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Mark's Diagnosis of Failed Reception in the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-20)

Emmanuel Tayo Ajibade and Olatundun Abosede Oderinde

Department of Religious Studies, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago Iwoye, Nigeria.

Corresponding author: pg.ajibade.emmanuel@pgs.oouagoiwoye.edu.ng

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Abstract

Readings of the Parable of the Sower often treat the four soils as four fixed types of hearers. This article argues that Mark's version, read beside Matthew 13:1-23 and Luke 8:4-15 and within Mark's wider narrative, works as a diagnosis. For each sowing it states what happens to the word, what removes or stifles it, and when the failure occurs. The study combines redaction-critical comparison, on the assumption of Markan priority, with a narrative-critical reading of the explanation (4:14-20) and the purpose saying (4:10-13). Three Markan features carry the argument. Satan is named as the agent who comes "immediately" to take the word (4:15), a detail neither parallel share. The cares, wealth and desires of the thorny ground are said to εἰσπορευόμεναι (enter in, 4:19). Mark alone has Jesus rebuke the disciples for not understanding (4:13), a failure his story later develops through σκανδαλίζομαι (the language of stumbling, 4:17; 14:27-29). Matthew, by contrast, makes συνίημι (understanding) the mark of the good soil (13:23), while Luke makes it holding the word fast and bearing fruit ἐν ὑπομονῇ (with endurance, 8:15). The article concludes that Mark does identify the soils with hearers, but defines them by processes that his own narrative shows to be open to change. For Nigerian churches, where economic hardship and prosperity teaching shape how the word is heard, the diagnosis supports forewarning, explanation and communal support, while leaving fruitfulness to God's own action (4:26-29).

Keywords: Parable of the Sower, Gospel of Mark, Synoptic Gospels, Discipleship, Persecution, Wealth.

Introduction

The Parable of the Sower belongs to the triple tradition (Mark 4:1-20; Matt 13:1-23; Luke 8:4-15). In Mark it opens the parables discourse of 4:1-34, and Jesus treats it as the key to the rest: "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" (4:13; France, 2002). It also sits within a section (3:20-4:34) where responses to Jesus have already split. His relatives think he is out of his mind (3:21), scribes from Jerusalem attribute his exorcisms to Beelzebul (3:22), and Jesus redefines his family as those who do the will of God (3:31-35). The parable is told into that divided reception.

A familiar way of reading it treats the four soils as four kinds of people: the unresponsive, the shallow, the distracted and the fruitful (Skinner, 2025). Van Eck (2014) traces allegories that map the soils onto classes of hearer back to patristic interpreters such as Augustine,

and the habit has survived in modern scholarship in more refined forms. Tolbert (1989) reads the soils as a typology of the characters in Mark's story, with the disciples, and Peter above all, as the rocky ground. None of this is simply wrong. Mark's explanation does say οὗτοί εἰσιν (these are the ones, 4:15-18). The difficulty is what the typology tends to become in use: a device for sorting people, which invites each hearer to ask which soil he or she is, as though the answer were settled.

Others have noticed that Mark dwells on failure. Snodgrass (2004; 2018) reads the passage as a parable about hearing, and Runge (2012) shows on linguistic grounds that Mark's explanation gives more prominence to the unfruitful sowings than Matthew's or Luke's does. This article does not claim to discover Mark's interest in failure. Its contribution is narrower. It corrects and extends the synoptic comparison of the explanation itself. It argues that Mark's identifications in 4:15-20 describe processes rather than fixed identities, and tests that claim against Mark's narrative of the disciples. It also asks what the resulting diagnosis does and does not authorise for churches in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

If the soils name fixed types of hearers, two problems follow. The first is exegetical. Mark's own story does not leave the insiders in the good soil as the disciples are rebuked for not understanding (4:13), are told that they have eyes but do not see and ears but do not hear (8:17-18), are warned that they will all stumble (14:27), and do flee (14:50). Yet Peter, whose conduct most resembles the rocky ground, is named in the promise of 16:7. A reading that freezes hearers into categories cannot account for that movement. The second problem is pastoral. A typology tends to produce either anxious self-classification or a quiet assignment of blame to those who fall away, and neither question is the one Mark's explanation spends its words on.

The scholarship leaves this gap open in different ways. Historical-Jesus readings, such as Van Eck (2014), set the explanation aside in order to recover an earlier parable (4:3-8), so they do not address Mark's diagnosis at all. Runge (2012) establishes which sowings Mark makes salient but does not pursue what that weighting means for Mark's narrative or theology. Tolbert (1989) and Black (2023) connects the soils to Mark's characters but retains the typology. African contextual readings of the parable exist, but are in relation with Luke's version (Udo, 2023), and the Nigerian contextual studies consulted on wealth and materialism engage Lukan parables (Ngele et al., 2017). The question therefore remains open. What precisely, does Mark's own explanation say about why reception fails and lasts, and how does his narrative qualify it? The question matters wherever a church's growth is easily read as evidence of its faithfulness, because Mark tells a parable in which some sowings yield nothing.

Objectives and Research Questions

The study has three objectives. First, to identify how Mark's explanation of the parable (4:14-20) differs from Matthew 13:18-23 and Luke 8:11-15 in naming the causes of failed and fruitful reception. Second, to show how Mark's framing of the parable (4:10-13) and his

wider narrative relate that diagnosis to the disciples. Third, to state what responsibilities follow for contemporary churches, particularly in Nigeria, and what limits the text places on those applications. These objectives correspond to three research questions. RQ1: How does Mark 4:14-20 differ from its Matthean and Lukan parallels, and what does the difference indicate about Mark's account of reception? RQ2: How do Mark 4:10-13 and the Markan story of the disciples bear on the claim that the soils describe conditions rather than fixed types? RQ3: Which pastoral responsibilities can be grounded in Mark's diagnosis, and which commonly drawn applications go beyond it? The conclusion answers each in turn.

Interpretive Framework and Key Terms

Two interpretive approaches are combined. Redaction criticism compares Mark with Matthew and Luke on the assumption that both later evangelists used Mark. Where they differ, the difference is treated as evidence of each evangelist's emphasis. Narrative criticism reads Mark 4 as part of a single story, so that vocabulary and motifs in the explanation are traced to later episodes involving the same characters (Tolbert, 1989; Black, 2023). The first approach identifies what is distinctive in Mark's wording while the second asks what that wording does within Mark's plot. In the analysis, every claim of Markan distinctiveness rests on a stated comparison with the Greek of the parallels, and every narrative claim rests on named Markan passages.

Three terms need definition. A diagnosis in this sense describes how failure happens. It does not by itself pronounce on the hearer's guilt or fix the hearer's identity. Reception is used to mean the whole course of hearing, welcoming, retaining and bearing fruit, not only the initial response. Triumphalism means the expectation that faithful proclamation will produce broad, immediate and lasting success, so that visible response can be taken as the measure of the word's power. These terms are used heuristically. It is not claimed that Mark opposed an identifiable triumphalist party. The claim is more modest because Mark's narrative contains such expectations, in the crowds who press on Jesus because of his healings (3:7-12), in Peter's refusal of the passion prediction (8:32-33), and in James and John's request for seats of glory (10:35-37). Moreover, the parable's account of three failed sowings stands against triumphalism.

Literature Review

Debate over Mark 4:1-20 has gathered around four questions. The first concerns the origin and character of the explanation in 4:14-20. A long line of critical scholarship has regarded it as an allegorising addition of the early church. Jeremias (1972) gave this view its classic form, and Van Eck (2014), surveying the history of interpretation, sets the explanation aside to read 4:3-8 as a parable of the historical Jesus addressed to peasants in an exploitative agrarian economy. Others have pressed the other way. Snodgrass (2018) argues that the explanation fits the parable's own concern with hearing, and Wenham (1974) and Bowker (1974) treat the structure of 4:1-20 as a deliberate composition rather than a clumsy accretion. Wenham's observation that Mark never formally identifies the seed with the

hearer, yet slips into that way of speaking, is directly relevant to the present argument. For our purposes the question of origin can stay open. Whatever its prehistory, 4:14-20 is Mark's text, and the aim here is to describe the evangelist's diagnosis, not to reconstruct Jesus' original meaning.

The second question concerns the force of ἵνα in 4:12. Jeremias (1972) proposed that ἵνα abbreviates a fulfilment formula and that μήποτε should be understood as "unless", softening the saying. Evans (1989) and Kohler (2026) place it within the wider reception of Isaiah 6:9-10 in early Judaism and Christianity. Marcus (1984) reads it as genuinely purposive, but within an apocalyptic epistemology in which God's revelation comes through hiddenness and is granted to some before others. This view is strengthened by Nagel (2016). Snodgrass (2004) argues that the parable, despite the apparent severity of 4:11-12, remains above all a summons to hear. These positions agree that 4:10-12 cannot be detached from the parable; they disagree about whether concealment is God's aim or a stage on the way to disclosure.

The third question is literary. Tolbert (1989) made Mark 4 the interpretive key to the whole Gospel, reading the soils as types embodied by Mark's characters. Runge (2012), using information-structure analysis, shows that Mark uses the near demonstrative οὗτοι for the three unfruitful groups and the far demonstrative ἐκεῖνοι for the good soil (4:20), and argues that Mark thereby gives the unfruitful sowings unusual salience compared with Matthew and Luke. Runge's study establishes, linguistically, that Mark foregrounds failure. It does not ask how that foregrounding interacts with the Markan story of the disciples, nor what kinds of failure Mark distinguishes. The present article takes Runge's finding as a starting point and pursues those two questions. The most recent large commentary, Keener's (2026) volume on Mark 1-4, treats the parables at length and confirms that these debates remain live.

The fourth body of work is contextual. African scholarship has read the sower in its socio-economic world and as a resource for public life (Van Eck, 2014). Udo (2023), for example, offers an Afrocentric reading of Luke 8:4-8 to reimagine dialogue and democracy in Africa. Nigerian studies of wealth and Christian practice have addressed materialism through Lukan texts (Ngele et al., 2017), while social-scientific work has examined how the prosperity gospel ties wealth to faith (Omavuebe, 2021; Smith, 2021). What is missing is a study that brings a corrected redaction-critical account of Mark's explanation together with Mark's narrative of the disciples and then tests its pastoral reach in a Nigerian setting. That is the gap this article addresses.

Methodology

The Greek text is that of Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th edition (NA28). English renderings are the authors' own. Lexical items are cited in their dictionary form (for example εὐθύς, πλοῦτος); phrases are cited as they stand in NA28, where accents change with position (for example εὐθὺς ἔρχεται). The comparison assumes Markan priority, the view that Matthew and Luke each used Mark. In this pericope the assumption is well supported as both later Gospels reproduce Mark's sequence of public parable, private

question and explanation, and their divergences are more economically explained as changes to Mark than the reverse (Van Eck, 2014). Greek terms were selected for analysis by three criteria. A term qualifies if (a) it occurs in Mark's explanation (4:14-20) or purpose saying (4:10-13), and either (b) its presence, absence or form differs from at least one synoptic parallel, or (c) it recurs elsewhere in Mark in a way that links the explanation to the narrative of discipleship. On these criteria the study examines σατανᾶς and εὐθύς (4:15), πρόσκαιρος and σκανδαλίζομαι (4:17), the list of thorns with εἰσπορευόμεναι and συμπνίγω (4:19), παραδέχομαι (4:20), and ἵνα with μήποτε (4:12). Two of these, εὐθύς at 4:16-17 and πρόσκαιρος, turn out to be shared with Matthew. The method proceeds in three stages. The analysis of the text sets out what can and cannot be said about the social setting of Mark's first hearers. It compares the explanation and purpose saying soil by soil with the parallels and it draws the findings together and considers their contemporary application, with a statement of limitations.

Analysis

Setting: Mark's First Hearers and the Question of Persecution

The provenance of Mark is disputed. Many scholars locate the Gospel in Rome, in the aftermath of Nero's action against Christians after the fire of 64 CE (Tacitus, Annals 15.44; Hengel, 1985). A significant minority places it in or near Syria, close in time and place to the Jewish revolt of 66-70 CE (Marcus, 1992; 2000). Both views date the Gospel to the late 60s or early 70s, and both see its first hearers as people for whom hostility was a real prospect. The Gospel's own text supports that much without settling the location. The explanation speaks of "tribulation or persecution on account of the word" (4:17). Mark 10:30 promises a hundredfold return "with persecutions" (μετὰ διωγμῶν), a phrase absent from the parallels in Matthew 19:29 and Luke 18:30. And Mark 13:9-13 forewarns of being handed over to councils, beaten in synagogues and betrayed by family members. These passages tell of what Mark expected his hearers to face or to fear. Reconstructing their actual experience from them is a form of mirror-reading, and it can go no further than the text allows. Mark writes for hearers to whom falling away under pressure was a recognisable danger.

The Word is Sown

Matthew specifies the seed as τὸν λόγον τῆς βασιλείας (the word of the kingdom, 13:19), and Luke as ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ (the word of God 8:11). Mark says only ὁ σπείρων τὸν λόγον σπείρει (the sower sows the word, 4:14). In context, ὁ λόγος (the word) is best understood as the proclamation of the kingdom announced by Jesus (1:14-15; 2:2; France, 2002). The sower does not choose ground according to its promise as seed falls on path, rock, thorns and good earth alike. Francis (2021) reads this broadcast sowing against agricultural practice in the ancient world, where seed was scattered widely and losses were expected. Read alongside 4:10-12, this produces a deliberate tension in that the word is offered without restriction, but its reception differs according to what happens where it lands

(Aguilar Chiu, 2023). The problem the explanation addresses is not a shortage of seed or a reluctant sower. It is what becomes of the word after it is sown.

The Path: Satan's Immediate Seizure

All three evangelists name an opponent. Mark has ὁ σατανᾶς (Satan), Matthew ὁ πονηρός (the evil one) and Luke ὁ διάβολος (the devil). The variation is terminological, but Mark's choice ties the scene to his wider story, in which Satan tests Jesus in the wilderness (1:13), is the subject of the Beelzebul dispute (3:23-26), and is the name Jesus gives Peter when Peter resists the way of the cross (8:33) (Marcus, 2000). The image itself had precedent in Jubilees 11:11 where Mastema sends ravens to eat the seed that people have sown.

Here Mark's wording is genuinely distinct. He alone says that εὐθὺς ἔρχεται ὁ σατανᾶς (Satan comes "immediately" 4:15). Matthew writes that ἔρχεται ὁ πονηρὸς καὶ ἁρπάζει (the evil one comes and snatches what was sown, 13:19), and Luke that ἔρχεται ὁ διάβολος καὶ αἴρει (the devil comes and takes the word away, 8:12). Neither has εὐθύς. The parallels also locate the problem differently. Matthew explains the failure by the hearer's lack of understanding (μὴ συνιέντος, 13:19). Luke names its consequence, "so that they may not believe and be saved" (8:12). Mark gives neither a cognitive explanation nor a soteriological result. He gives an agent and a moment with the claim that the word is taken before anything else can happen to it.

Mark names Satan's action without either excusing or condemning the hearer. The surrounding discourse, meanwhile, places a responsibility to hear on everyone saying "Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear" (4:9, 23), and βλέπετε τί ἀκούετε (pay attention to what you hear, 4:24). The diagnosis of the path therefore identifies a real opposing agency while leaving the call to hear intact. It does not supply grounds for declaring any particular hearer either helpless or culpable.

The Rocky Ground: Joy, Root and Stumbling

Mark's double εὐθύς at 4:16-17 (immediate reception with joy, immediate stumbling) is not a distinctive as Matthew has the same pattern where the hearer εὐθὺς μετὰ χαρᾶς (immediately receives the word with joy, 13:20) and εὐθὺς σκανδαλίζεται (immediately fall away, 13:21). Mark's ἀλλὰ πρόσκαιροί εἰσιν (4:17) is matched by Matthew's ἀλλὰ πρόσκαιρός ἐστιν (13:21) with the difference being the grammatical number (plural in Mark and singular in Matthew). The parable also shares the immediacy with Mark 4:5 having εὐθὺς ἐξανέτειλεν ("immediately it sprang up") and Matthew 13:5 εὐθέως ἐξανέτειλεν.

The real contrast on the rocky ground lies with Luke. Luke has no immediacy at either point. His hearers πρὸς καιρὸν πιστεύουσιν (believe for a while) and ἐν καιρῷ πειρασμοῦ ἀφίστανται (in a time of testing fall away, 8:13). Luke thus generalises the pressure into testing and describes the outcome as departure. Mark and Matthew keep the more specific θλίψεως ἢ διωγμοῦ διὰ τὸν λόγον (tribulation or persecution on account of the word) and the verb σκανδαλίζομαι (to stumble or to be caused to fall). Mark's diagnosis also places the fault where the image puts it as οὐκ ἔχουσιν ῥίζαν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς these hearers (have no

root in themselves, 4:17). The external pressure reveals a lack that was already present (Edwards, 2002).

What is distinctively Markan here is not the vocabulary but what the narrative does with it. The verb σκανδαλίζομαι returns when Jesus' hometown "took offence at him" (6:3) and, decisively, when Jesus tells the disciples, "you will all stumble" (14:27), and Peter replies that even if all stumble, he will not (14:29). Peter's name, Πέτρος, sits uncomfortably close to the rocky ground (τὰ πετρώδη), a link Tolbert (1989) made central to her reading. Matthew also has the prediction of stumbling (26:31-33), so the wordplay is available to both. The difference lies in how the two stories end. Matthew restores the disciples in Galilee and commissions them (28:16-20). Mark leaves the disciples fled (14:50) and Peter weeping after his denial (14:72), with only the promise that the risen Jesus goes before them, "and Peter", to Galilee (16:7). In Mark the rocky-ground failure of the inner circle is left standing.

Mark 4:10-13: Concealment and the Insiders

Mark's account of why Jesus speaks in parables is the hardest of the three, but its severity needs to be stated precisely. The purpose clause with ἵνα ("so that") is not peculiar to Mark. Luke 8:10 also has ἵνα and Matthew instead uses ὅτι (because, 13:13) and then quotes Isaiah 6:9-10 in full as a prophecy fulfilled in a people whose heart has grown dull (13:14-15). Mark's distinctive element is the final clause, μήποτε ἐπιστρέψωσιν καὶ ἀφεθῇ αὐτοῖς (lest they should turn again and be forgiven 4:12), which Luke omits. The verse contains two negated clauses, "so that seeing they may see and not perceive (μὴ ἴδωσιν), and hearing they may hear and not understand (μὴ συνιῶσιν)".

How to read ἵνα remains disputed. Marcus (1984) argues that it is purposive and belongs to an apocalyptic understanding in which God discloses the mystery of the kingdom to some while it remains hidden to others. Two features of Mark's own text keep this from becoming a fixed division of humanity. First, the insiders are not defined as the Twelve alone but as οἱ περὶ αὐτὸν σὺν τοῖς δώδεκα (those around him with the Twelve, 4:10), people defined by their proximity to Jesus. Second, the surrounding sayings point beyond concealment: noting that nothing is hidden except to be made manifest (4:22), and Jesus spoke the word καθὼς ἠδύναντο ἀκούειν (as they were able to hear it, 4:33).

Most important for the theme of discipleship, Mark alone follows the purpose saying with a rebuke of the insiders: "Do you not understand this parable?" (4:13). Matthew replaces the rebuke with a blessing, "blessed are your eyes, for they see" (13:16), and later has the disciples answer "Yes" when asked whether they have understood (13:51). Luke has neither the rebuke nor the blessing at this point. Mark, then, gives the secret to the insiders and in the same breath shows them failing to grasp it. Later he applies Isaiah-like language to them directly: "Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?" (8:18). For Mark the diagnosis is not something insiders apply to outsiders as it applies to them first.

The Thorns: What Enters and Chokes

The verb πνίγω (to choke) does not appear only here in the Gospels. In the parable proper Mark has the compound συνέπνιξαν (4:7), Matthew ἔπνιξαν (13:7) and Luke ἀπέπνιξαν (8:7). The simple verb occurs elsewhere at Matthew 18:28 and Mark 5:13. All three evangelists use the compound συμπνίγω (Mark 4:19; Matt 13:22; Luke 8:14). The choking image is common to the tradition. Mark's distinctive wording lies elsewhere. His list has three members: the cares of the age (αἱ μέριμναι τοῦ αἰῶνος), the deceitfulness of wealth (ἡ ἀπάτη τοῦ πλούτου) and the desires for other things (αἱ περὶ τὰ λοιπὰ ἐπιθυμίαι). Matthew has the first two only (13:22). Luke has three members, but the third is pleasures rather than desires. More significant is Mark's participle, εἰσπορευόμεναι (these things are "entering in") and choke the word. In Luke the construction is different: the hearers are the ones who go on their way (πορευόμενοι) and are choked (8:14).

For Mark, the cares arise from conditions outside the hearer, including the plain pressure of economic survival. But Mark describes them entering in, and it is inside the hearer that they compete with the word. Economic anxiety is not itself condemned, and wealth is not itself said to be evil. The diagnosis concerns what happens when such concerns occupy the space where the word was meant to grow. Mark's narrative supplies an example. The man who came running to Jesus went away grieving, "for he had great possessions" (10:22), and Jesus then tells the disciples how hard it is for those with wealth to enter the kingdom (10:23-25). That scene is triple tradition too, but Mark alone appends to the promise of a hundredfold return the words "with persecutions" (10:30), joining the language of the thorny and rocky grounds in one sentence.

The Good Soil

Mark describes the good soil with three present-tense verbs, ἀκούουσιν τὸν λόγον καὶ παραδέχονται καὶ καρποφοροῦσι (hear the word and welcome it and bear fruit, 4:20). The yields ascend, thirty, sixty and a hundredfold. Here the three Gospels diverge clearly. Matthew's good-soil hearer is the one "who hears the word and understands it" (ὁ τὸν λόγον ἀκούων καὶ συνιείς, 13:23), and the yields descend from a hundredfold. Understanding is Matthew's criterion, consistent with his use of συνίημι at the path (13:19) and with the disciples' affirmation that they have understood (13:51). Luke's good soil consists of those who, οἵτινες ἐν καρδίᾳ καλῇ καὶ ἀγαθῇ ἀκούσαντες τὸν λόγον κατέχουσιν καὶ καρποφοροῦσιν ἐν ὑπομονῇ (having heard the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with endurance, 8:15). Retention and endurance are Luke's criteria, and only Luke speaks of the heart here. Mark's criterion is welcome followed by fruit. He does not mention understanding or endurance.

Two consequences follow. First, Mark nowhere says that the good soil has already passed through the tribulation that defeated the rocky ground. He describes a fruitful outcome, not a tested history. Second, the parable states a result in the field and does not promise any individual hearer a guaranteed yield. The parable that follows (4:26-29) makes the point directly. The farmer scatters seed and sleeps, and the seed sprouts and grows "he does not know how", for "the earth produces by itself" (αὐτομάτη ἡ γῆ καρποφορεῖ, 4:28). In Mark's

discourse, fruit is the work of God through the word, not the achievement of the hearer or the sower.

Discussion

Conditions or types?

Mark identifies hearers by what happens to the word in them, and his narrative treats those identifications as open. Three observations support it. First, each description is a temporal sequence rather than a static label: "when they hear, immediately Satan comes" (4:15); "when they hear… then, when tribulation arises… immediately they stumble" (4:16-17). Second, Mark's metaphor is unstable. The hearers are called "those sown" (οἱ… σπειρόμενοι, 4:16, 18), so that they are both seed and ground, a slippage Wenham (1974) noted. The unsteadiness suggests that Mark is describing an event of reception more than a taxonomy of persons. Third, the narrative moves its characters. The disciples receive the secret (4:11), fail to understand (4:13; 8:17-18), stumble (14:27, 50), and are still summoned to Galilee (16:7). If the soils were fixed types, the disciples would need to be assigned to one. The diagnosis that results can be summarised. On the path the word is taken immediately by an opposing agent. On the rocky ground it is welcomed with joy but has no root, and persecution exposes that lack. Among the thorns it is received but crowded out by cares, wealth and desires that enter in. In the good soil it is heard, welcomed and fruitful. Mark distinguishes these failures by agent, moment and mechanism.

Responsibility and Agency

Mark names forces the hearer does not control: Satan's seizure, persecution and the cares of the age. He also calls every hearer to attend (4:9, 23-24) and warns that "the measure you use will be the measure you receive" (4:24). The text holds these together without resolving them into a formula. It does not license the preacher to excuse all failure as satanic interference, nor to blame every lapse on the hearer's shallowness. It asks the community to recognise the different ways the word is lost.

The Diagnosis and Triumphalism

Within Mark's story, the parable answers expectations of easy success. Crowds have gathered in large numbers (3:7-10; 4:1), yet the parable told to that crowd reports that most sowing fails. The disciples will later expect glory (10:35-37) and resist suffering (8:32). The parable prepares Mark's hearers to understand rejection and defection without concluding that the word has failed. A contemporary counterpart is the prosperity teaching widespread in Nigerian Christianity, which interprets the accumulation of wealth as evidence of faith and divine blessing (Smith, 2021) and which has both imported and indigenous roots (Omavuebe, 2021). Measured against Mark 4, such teaching is vulnerable on two counts. It equates visible gain with fruitfulness, whereas Mark warns that the deceitfulness of wealth is one of the things that choke the word (4:19). And it has little room for the persecution that Mark expects to accompany even the hundredfold (10:30).

From Text to Church: What the Parable Authorises

Fruitfulness cannot be manufactured by pastoral technique, and faithful proclamation does not guarantee faithful reception (Snodgrass, 2013). What Mark does show is how Jesus treats those who have heard. He explains the parables privately to his own disciples (4:10, 34). He forewarns them of persecution so that it will not come as a surprise: "I have told you everything beforehand" (προείρηκα ὑμῖν πάντα, 13:23). He names the pull of wealth openly (10:23-25) and he promises a new household of brothers, sisters, mothers and children, "with persecutions" (10:29-30). Explanation, forewarning, frank speech about wealth and a supporting community are practices Mark himself depicts, and they address the very conditions his explanation diagnoses. They do not produce the harvest, but they are what a community can faithfully do while the seed grows.

The Nigerian Setting

These findings bear on Nigerian churches in specific ways, though the application must be made with care. Economic pressure is widespread. The National Bureau of Statistics (2022) reported that 63 per cent of people living in Nigeria, about 133 million, were multidimensionally poor, with the highest concentrations in the north. In such conditions the "cares of the age" are not a metaphor for middle-class distraction for they include the daily struggle to secure food, health care and housing. At the same time, prosperity teaching offers a reading of wealth that Mark's list of thorns calls into question (Smith, 2021), and Nigerian biblical scholars have identified materialism as a serious problem within the churches (Ngele et al., 2017). Pressure of another kind affects Christians in parts of northern Nigeria, where the Boko Haram and armed bandits insurgency has attacked churches among many other targets and has strained relations between Christian and Muslim communities (Onapajo & Usman, 2015). Important to add that not all hardship faced by Christians is persecution on account of their faith and the insurgency's violence has not been directed at Christians alone. Mark's rocky ground speaks to pressure that arises because of the word. Hence, churches applying it should distinguish that from general insecurity rather than collapsing the two.

Conclusion

Mark shares with Matthew the double immediacy of the rocky ground, the adjective πρόσκαιρος and the image of choking. His distinctive features are the immediacy of Satan's seizure on the path (4:15), the three-member list of thorns that "enter in" (4:19), and a good soil defined by welcome and fruit (4:20) rather than by Matthew's understanding (13:23) or Luke's holding fast with endurance (8:15). Mark specifies how the word is lost, Matthew specifies what the fruitful hearer comprehends and Luke specifies what the fruitful hearer retains. Mark's framing and narrative bear on the claim that the soils describe conditions. Mark does identify hearers with soils, but he defines them by processes, mixes the metaphor of seed and soil, and then shows his insiders failing to understand (4:13) and stumbling (14:27, 50) before they are summoned again (16:7). The soils are better understood as descriptions of what happens to the word in hearers than as fixed classes of

people, and Mark applies the diagnosis to disciples first. The text supports explanation, forewarning, honest teaching about wealth and the formation of supportive communities, because Mark depicts Jesus doing each of these. It does not support the claim that the church can secure fruit by preparing the soil, because Mark attributes growth to the earth's own working under God (4:26-29). Mark's realism rules out easy optimism. It does not rule out hope for the seed that falls on good ground still yields thirty, sixty and a hundredfold.

The study has several limits. Its scope is Mark 4:1-20 and selected Markan cross-references and does not offer a full textual-critical analysis of the passage. Its account of Mark's first hearers depends partly on mirror-reading and is stated tentatively for that reason. Its lexical selection, though governed by stated criteria, inevitably leaves other terms unexamined. Its comparative judgements depend on Markan priority. Finally, its Nigerian application draws on published statistics and secondary studies rather than fieldwork, so it identifies questions for congregations rather than measuring their experience

Recommendations

i. Preachers should preach the explanation (4:14-20) as well as the parable, including its three failures, so that congregations do not read defection or slow growth as proof that the word has failed. When calling people to faith, it should be said plainly, as Mark 13:23 does, that following Jesus may bring pressure and loss.

ii. For discipleship programmes, the pattern of Mark 4:10 and 4:34 should be followed by providing settings in which new believers can ask questions and receive explanation in small groups after public preaching. Economic anxiety should be addressed concretely through teaching on work and money that does not equate wealth with blessing and through practical support where members face hardship.

iii. Church leaders should evaluate congregational life by the continuing fruitfulness of members rather than by attendance or initial response alone. Where members face hostility because of their faith, the kind of household Mark 10:29-30 describes where people can stand with them through persecution should be provided.

iv. For researchers, three lines of inquiry follow from the limitations above. First, empirical study in Nigerian congregations of why members who respond initially do or do not continue, which would test the relevance of Mark's categories. Second, a full textual-critical and historical study of Mark 4:1-20, including its use in Nigerian preaching. Third, comparison of Mark 4 with Mark 13 and 14 in African readings, since the vocabulary of tribulation and stumbling links all three chapters.

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