees could easily have been a stock image of popular culture or the “little tradition” (cf. Roth 2018:305, 308).¹⁹ In the parable of the Mustard Seed, it is likely that Jesus is deliberately comparing his vision of God’s kingdom with former earthly kingdoms and/or traditional expectations of Israel’s future kingdom (cf. Dodd 1961:142; Snodgrass 2008:224; Roth 2018:308, 323). In fact, the opening of the parable makes clear that the kingdom of God is here being compared to other kingdoms: “What is the kingdom of God like, and with what am I to compare it?” (Van Eck 2016:77-78). However, to call this comparison a “burlesque” or “parody” is perhaps going too far (Snodgrass 2008:224). Although it would not have been uncharacteristic for the historical Jesus to be controversial or subversive, I do not get the impression from this parable that Jesus is trying to mock earthly kingdoms. Instead, it seems to me that the parable is merely implying that the kingdom of God envisioned by Jesus differs from past, present and future kingdoms. This is an attribute of the kingdom accurately portrayed by the parable. To understand how this attribute is relevant to the interpretation of the parable, one needs to know *in what way* God’s kingdom differs from other kingdoms. My current argument is that impurity should not be seen as the answer, and neither should growth.

The parable of the Leaven is also interpreted by many scholars as a parable of growth or contrast. Although there is no comment about the smallness or insignificance of leaven in the parable, this

¹⁷ Funk (1996:157) also regards the Parable of the Leaven as “a burlesque of the old standard – the unleavened – that used to be associated with the sacred”.

¹⁸ According to Allison (2000:134-135), Daniel 4 (LXX and Theodotion) provides the closest verbal parallel to Q 13:19, while Ezekiel 17 provides the closest thematic parallel.

¹⁹ Being a peasant or poor is not the same as being ignorant or obtuse, even if it is true that many poor people are often uneducated (Rollens 2014:192 n. 181).

is assumed due to its proximity to the parable of the Mustard Seed in Matthew, Luke and Q (e.g. Kloppenborg 1987:223 n. 214).²⁰ Just like we saw with the parable of the Mustard Seed, certain elements in the parable of the Leaven are highlighted to argue that it was indeed about growth or contrast. In particular, a number of scholars emphasise the fact that the woman initially “hid” (ἐκρυψεν / ἐνέκρυψεν) the leaven, and that the flour was ultimately “fully” (ὄλον) fermented (e.g. Marshall 1978:561; Crossan 1991:281; Funk 1996:156; 2006:100-101; Scott 2001:27-28, 32; Valantasis 2005:180; Snodgrass 2008:231). The peculiarity of the verb “hide” is particularly noticeable in this context (Scott 1989:326; 2001:27-28; Jacobson 1992:204; Fleddermann 2005:671; Snodgrass 2008:231; Roth 2018:312, 313, 317, 318). It would be unusual for someone to “hide” leaven in flour and not expect it to ferment, as opposed to merely “placing” the leaven in the flour with the deliberate intention of effecting fermentation (Funk & Hoover 1993:195; Luz 2001:262; Valantasis 2005:180; Funk 2006:100). Under normal circumstances, “placing” leaven in flour would be followed by “kneading” (Scott 1989:326; Luz 2001:262; cf. e.g. Gen 18:6). The reference to hiddenness was particularly important to those responsible for the Sayings Gospel Q (Fleddermann 2005:671). Other passages in Q likewise associate the kingdom of God with hiddenness (e.g. Q 10:21; 11:33; 12:2-3; [17:20-21]; 19:21; see Fleddermann 2005:664, 671-672). In particular, Q describes the message of Jesus about God’s kingdom as formerly being hidden (Q 10:21; 12:2-3), but subsequently being proclaimed openly by the followers of Jesus (Q 11:33; 12:2-3). In other words, the development is from something that starts out hidden to something that ends up permeating everything (Vaage 1994:64; Luz 2001:261, 263; cf. 1 Cor 5:6; Gal 5:9). This line of interpretation can then be associated with the kingdom of God, which starts out obscure, but inevitably ends up as something that permeates the whole ancient world (see Dodd 1961:142-144; Liebenberg 2001:341-345).

A word of caution is warranted. Although ἐγκρύπτω typically means “hide”, it was on rare occasions used to simply mean “put into” (Davies & Allison 1991:423; Funk 2006:100). According to Liebenberg (2001:339-340), this verb is used merely because it accurately portrays what happens to leaven when it is worked into dough: it becomes invisible (cf. Vaage 1994:64; Etchells 1998:64). Moreover, hiddenness is not the same as smallness. The parable says nothing about the initial smallness of the leaven.²¹ This is because the leaven is probably not small at all. According to Luz (2001:262), almost four pounds of leaven would be required to ferment three measures or fifty pounds of flour. As such, it is unlikely that contrast between small and large is the focus of the parable (Liebenberg 2001:342). In my view, the reference to “hiding” the leaven

²⁰ It is only the Gospel of Thomas (96) that specifies the amount of leaven as “little” (μικρός) and then contrasts it with the resultant “large” (μέγας) loaves of bread (see Scott 1989:322-323; 2001:22-23, 24, 37; Liebenberg 2001:345-347).

²¹ The only exception is the Gospel of Thomas 96.

is probably deliberate, especially on the level of Q, but the foregoing observations should alert one against reading too much into this verbal choice.

Another feature of the parable highlighted in this context is the express mention of “three measures” (σάτα τρία) of flour at the end of the parable. The “three measures” equate to about fifty pounds of flour, which would have produced enough bread for over a hundred people (Jeremias 1972:147; see Snodgrass 2008:231-232). The massive amount of fermented flour is therefore equivalent in metaphorical meaning to the massive size of the tree in the parable of the Mustard Seed (Nolland 2005:554). As I will continue to argue, the references to the “three measures” of flour and the flour being “fully” fermented probably have a different emphasis than the massiveness or all-encompassing nature of God’s kingdom, although these aspects of the kingdom might also be implied. At any rate, scholars ultimately conclude that both parables treat growth as a factor of God’s kingdom, contrasting small, humble, clandestine beginnings with massive, magnificent, all-pervasive endings.²²

That the parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven mention growth and hiddenness is accurate (Crossan 1992:38, 50; Levine 2014:181). In fact, growth and hiddenness are indisputable components of these parables, as indicated by the mere presence of the verbs “grow” (αὐξάνω), “develop” (γίνομαι), “leaven” (ζυμώω) and “hide” (ἐγκρύπτω) (cf. Jacobson 1992:203; Vaage 1994:63; Kloppenborg 1995:307-308, 310; Fleddermann 2005:670; Meier 2016:232-233; Roth 2018:300, 303, 315; *pace* Van Eck 2016:74). However, this does not mean that the emphasis is on these elements, or that the applications of the parables lie “hidden” in them. The parables also feature the verbs “take” (λαμβάνω) and “throw” (βάλλω), but interpreters are not queuing up to extract the message of the parables from these latter verbs. That is not to say that growth and hiddenness are irrelevant to the interpretation of these parables, as we will see, but rather that they are subordinate to (and supportive of) the central message (cf. Bock 1996:1226; Levine 2014:120). The oft-repeated claim that the earliest versions of these parables place particular emphasis on the minuteness of the initial stage and the massiveness of the end result seems untenable. On the level of Q, the parable of the Mustard Seed merely mentions growth as an aspect of the kingdom, just as the parable of the Leaven merely mentions hiddenness as an aspect of the kingdom. These are hardly shocking or surprising observations about the kingdom

²² Most interpreters reach this conclusion. An interesting variation to this traditional interpretation appears in Jacobson (1992:204), Robinson (2003:31-32) and Snodgrass (2008:216-235), who argue that these parables are not in the first place about either growth or contrast, but about the (surreptitious) kingdom being already present and underway in the earthly ministry of Jesus (cf. Vaage 1994:63-64; Tuckett 1996:128, 144, 210, 421; Allison 2000:137; Heil 2001:653, 656; Hoffmann 2001:282; Joseph 2014:198-199). Eschatological and teleological aspects of the parable are not in the process denied by these scholars (see Foster 2014:283-284; cf. Funk & Hoover 1993:346; Allison 1997:183; 2000:136, 137; Tuckett 1996:143-144, 210, 421; Hoffmann 2001:282; Järvinen 2001:521; Joseph 2012:29; Bazzana 2015:264 incl. n. 3; Ra 2016:159-160, 224).

of God.²³ Given what we know about the historical Jesus (as well as Q's Jesus), it is unlikely in my view that he would have told these parables in order to make the obvious point that the kingdom grows. Instead, my contention is that the key to understanding these parables lies in their endings (cf. Dodd 1961:142, 143), to which we now turn.

The provision angle

The parable of the Mustard Seed ends with the image of birds nesting in the branches of the “mustard tree”. This ending has been the cause of much speculation and doubt (Scott 1989:383). In particular, it seems to lend itself to allegory. Some scholars, for example, postulate that the reference to birds nesting in the branches might have been a veiled reference to the presence of non-Jews in the kingdom of God.²⁴ Nolland (2005:551 n. 92) doubts that Matthew intended the birds to be associated with non-Jews, because the evangelist has failed to retain the word “all” (לֵב; πᾶς, πᾶσα, πᾶν) from Ezekiel 17:23 (and 31:6). In general, though, the idea that the references to birds has non-Jews in mind is unnecessarily allegorical and transgresses beyond the parameters set up by the parable itself (see Bock 1996:1226-1227; Liebenberg 2001:293-295, 299, 301-302, 326-327). Allison (1997:183) is also correct that in Jewish tradition “the image of a large tree with birds resting in it or under it does not always have to do with Gentiles”. Crossan (1991:278) and Oakman (2008:116) see the birds as an agricultural nuisance, eating produce and destroying plantations. This reading also transgresses beyond the imagery of the parable, where birds are depicted as nesting in the mustard plant, not as destroying the garden or field (Roth 2018:304). Some have also regarded the words “of heaven” (τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) in the term “birds of heaven” (τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) as having some spiritual, religious or metaphorical significance (e.g. Zimmermann 2015:244-245, 254; Roth 2018:305). This idea is refuted by the popularity of the term “birds of heaven” in the Hebrew Bible, wider Jewish literature and the

²³ According to Levine (2014:118-119, 169, 171, 181), interpretations that view growth as the central message of these parables are watered-down and banal (cf. Funk 2006:99). I tend to agree, even if I find her rhetoric a bit heavy-handed. Moreover, although Levine's interpretations of the parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven are innovative and convincing, one or two of her conclusions may equally be criticised for being banal, including, for example, her conclusions that “the kingdom will come if we nurture it” (p. 136); that the kingdom “is present, inchoate, in everything, and it is available to all” (p. 137); that “some things need to be *left alone*” (p. 182; emphasis original); and that “sometimes we need to *get out of the way*” (p. 182; emphasis original). In tone and significance, these conclusions are very similar to the ones that Levine criticises, like that the kingdom grows or that it is mighty. In the case of the first example above, Levine's association of the leaven with a child in the womb might be considered interesting, but the ultimate application that “the kingdom will come if we nurture it” (p. 136) is not really that interesting.

²⁴ Many examples could have been listed here, but the following will suffice: Hunter 1961:44; 1971:24, 45; Perrin 1967:157; Carlston 1975:27, 28, 159, 160, 161; Marshall 1978:561; Scholtz 2015:6; Zimmermann 2015:255-256.

New Testament as a straightforward reference to literal birds (see Liebenberg 2001:293-295; Levine 2014:179-180).²⁵

When considering the rest of Q, it becomes clear that the image of nesting birds must be understood differently (cf. Bock 1996:1226-1227; Levine 2014:179-180). On the level of Q, the most important intertext for this imagery is the saying in Q 9:58: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the sky have nests; but the son of humanity does not have anywhere he can lay his head”. Crucially, the two traditions share not only the phrase “birds of the sky” (τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ), but also the word “nest” (κατασκήνωσις / κατασκηνώω) (Liebenberg 2001:327; Zimmermann 2015 243 n. 14). The latter word is striking, since the more usual and technically appropriate term for birds “nesting” is νοσσεύω (Zimmermann 2015:243; cf. Liddell & Scott 1996:1169, s.v. νεοσσειά). In Q 9:58, the literary context makes clear that κατασκήνωσις is used deliberately because the analogy is with human housing or accommodation (cf. Liebenberg 2001:327). In ancient literature, the Greek word “nest” (noun: κατασκήνωσις; verb: κατασκηνώω) is typically used of people and carries the meaning “dwell” (Davies & Allison 1991:420; Nolland 2005:551; Snodgrass 2008:224; Zimmermann 2015:244; Roth 2018:303; cf. Acts 2:26; 1 Clem. 58.1). Liddell and Scott (1996:912) offer translation possibilities like “take up one’s quarters”, “encamp” and “occupy”. In the Septuagint, the verb κατασκηνώω often translates the Hebrew word יָבֹשׁ, which literally means to “settle”, “abide” or “dwell” (Brown, Driver & Briggs 1977:1014-1015, s.v. יָבֹשׁ; Zimmermann 2015:243-244). Only one of these occurrences relates to birds, namely Psalm 104:12 (Zimmermann 2015:243-244).²⁶ The other occurrences of κατασκηνώω in the Septuagint all relate to people (Zimmermann 2015:244). In Q 9:58, the image of birds nesting is indisputably used to make the point that animals have a place to stay, as the rest of the logion indicates (see Van Aarde 2002:1641-1649; 2004:434-438; 2009:540-541). By contrast, the Son of Man often does not have a place to stay. In this Q context, the term “son of humanity” or “Son of Man” (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου) refers to the earthly Jesus, while the saying *in toto* implies that his followers might have to share in his homelessness (see Howes 2015a:170-171). Yet, the saying also hints at the homelessness of humanity in general.²⁷ In other words, the term κατασκήνωσις is used in Q 9:58 to compare animals with one or more humans in the context of lodging

²⁵ E.g. Gen 2:20; 7:3; 1 Sam 17:44, 46; 2 Sam 21:10; 1 Kgs 14:11; Ps 79:2; Jer 7:33; Job 12:7; Ps. 8:8; Jdt 11:7; Q 9:58; Matt 6:26. Zimmermann (2015:244) and Roth (2018:305) acknowledge these Jewish intertexts, but still argue that the reference to “heaven” has some metaphorical significance.

²⁶ LXX Ps 103:12: “By them shall the birds of the sky lodge [κατασκηνώσει]: they shall utter a voice out of the midst of the rocks” (translation from Brenton 1870).

²⁷ Casey (2009) argues that the historical Jesus used the term Son of Man in an idiomatic way to say something about humanity in general, but with implied specific relevance to the speaker, the speaker and others or another person indicated by the literary context. This usage would also make sense for Q 9:59. For the claim that the expression Son of Man originally referenced humanity in general, see Crossan (1983:241); Robinson (1991:189; 1994:321); Horsley (1999:239); Rollens (2014:157). For arguments to the contrary, see Marshall (1978:410); Nolland (2005:365-366); Joseph (2012:61-63).

(Liebenberg 2001:327). It seems likely that κατασκηνώ is similarly used in Q 13:19 to say something about lodging in relation to animals and humans (cf. Zimmermann 2015:255). Roth (2018:303) is therefore spot-on when he says the following about the nesting birds in Q 13:19: “The mimetic component is related to their ‘dwelling’, that is, not simply perching but ‘taking up abode’ in the tree” (cf. Liebenberg 2001:315, 322; Meier 2016:233-234). Roth (2018:304) continues to say that “the focus here is on the provision of a habitat for the birds”.²⁸ It is not a coincidence that the Gospel of Thomas (20) uses the noun “shelter” (σκέπη) instead of the verb “nest” (κατασκηνώ) to describe the benefit of the mustard plant to the birds in his version of the parable (cf. Jeremias 1972:31; Scott 1989:378; Crossan 1992:49; Funk 2006:115; Snodgrass 2008:219; Gathercole 2014:297; cf. LXX Isa 16:3). The main difference between the two texts is that Q 9:58 *explicitly contrasts* the “housing” of animals and humans, while Q 13:19 *implicitly relates* the “housing” of animals and humans. The reason for this difference is that Q 9:58 describes reality in the world, while Q 13:19 describes reality in the kingdom of God (Liebenberg 2001:315 n. 146, 327). In the former, animals are better off than humans, but in the latter, God provides for humans as he does for animals. Referring specifically to the connection between Q 9:58 and Q 13:19, Fleddermann (2005:671) remarks: “God provides a home in the kingdom, though, to replace the home the disciple abandoned”. The point here is not to argue that Q 13:19 compares humans to animals – although such a comparison might be implied – but to illustrate that Q 13:19 is like Q 9:58 in that it uses the image of nesting birds to say something about human accommodation.

These associations also find expression in the Hebrew Scriptures. Proverbs 27:8 explicitly relates birds’ nests with human houses: “Like a bird that strays from its nest is a man who strays from his home”.²⁹ Conversely, Isaiah 16:2 describes those without houses and lodging by comparing them to birds without nests: “Like fleeing birds, like a scattered nest, so are the daughters of Moab at the fords of the Arnon”. The passage continues in verse 4 to instruct its readers and listeners to let these outcasts “sojourn” or “dwell” (MT: גָּר; LLX: παροικέω) among them and to be a “shelter” (MT: סִתָּר; LXX: σκέπη) for them (see also Hos 11:10-11). Ancients must have been fascinated, mesmerised even, by the fact that simple creatures like birds have the ability to build their own “houses”. Even today – all our scientific knowledge notwithstanding – the fact that birds build their own nests from twigs and other material remains a natural wonder. Ancient fascination at this natural wonder finds poetic expression in Psalm 104:16-17: “The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. In them the birds build their nests; the stork has her home in the fir trees”. Particularly noteworthy for the current discussion is the poetic synonymisation of the word “home” (MT: בַּיִת; LXX: οἰκία) with the idea of birds

²⁸ Although Roth places equal emphasis on other aspects of the parable, like growth, he does interpret this accent of the parable accurately.

²⁹ In this article, all translations of the Bible are from the English Standard Version.

building nests in the two parallel lines of verse 17. Speaking about mountain springs, the same Psalm says in verse 12: “Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell; they sing among the branches”. Taken together, these verses contain a number of terms that also feature in the parable of the Mustard Seed, including “tree” (MT: גַּמְלָא; LXX: ξύλον), “birds of heaven” (MT: עוֹרְבֵי שָׁמַיִם; LXX: τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ), “nest/dwell” (MT: בָּנוּ; LXX: κατασκηνώω) and “branches” (MT: עֵצִים; “rocks” in the LXX: πετρῶν). In particular, the combination of the term “birds of heaven” with the verb “nest/dwell” is strikingly similar to the conclusion of the parable. Liebenberg (2001:292) argues: “The text from Ps 104:12 is listed in a context of the wonder of creation and JHWH’s care for all creatures and is not seriously to be considered as an Old Testament allusion [to the parable of the Mustard Seed]” (see also Meier 2016:236).³⁰ Liebenberg misses the point that the “wonder of creation” and “JHWH’s care for all creatures” are precisely the components of Psalm 104 that apply to the parable of the Mustard Seed. The imagery of birds nesting is used in both texts to describe God as the provider of accommodation. Crossan (1992:46-47) dismisses Ezekiel and Daniel as intertexts, but concludes his discussion on the intertextuality of the parable by saying that “if there is any Old Testament allusion behind the original version of Mark 4:31, it is no more and no less than an allusion to God’s loving providence in the pastoral scene of Psalm 104:12” (quotation from p. 47; emphasis original; see also Donahue 1988:37).³¹ Texts like Proverbs 27:8, Isaiah 16:2 and Psalm 104:12 indicate that the image of birds nesting was sometimes used in ancient Judaism to say something about the presence or provision of lodging and shelter.

The same is true of other texts from the Hebrew Scriptures (Bock 1996:1226; Levine 2014:178). This includes Ezekiel 17 and 31, discussed above (Bock 1996:1226). In the midst of the cedar metaphor, Ezekiel 17:23 says: “On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest”. Also as part of the cedar metaphor, Ezekiel 31:6 says: “All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs”. Daniel 4:12, 14, 21 could also have been quoted here. Understood as part of the cedar metaphor, these birds represent the people or subjects being sheltered by the empire in question (Dodd 1961:142; Donahue 1988:37; Funk & Hoover 1993:194; Fleddermann 2005:670; *pace* Liebenberg 2001:291-293). The intent is to depict an earthly kingdom that provides abundantly for its populace. In my view, the exact same meaning lies behind the imagery of nesting birds in the parable of the Mustard Seed (Bock 1996:1226, 1227, 1229; Meier 2016:234, 236). In this parable, the intent

³⁰ Snodgrass (2008:224) argues that Psalm 104:12 could not have been an intertext, because (1) “it has no reference to a kingdom”; and (2) “[i]t merely describes the provision available in water God supplies”. The first argument ignores the similarities that do exist between Psalm 104 and Q 13:18-19. The second argument fails to recognise that divine provision is precisely the point. Both texts describe God providing the bare necessities required to survive, and does so with the imagery of birds nesting in trees.

³¹ Crossan repeats the same opinion on p. 48.

with the image is to depict God's kingdom as a place where God provides lodging and shelter for people as he does for birds (Levine 2014:181; Meier 2016:234, 236; cf. Von Gemünden 1993:201-202). This is the point of the comparison between the parable of the Mustard Seed and the cedar of Lebanon: both describe empires that are able to provide shelter and lodging for people, and both do so by using the metaphor of nesting birds (Hunter 1971:45; Meier 2016:234, 236). Rather than alluding to one particular Jewish intertext, the parable alludes to the general idea that an earthly kingdom is comparable to a tree with nesting birds, especially in its function and ability to provide (Snodgrass 2008:224; Roth 2018:309; see Meier 2016:234-236, esp. 236).³² Whether those who receive shelter include non-Jews or other nations is not the point of the parable, although this possibility is not precluded either (cf. Allison 1997:183-184; Fleddermann 2005:670-671). Rather, the point is that the kingdom of God provides shelter to all those included under its shadow.

There are also suggestions that such provision might include more than just accommodation. Luz (2001:261) points out that "birds like to eat mustard seeds", and Zimmermann (2015:247) remarks that "[m]ustard seed was also used as bird feed". Moreover, mustard shrubs were also a food source for humans in the ancient world, who cooked its leaves as greens and used its kernels as spice (Scott 1989:380; Crossan 1991:278; Liebenberg 2001:296; Luz 2001:261; Schellenberg 2009:532; Zimmermann 2015:247; Van Eck 2016:76, 81).³³ Oakman (2008:115) reads the Lukan version as saying "that the mustard is sown for the purpose of raising a condiment". The only other occurrence (in addition to Q 9:58) of the collective term "birds" (πετεινά) in the Sayings Gospel, namely Q 12:24, states: "Consider the ravens: They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them. Are you not better than the birds?" The link with food is further supported by the description of the "world tree" in Daniel 4:12, which in that context represents king Nebucadnezzar and his Babylonian kingdom: "Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it". These words, repeated in verse 21, clearly associate the ability of the tree to provide shelter with its ability to feed those who depend on it. Another text that is at least interesting in this regard is Numbers 24:5-7: "How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel! Like palm groves that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the Lord has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters. Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters;

³² Liebenberg (2001:289-295, 299-300, 312, 326-327) argues at some length that the parable of the Mustard Seed does not allude to a Jewish intertext at all. Although I agree that this parable does not have one specific intertext in mind, I do believe that it alludes to the general idea in Hebrew Scriptures that a kingdom is comparable to a tree, specifically in its ability to provide. All texts that develop this metaphor are therefore relevant to the parable as intertexts, even if the parable does not allude to any one of them in particular. For his reaction to this line of reasoning, see Liebenberg (2001:312 incl. n. 139).

³³ Cf. t. Ma'as. 3.7; b. B. Meš'a 86; b. Hul. 133; b. Ber. 40; Pliny, *Nat.* 19.40, 54, 61.

his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted". This passage is suggested as an intertext by the words "cedar" (MT: רָאֵד; LXX: κέδρος), "seed" (MT: עֵרֶב; LXX: σπέρμα), "garden" (MT: הַגָּן; LXX: παράδεισος) and "kingdom" (MT: מַלְכוּת; LXX: βασιλεία). While making reference to cedar trees, the kingdom of Israel is here associated with the abundant provision of water; although, in this case, it is cedar that is being fed by the water. God supports the kingdom of Israel. Similar imagery appears in verse 16 of Psalm 104, discussed above (cf. Snodgrass 2008:224). It is worth quoting Psalm 104:16-17 again here: "The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. In them the birds build their nests; the stork has her home in the fir trees". The Septuagint's version of this text (LXX: Ps 103:16-17) uses the verb χορτάζω to describe how God provides for the cedars of Lebanon. This verb is more commonly used to describe the act of feeding humans or animals, and specifically denotes feeding them until they are full (see Liddell & Scott 1996:1999-2000, s.v. χορτάζω). The verb is also sometimes used to describe a feast (Liddell & Scott 1996:1999-2000, s.v. χορτάζω). The connotation of a feast relates well not only to the parable of the Leaven (see below), but also to other texts in the Sayings Gospel that describe banquets, like Q 13:29 and Q 14:16-21, 23 (cf. Kirk 1998:304; Hoffmann 2001:282).

In addition to being a food source for animals and humans alike, the mustard plant was highly regarded for its medicinal value in the ancient world (Schellenberg 2009:532, 543; Roth 2018:306; see Levine 2014:169, 170, 177, 181). In fact, this was arguably its most popular characteristic in the ancient world, in addition to its sharp taste and smell (cf. Liebenberg 2001:296; Schellenberg 2009:532-533, 543). Pliny the Elder goes on and on about the medicinal and gastronomical benefits of mustard (e.g. *Nat.* 16.60; 19.54; 20.13, 50, 87; 21.89; 27.113; 28.46, 62; 29.34; cf. Zimmermann 2015:247). *Natural History* 20.87 is particularly relevant, describing mustard, sometimes in combination with other resources, as a cure or suppressant for numerous ailments, including snake bites, tooth-ache, stomach problems, asthma, epilepsy, dropsy, body pains, leprosy and bruising – to mention only a few. Referring specifically to this text by Pliny, Scott (1989:380) remarks: "From his description, there appears to be no illness that mustard will not cure". Rather than being known for its smallness, mustard was known for its healing power. Given both its culinary and medicinal benefits, mustard was precisely the type of plant ancients would have wanted in their gardens or fields (Levine 2014:178). Far from being an impure weed, it was a useful resource. Given these attributes of mustard, the parable might be hinting at the provision of food and healing in addition to shelter as a feature of God's kingdom (cf. Scott 1989:380; Järvinen 2001:521). Q 12:6-7, 22-24 associates birds particularly with God's all-inclusive providential care, which includes at least the provision of food as well. As Zimmermann (2015:242) states, the mustard shrub "becomes a source of life for other creatures". To the extent that people are worth more to God than birds (cf. Q 12:7, 24), God's kingdom promises to be a place where God provides more abundantly for people than he does

for animals (cf. Q 12:22-31) (cf. Valantasis 2005:178). It is probably no coincidence that two of the three features most commonly associated with God's kingdom in Q, namely food and healing,³⁴ are also two of the features for which the mustard plant was best known in the ancient world.³⁵ The third of the three features most commonly associated with God's kingdom in Q, namely shelter,³⁶ is brought out in the parable through the image of the nesting birds. Although the association with food and healing might be implied by the choice of mustard in particular, it is the provision of accommodation that is explicitly mentioned in the parable when using the verb "nest" (κατασκηνώω).

Given the discussion up to this point, it would be fair to conclude that the imagery of birds nesting in a tree is appropriate to depict God's kingdom as a place where God provides. The appropriateness of the mustard plant in particular, even if it is not specified as a "world tree" anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, lies in the fact that birds were especially attracted to the abundant seeds and shade of mustard plants (Perrin 1967:157; Crossan 1992:48; Liebenberg 2001:298-299, 300, 303, 313; Funk 2006:116; Snodgrass 2008:220).³⁷ Nonetheless, this image might be the unexpected turn in the parable (Roth 308, 309-310, 321, 324-325; cf. McGaughey 2007:12). The telling starts off with a mustard seed, as opposed to the seed of a cedar, oak or maple, so that the last thing the audience expects is that the comparison will draw on birds nesting in its branches (Allison 2000:136). The potential of the insignificant socio-economic movement initiated by Jesus, otherwise referred to as "the kingdom of God", to feed people of the world might likewise be one of its surprising aspects (cf. Vaage 1994:63; Tuckett 1996:128; Allison 2000:136, 137; Valantasis 2005:178).³⁸ This is how the kingdom of God envisioned by Jesus differs from other kingdoms, whether Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Roman or Herodian (cf. Valantasis 2005:178; Roth 2018:323). From the perspective of socio-economically struggling Palestinians, these earthly kingdoms, including Israel, exploited the populace in various ways, confiscating bare necessities like food and shelter from the most vulnerable members of society (Herzog 1994:161; Horsley 1995a:60, 215-216, 219; 1995b:43; Freyne 2000:205; Arnal 2001:139-140, 146; Moxnes 2003:150; Oakman 2008:21, 25, 224; Van Eck 2011:5, 7; 2016:78,

³⁴ For food and healing as central to Q's understanding of God's kingdom, see Robinson (1993:15; 2001a:33; 2001b:16; 2002:15); Vaage (1994:63); Horsley (2003:30-33, 35; 2012:127); Howes (2015a:123-124; 2019:4-11). Cf. also Piper (2000:241, 251, 259); Järvinen (2001:521); Kloppenborg (2001:166).

³⁵ It might also not be coincidental that Luke precedes the parable of the Mustard Seed with a story of healing (see Etchells 1998:64-65; cf. Liebenberg 2001:309-310; Snodgrass 2008:218, 219-220). In fact, Luke presents Jesus as telling the parable in the Synagogue where people had just witnessed this healing (Etchells 1998:65; Liebenberg 2001:309). The parable's literary context in Luke is otherwise difficult to explain (Snodgrass 2008:219-220).

³⁶ For shelter as central to Q's understanding of God's kingdom, see Howes (2019:4-6).

³⁷ However, some scholars question whether birds actually built nests in mustard plants (e.g. McArthur 1971:198-201; cf. Crossan 1992:48).

³⁸ Bultmann (1968:200) is virtually alone in maintaining that the kingdom of God should not be understood as a "human community". Jacobson (1992:204) makes explicit what most scholars assume: "The Q people are probably the mustard seed which will become a tree; they are the kingdom".

79; Park 2014:85, 86). One might have here a veiled criticism of former and existing earthly kingdoms, especially in their tendency to exploit the lower classes. Instead of explicitly mocking these kingdoms, Jesus is implicitly criticising them. They did not and do not live up to the metaphor of the cedar, which was traditionally depicted as providing for birds and animals. The kingdom of God is different, providing instead of extracting resources (cf. Scott 2001:30-34; Valantasis 2005:178; Van Eck 2016:78, 79, 82-83).

Additional support for the interpretation advocated here is provided by the elements of the parable that remain constant across different versions of the parable of the Mustard Seed. While these different versions disagree on whether the seed was sown or thrown, whether it ended up in a garden or a field, whether it grew into a plant or a tree, and whether the birds found shelter in its branches or its shade, they agree that a mustard seed grew into something that provided shelter to birds (Van Eck 2016:72; see Levine 2014:165-166, 173, 181). It would be sensible to locate the key to understanding the parable not in these variables, but in the elements that remain constant (cf. Dodd 1961:142; Snodgrass 2008:222). Far from being a later interpolation into the parable, as some scholars have suggested (e.g. Carlston 1975:160; Vaage 2001:487; Howes 2015b:329-330), the detail about the birds nesting was part of the original parable (Dodd 1961:142; Scott 1989:378, 379-380; see Van Eck 2016:74-75). More than that, it was probably the parable's most important element (Bock 1996:1226; cf. Dodd 1961:142; Carlston 1975:159). Interestingly, Carlston (1975:158) finds the meaning of the parable *as it appears in Mark* to be about the provision of shelter, with Daniel 4 indicated as the most important intertext. It is worth pointing out that the interpretation proposed here would remain valid even if Q 13:18-19 did not allude to any text in the Hebrew Bible whatsoever, given that the parable ends with a description of birds nesting/dwelling in trees. Whether or not the ancient lower-classes knew the intertexts listed above, they could (and probably would) have understood the analogy between birds' nests and human houses.

As we saw, the parable of the Leaven ends with a massive amount of bread. As such, the baking anticipates a very large meal, or, as Funk (2006:101) puts it, "a festive occasion of significant proportions". According to Levine (2014:133), "[t]he image is one of extravagance, or hyperbole" (so too Nolland 2005:554; Funk 2006:102). Whereas the parable of the Mustard Seed ends with people having a place to stay, the parable of the Leaven ends with people having more than enough to eat (cf. Luz 2001:263; Levine 2014:136-137). What is more, the chronological progression from farming in the parable of the Mustard Seed to baking in the parable of the Leaven would have seemed altogether natural and familiar to an ancient audience, especially peasants (cf. Oakman 2008:112; Park 2014:78; Thurén 2014:194). The anticipated outcome of both these activities is food. In fact, the parable of the Leaven is about food from beginning to end. As Luz (2001:262) states: "The image of the leaven comes from the kitchen". Yet, the ending

is particularly vivid, depicting the kingdom of God as a place where people have abundant food (cf. Levine 2014:136-137). Throughout Q, the kingdom of God is particularly associated with food (see Valantasis 2005:190–191; cf. Vaage 1994:63, 64).³⁹ Using “bread” (ἄρτος) as an image of God’s providence is an important motif in Q. In this regard, the most important intertext for the parable of the Leaven is arguably Q 11:2-4, [5-8], 9-13, which speaks about “bread” in the context of daily survival (cf. Vaage 1994:63; Levine 2014:119, 136-137; Howes 2016:18-20; 2017:15-17; 2019:6-13). Robinson (1998:20) also noticed this intertextual linkage: “Die Auslegung der Bitte ‚Deine Königsherrschaft komme!‘ im Vaterunser selbst, nämlich: ‚Unser Brot für den Tag gib uns heute!‘, wurde nicht durch vom Himmel gefallenes Manna erfüllt, sondern durch Frauen, die, nach dem Rezept von Q 13,21, Sauerteig in drei Sat Weizenmehl verbargen, bis es ganz durchsäuert war, im Backofen in Brot verwandelt zu werden”. Unfortunately, limited space does not allow unpacking the question of how exactly Q envisions the kingdom of God providing accommodation and food, but Robinson is correct that it in no small way involves human action,⁴⁰ which is then interpreted as indirect divine providence (see Howes 2019:6-11).⁴¹

This line of interpretation is further supported by the intertextual link with Genesis 18:6-8, where Abraham provides food to three mysterious visitors from “three measures” (MT: *שְׁלֹשָׁה מִדּוֹת*; LXX: *τρία μέτρα*) of flour (see Levine 2014:133-134; cf. e.g. Ryle 1921:206; Jeremias 1972:147; Ford 2016:58-59; Roth 2018:319; cf. Judg 6:19; 1 Sam 1:24).⁴² This narrative was the prime example of hospitality in ancient Judaism. Hunt (2012:88) writes: “The paradigm for hospitality in Jewish thinking is, of course, Abraham, who went out of his way to receive three special visitors in Genesis 18” (cf. also Nolland 2005:554; Ford 2016:59). The meal that Abraham prepared included not only three measures of “breadcakes” (MT: *לֶחֶם*; LXX: *ἐγκρυφίας*), but also milk, curds and a calf. To say that this feast was too much for three visitors is a gross understatement (cf. Davies & Allison 1991:423). The deliberate link with Genesis 18 reinforces the parable’s emphasis on abundant food, while also evoking the motif of generous hospitality. Rather than associating leaven negatively with impurity, the parable associates it positively with food (cf. Roth 2018:317).

It is true that the imagined feast is not recounted by the parable, but the parable does include the comment that the flour ended up being “fully fermented” (ἐξυμώθη ὅλον). In fact, these two words conclude the parable (Hunter 1971:44; Fleddermann 2005:672). According to Dodd (1961:143), on the level of Q, “the emphasis must lie upon the completion of the process of fermentation”. And as any baker, ancient or modern, will tell you, “the completion of the process

³⁹ Cf. Q 6:20-21; 10:8-9; 11:2-3, 11-13; 12:22-31, 42-46; 13:18-19, 20-21, 28-29; 14:16-21, 23.

⁴⁰ Cf. Q 6:29-32, 34, 46-49; 10:5-9, 16; 11:4, [5-8], 9-12; 11:33; 12:31, 42-44, 58-59; 14:16-21, 23; 16:13; 19:12-13, 15-24.

⁴¹ Cf. Q 6:20-21, 35, 36; 10:9; 11:2-3, 13; 12:6-7, 22-31.

⁴² For the view that Genesis 18 should not be regarded as an intertext for the parable of the Leaven, see Snodgrass (2008:234).

of fermentation” translates into bread (cf. Etchells 1998:62-63; Robinson 1998:20; Scott 2001:25; Valantasis 2005:179). This would have been particularly obvious to ancient people, many of whom baked their own bread. I cannot imagine any ancient listener hearing this parable and not thinking about bread. The introduction of leaven turns the massive amount of flour into a staple food (Jacobson 1992:205). Similarly, when the kingdom of God is introduced, it produces plenty of food (cf. Ford 2016:64-65). Choosing specifically the ingredients for making bread as the metaphor is no coincidence (cf. Robinson 1998:20). If the idea that God’s kingdom will (inevitably) spread throughout the ancient world is present, the specific nature of the metaphor draws attention to the ability of the kingdom to create food for people throughout the world. Liebenberg (2001:341) comments: “The end result is that the dough acquires the most distinctive trait of the leaven – it becomes *leavened*, all of it” (emphasis original; cf. Etchells 1998:63; Fleddermann 2005:672). In the same way, the world – probably all of it – acquires the most distinctive trait of the kingdom according to Q, which is that it provides for people, especially by feeding them. However, the latter accent is at most only implied, requiring one to regard the flour or dough somewhat allegorically as the world. Instead, the main focus is plainly on the function of the kingdom to produce a lot of food for a lot of people. Like the parable of the Mustard Seed, it is worth pointing out that the interpretation proposed here would remain valid even if the parable of the Leaven did not allude to any Old Testament text, and even if we are mistaken in viewing “three measures” as a large quantity (cf. Snodgrass 2008:231-232, 234). Intrinsically and essentially, the parable is about a process that ends in bread, the most important staple food in antiquity (cf. Robinson 1998:20). Since the festive occasion implied by the parable would typically take place in someone’s house, the baking metaphor might also imply lodging. In the Sayings Gospel Q, gaining entry into someone’s house is regarded as an important way of procuring sustenance.⁴³ This suggestion is strengthened by the intertextual link to Genesis 18, which depicts the most famous example in Jewish antiquity of hospitality in action. Yet, this facet is at most only implied, since the parable is primarily and explicitly about food.

Although the two parables in Q 13:18-21 emphasise two different aspects of divine providence in God’s kingdom (i.e. accommodation and food, respectively), both aspects are present in both parables – what is expressly stated by the one is implied by the other. The subsequent material in Q (i.e. Q 13:24-29) makes this association between food and lodging explicit. In fact, the interpretation of the parables proposed here goes a long way toward explaining the logic behind the specific placement of Q 13:18-21 in the Sayings Gospel, which a number of scholars have otherwise found peculiar (e.g. Schürmann 1982:161; Kloppenborg 1987:92; 1995:308-311; Sato 1994:173; Vaage 1994:119-120; Liebenberg 2001:317).⁴⁴ A number of texts in the immediate

⁴³ Cf. Q 10:5-9; 11:9-10; 13:25-26; 14:16-21, 23. See Howes, “Q’s Message to the Peasantry and Poor”, 4-11.

⁴⁴ For the opposite opinion that Q 13:18-21 fits well in its literary Q context, see Jacobson (1992:204); Kirk (1998:303-304); Horsley (1999:87-88 incl. n. 92); Fleddermann (2005:673).

literary context of Q 13:18-21 explicitly discuss food and accommodation (i.e. Q 12:22-31, 39-40, 42-44; 13:24-27, 28-29, 16-21, 23; cf. Kloppenborg 2000:93). Interpreters often miss concrete links and motifs like these, tending to over-theologise and abstractify texts. When one focuses narrowly on the religious aspects of a text, one loses sight of its economic and political dimensions (cf. Oakman 2008:117). Yet, as Levine (2014:174) rightly notes, the parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven “are both about the necessities of life: bread and shelter”.⁴⁵

Findings

On the level of Q, the main point of the parable of the Mustard Seed is that God’s kingdom provides shelter to everyone, and the main point of the parable of the Leaven is that God’s kingdom provides more than enough food for everyone. These parables might hint at the inclusivity of God’s kingdom to “everyone” with the image of the “world tree,” as well as the use of a man and a woman as main characters to form one of Q’s famous gender-pairs. These parables might further hint at the unassuming and unusual (but not impure) nature of God’s kingdom when compared to other kingdoms, or its humble, clandestine beginnings, rapid growth and anticipated magnitude, but these features are not what the parables are ultimately about. Like the rest of Q, these parables associate the kingdom of God with bare necessities like food and shelter – maybe even healing. Surprisingly, these necessities are made available not through an impressive Roman or Jewish empire, but through an obscure and unassuming social movement, called the “kingdom of God” by its (mostly) lower-class proponents.⁴⁶ But still, this is incidental to the main point that the kingdom of God will house and feed its members. To my mind, this line of interpretation brings us very close to the message and intent of the historical Jesus.

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⁴⁵ In relation to Levine’s critique in an earlier footnote that readings focusing on growth or contrast are banal, some might want to argue that the reading proposed here is no less banal. Firstly, having something to eat would not have been a trivial matter for the first audience(s) of this parable. It would certainly have been more important to them than the abstract idea that God’s kingdom grows or that it starts out small and ends up big. Anyone who regards the current proposal as dull or trivial does not know what it is like to worry about lodging and food on a daily basis – year in, year out. Secondly, given the exploitative nature of concurrent earthly empires, promoting a kingdom that existed primarily or exclusively to benefit the peasantry and poor by feeding and housing them would have been not only novel and surprising, but also subversive.

⁴⁶ Cf. Hunter (1964:43-44); Carlston (1975:161); Donahue (1988:37); Scott (1989:387); Jacobson (1992:204); Vaage (1994:63); Tuckett (1996:128); Allison (2000:137); Heil (2001:656); Fleddermann (2005:670); Valantasis (2005:178); Snodgrass (2008:221, 222, 225, 235); Van Eck (2016:78, 82-83).

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