

Kingdom as Contaminant? The Role of Repertoire in the Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven

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AMONG THE VARIABLES governing interpretation of the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven,¹ judgments concerning the culturally specific symbolism of mustard and leaven have become particularly important. Interpreters frequently refer their readers to comments from Pliny or Paul or the Mishnah that ostensibly demonstrate the meaning of mustard or leaven for a first-century Galilean audience. Leaven, it is usually argued, serves as a metaphor for moral corruption; mustard seed is proverbially small, or notoriously noxious, or an established figure for contamination. The influential commentary of Bernard Brandon Scott has brought the issue to the fore; Scott's interpretation of both parables hinges on his assertions regarding the audience's culturally determined reading of the primary symbols.² The hearers' prior assumptions concerning the metaphorical significance of mustard and leaven are as important for Scott as the parabolic narratives in which these ostensible stock images are embedded. As I will demonstrate, however, the evidence for the use of mustard seed and leaven as stock images in the early first century is surprisingly sparse. The putative symbolic valences of mustard seed and leaven are simply not well enough attested to bear the interpretive weight that has been placed on them. My intent here is not to propose an alternative interpretation;

¹ Mustard seed: Mark 4:30-32; Q 13:18-19 (Luke 13:18-19; Matt 13:31-32); *Gos. Thom.* 20. Leaven: Q 13:20-21 (Luke 13:20-21; Matt 13:33); *Gos. Thom.* 96.

² Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 321-29, 373-87.

instead, I hope simply to demonstrate that, lacking any evidence of established symbolism, interpretation of the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven must instead be derived from the internal logic of the parables themselves and from the narrative contexts in which they are embedded.

I. Mustard Seed and Leaven in Recent Interpretation

In *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day*, Douglas E. Oakman ponders the implications for the parable of the mustard seed of the fact that “mustard plants have from time immemorial been found as weeds in grain fields.”³ Oakman cites a remark of Pliny concerning mustard that is now familiar to interpreters: “It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once” (*Nat.* 19.170 [trans. Rackham, LCL]).⁴ Oakman concludes that this parable compares the kingdom of God to a weed, or at least a very intrusive domesticated variety of a weed. John Dominic Crossan cites Oakman’s observation approvingly: “The point is not just that [the mustard seed] starts small and ends big but that its bigness is not exactly a horticultural or agricultural desideratum.”⁵

Scott concentrates on the “metaphorical structure” of mustard and leaven in their “cultural, historical context.”⁶ According to him, both the *Gospel of Thomas* and Mark highlight the smallness of the mustard seed, both adding that it is “the smallest of all seeds” to make the point explicit. But even without such explicit notice, Scott expects the parable’s audience to draw on the “proverbial smallness” of the mustard seed.⁷ To illustrate this figurative use of mustard seed, Scott cites Matt 17:10 (par. Luke 17:6);⁸ *m. Nid.* 5.2, and *b. Ber.* 31a.

But smallness is not the only metaphorical meaning Scott attributes to the mustard seed. Equally important to his interpretation is mustard’s potential for

³ Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 8; Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1986) 124.

⁴ Cited in Oakman, *Economic Questions*, 125.

⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 278; cf. Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 157.

⁶ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 322.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 377-78, 381.

⁸ Q 17:6 reads: “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.” Text from James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg, eds., *The Critical Edition of Q: A Synopsis including the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and Mark and Thomas with English, German, and French Translations of Q and Thomas* (Hermeneia; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), hereafter IQP.

uncleanness. Though for Scott the possibility that the image has a “derogatory sense” is present from the outset, this aspect comes to the fore when the farmer plants the mustard seed in a garden, thereby violating the law of diverse kinds as articulated in the *Kilayim* tractate of the Mishnah (*m. Kil.* 3.2).⁹ The parable thus plays on the tension between these connotations of uncleanness and the hearers’ understanding of the kingdom of God, thereby urging them to recognize that “God’s mighty works are among the unclean and insignificant.”¹⁰

Scott understands the parable of the leaven similarly. Since “leaven in the ancient world was a symbol for moral corruption” and “woman as a symbolic structure was associated . . . with the unclean,” there is “radical disjunction between the metaphorical structures of the kingdom of God and the parable.”¹¹ Again, the parable “insists on the kingdom’s freedom to appear under its own guise, even if it be the guise of corruption.”¹²

Scott’s interpretation of the parable of the leaven is dependent on the work of Robert W. Funk, who also emphasizes that leaven was “a figure predominantly associated with the ‘infectious power of evil.’”¹³ Funk follows Ernst Lohmeyer in understanding Jesus’ use of leaven as a figure for the kingdom as a challenge to accepted religious institutions:

In the span of a single sentence Jesus . . . creates a burlesque of the old standard—the unleavened—that used to be associated with the sacred. Now it is what is leavened that is connected with the sacred. To invert the images of the sacred in a society is to subvert its sacred institutions. His word-act was thus understood as an attack on the temple and the temple cult in place in his day.¹⁴

Assertions such as those of Funk, Oakman, and Scott concerning the culturally informed metaphorical significance of mustard and leaven have, so to speak, thoroughly leavened the interpretation of the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven. These conceptions of the symbolic significance of mustard and leaven have been adopted, with little or no argumentation, in a number of recent studies and commentaries, and have made their way into popular treatments of the parables.¹⁵

⁹ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 381-83.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 387.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 324, 326, 328. Regarding leaven as a metaphor for corruption, Scott cites Exod 12:15-16, 19; 13:3, 6-7; Deut 16:3-4; Mark 8:15 (par. Matt 16:12; Luke 12:1); 1 Cor 5:7; Gal 5:9. On women, Scott refers to A. Oepke, “γύνη,” *TDNT*, 1. 776-89.

¹² Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 329.

¹³ Robert W. Funk, “Beyond Criticism in Quest of Literacy: The Parable of the Leaven,” *Int* 25 (1971) 149-70, here 161.

¹⁴ Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 157; cf. *idem*, “Beyond Criticism”; Ernst Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus* (2nd ed.; KEK Sonderband; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958) 219-21.

¹⁵ E.g., Zeba Antonin Crook, “The Synoptic Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven: A Test-Case for the Two-Document, Two-Gospel, and Farrer-Goulder Hypotheses,” *JSNT* 22 (2000)

This invocation of cultural repertoire is particularly evident in interpretations of the parables in their Q setting,¹⁶ where parallels are frequently drawn between the alleged symbolism of mustard and leaven and the apparent social location of the Q tradents. In various expressions and with varying emphases, there is broad agreement that whatever mustard and leaven symbolize can be correlated to the social marginality of the Q people; the remarkable growth of the mustard “tree” and the pervasive power of the leaven accordingly function as ciphers for Q’s subversive reevaluation of status in light of ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ.¹⁷

It is not difficult to see how the understated seed of a tenacious weed correlates with recent proposals concerning the social location of Q. Leif E. Vaage, for example, sees in the parable of the mustard seed “a certain ironic playfulness”:

Just as the Cynics toyed with other people’s deprecating characterization of them as “dogs,” seeking in one way or another to make this term of reproach work rather in their favor, so the Q people accounted for their questionable ethos as a manifestation of the kingdom of God in terms of mustard seed: a generally unwelcome but always

23-48, here 32; Warren Carter, “Challenging by Confirming, Renewing by Repeating: The Parables of the ‘Reign of the Heavens’ in Matthew 13 as Embedded Narratives,” in *SBL 1995 Seminar Papers* (SBLSP 34; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995) 399-424, here 419; John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 67-68; R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections* (NIB 9; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 276; David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 77, 147-48.

¹⁶ Although, as their separate placement in the *Gospel of Thomas* demonstrates, these two parables originally circulated independently, they are clearly intended as a pair in Q (see John S. Kloppenborg, “Jesus and the Parables of Jesus in Q,” in *The Gospel behind the Gospels: Current Studies on Q* [ed. Ronald A. Piper; NovTSup 75; Leiden: Brill, 1995] 275-319, here 305-8; Rudolf Laufen, *Die Doppelüberlieferungen der Logienquelle und des Markusevangeliums* [BBB 54; Bonn: Hanstein, 1980] 178-79). As a result, the structure of the parable of the mustard seed has been assimilated to that of the parable of the leaven. Most conspicuous is the addition of an agent: the ἄνθρωπος who plants the seed in Q is absent from Mark 4:31 and *Gos. Thom.* 20, and has no function in the narrative; presumably he has been added to conform to the structure of the parable of the leaven, which features an agent both in Q 13:21 and *Gos. Thom.* 96 (see Laufen, *Doppelüberlieferung*, 178; Kloppenborg, “Jesus and the Parables,” 306-7; Timothy A. Friedrichsen, “The Parable of the Mustard Seed—Mark 4,30-32 and Q 13,18-19: A Surrejoinder for Independence,” *ETL* 77 [2001] 297-317, here 302-3).

¹⁷ Wendy J. Cotter, “The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven: Their Function in the Earliest Stratum of Q,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 8 (1992) 38-51; Kloppenborg, “Jesus and the Parables,” 305-11; Leif E. Vaage, *Galilean Upstarts: Jesus’ First Followers According to Q* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1994) 63-65; idem, “Jewish Scripture, Q, and the Historical Jesus: A Cynic Way with the Word?” in *The Sayings Source Q and the Historical Jesus* (ed. Andreas Lindemann; BETL 158; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001) 479-95, here 486; Laufen, *Doppelüberlieferung*, 189-92; Paul Hoffmann, “Mutmassungen über Q: Zum Problem der literarischen Genese von Q,” in *Sayings Source Q* (ed. Lindemann), 255-88, here 282; Arland D. Jacobson, *The First Gospel: An Introduction to Q* (FF; Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1992) 203-5.

tenacious plant, that, once sown, i.e., taught, not only was extremely difficult to uproot, but promised threateningly to prosper.¹⁸

Similarly, Vaage sees “the dubious moral value” of the leaven as an apt comparison to “the kingdom of God as embodied by the persons whom Q represents”: though they are “viewed by others as desperate and despicable,” nevertheless Q insists that they are “happy, healthy, and sufficiently supplied.”¹⁹

William E. Arnal’s comments evince a similar understanding of the symbolic valences of mustard seed and leaven in antiquity:

What thus appears to be at issue in both parables is the type of behavior advocated by the people responsible for this document; the proverbial noxiousness of mustard and leaven further reinforce the impression that it is the inversionary and countercultural *ethos* of Q that constitutes the “kingdom” in these instances.²⁰

Evidently, interpreters of the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven are drawn to the idea that these parables feature morally ambivalent images. The evidence to sustain this interpretation, however, is extremely sparse. If, among first-century Galileans, mustard symbolized noxious pervasiveness and yeast was a codified contaminant, this should be established from a careful survey of metaphorical usage of yeast and mustard in relevant literature. As we will see, literary references to leaven and mustard simply do not support this reading.

II. Symbolic Valences of Mustard Seed in Antiquity

Numerous characteristics of mustard seed have been set forth as the *tertium comparationis* of this parable: its minute size, its potential uncleanness, its weed-like invasiveness, its potential for growth, the contrast between its initial form and the full-grown plant, its unobtrusiveness. Moreover, interpreters commonly claim that at least one of these potential valences was an established metaphorical convention presupposed by the parable. In order to assess the credibility of such claims—and with a hope to narrow the list of metaphorical possibilities—I will examine approximately contemporaneous references to mustard that may help disclose the cultural repertoire of the parable’s audience.

When surveying ancient references to mustard, the almost complete absence of metaphorical usage is immediately striking. It is worth noting that there is no reference to mustard (חרדל) in the OT; accordingly, neither the word for mustard

¹⁸ Vaage, *Galilean Upstarts*, 64.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

²⁰ William E. Arnal, “Gendered Couplets in Q and Legal Formulations: From Rhetoric to Social History,” *JBL* 116 (1997) 75-94, here 84.

used in our parable, σίναπι, nor the Attic νᾶπι is found in the LXX.²¹ In the Egyptian papyri σίναπι occurs quite frequently but never with a metaphorical sense. As would be expected, references to mustard appear in produce inventories and receipts²² as well as in personal letters in agricultural or food-related contexts.²³ If mustard seed had some proverbial currency in first-century Palestine, there is no evidence here.

Mustard appears quite regularly in Greco-Roman literature.²⁴ As noted above, Pliny the Elder remarks on the invasiveness of mustard in his *Natural History* (19.170-71; 20.236-40); however, the common use of Pliny's comments as evidence that mustard was perceived as a threatening weed misconstrues his remark by ignoring its context. Pliny does not call mustard a weed; on the contrary, his remark occurs amid a discussion of plants sown at the autumn equinox. Elsewhere, too, he explicitly speaks of mustard as a cultivated plant (*in sativis* [20.236]). Moreover, Pliny emphasizes that mustard "with its pungent taste and fiery effect is extremely beneficial for the health" (19.170 [trans. Rackham, LCL]). In a lengthy encomium, he describes the use of mustard to treat serpent and scorpion bites, toothache, indigestion, asthma, epilepsy, constipation, dropsy, lethargy, tetanus, leprosy sores, and a host of other maladies (20.236-40). It is not self-evident that the hardness Pliny attributes to mustard is undesirable in such a valued medicinal herb.

Other references to mustard by Greco-Roman writers present a similar picture. Mustard is uniformly considered a cultivated crop, albeit a quickly germinating crop that requires little attention.²⁵ Its medicinal properties are highly lauded.²⁶ Occasionally its culinary use is discussed.²⁷ There is no evidence of a negative metaphorical use, nor any exploitation of mustard seed's "proverbial smallness"; in fact, the phrase "mustard seed" (κόκκος σινάπεως) is not attested

²¹ Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament (including the Apocryphal Books)* (3 vols.; Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1954). Nor is there mention of mustard in the literature surveyed in A.-M. Denis' concordance of pseudepigraphic literature (Albert-Marie Denis, *Concordance latine des pseudepigraphes d'Ancien Testament* [Turnhout: Brepols, 1993]).

²² *P.Tebt.* 9; *P.Oxy.* 920, 936, 2614, 3761; *P.Customs* 338; *CPR* 8.85; *P.Stras.* 102, 362; *P.Mil.Vogl.* 305.

²³ *P.Fay.* 122; *P.Oxy.* 3856; *P.Mich.* 72; *P.Athen.* 66; *O.Claud.* 227; *P.Hamb.* 258; *SB* 9017; *P.Tebt.* 11, 1093; *P.Apoll.* 95.

²⁴ In addition to the references cited below, see the sources listed in C.-H. Hunzinger, "σίναπι," *TDNT*, 7. 287-91.

²⁵ Theophrastus *Hist. plant.* 7.1.3; Columella *Rust.* 11.3.15, 29.

²⁶ Philumenus *Ven. anim.* 16.8.1; *Duo. mens. nat.* 1.4.3; 10.2.2; Alexander *Therap.* 2.257.16; Galen *Simpl. med.* 11.870.5, 15; Dioscorides *Mat. med.* 1.38.1.

²⁷ Plautus *Pseud.* 3.820; Athenaeus *Deipn.* 2.2.30; Theophilus *Fr. apost.* 4.122.4; *Aliment.* 20.13; 23.1.

prior to the Synoptic Gospels. If mustard has a characteristic that is potentially proverbial in this literature, it is its pungency.²⁸

The majority of rabbinic references to mustard also have no metaphorical significance.²⁹ Mustard appears repeatedly in the *Kilayim* tractate, which elaborates on the biblical references forbidding the commingling of different classes (“diverse kinds”) of seeds (Lev 19:19; Deut 22:9-11).³⁰ Notably, discussion of where it is permissible to sow mustard presupposes that mustard was indeed cultivated in Palestine—at least at the time of the formation of the Mishnah.³¹ The tractate begins with a list of plants that are or are not considered “diverse kinds.”³²

Mustard (חרדל) and Egyptian mustard (חרדל מצרי) . . . are not accounted Diverse Kinds. (1.2)

Although . . . mustard (חרדל) and wild mustard (לפטן) are like to each other, they are accounted Diverse Kinds. (1.5)

Thus, native Palestinian mustard and Egyptian mustard can be treated as a single crop and may be grown together, but wild mustard should not be commingled with the domestic variety.³³

²⁸ Columella *Rust.* 10.122; Plautus *Pseud.* 3.820; Pliny *Nat.* 19.170. Cf. Plautus *Truc.* 2.2.312 (trans. Nixon, LCL): “Upon my faith, if this fellow were living on mustard, I don’t think he could possibly be as snappish.”

²⁹ Medical value: *b. Ber.* 40a. Agricultural product: *m. Peah* 3.2; *m. Maas.* 4.6. Food: *m. Shab.* 20.2; *m. Pes.* 2.8; *b. Shab.* 140a. Outrageously large plant: *b. Ket.* 111b; *y. Peah* 20b. For more complete lists, see Str-B 1. 668-69; and Immanuel Löw, *Die Flora der Juden* (4 vols.; Veröffentlichungen der Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation 2-6; Vienna: Löwit, 1924-34) 1. 518.

³⁰ See Irving Mandelbaum, *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Agriculture: Kilayim* (BJS 26; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

³¹ See Cotter, “Parables,” 50 n. 18; F. M. Heichelheim, “Roman Syria,” in *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* (ed. Tenney Frank; 6 vols.; Paterson, NJ: Pageant, 1959) 4. 121-257, here 132.

³² All translations of the Mishnah are from Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933).

³³ The most detailed treatment of the varieties of mustard referred to in the Mishnah and other ancient literature is that of Löw (*Die Flora der Juden*, 1. 516-27). He concludes (1. 519-20) that חרדל refers to *brassica nigra*, חרדל מצרי to *sinapis alba*, and לפטן to *sinapis arvensis*. Most scholars contend that the σίναπι in the Synoptic tradition is *brassica nigra* (Harold N. Moldenke and Alma L. Moldenke, *Plants of the Bible* [New York: Ronald, 1952] 59-62; Michael Zohary, *Plants of the Bible* [London: Cambridge University Press, 1982] 93; John A. Sproule, “The Problem of the Mustard Seed,” *Grace Theological Journal* 1 [1980] 37-42, here 40). This identification of the species, however, is typically dependent on the parable’s reference to the plant’s large size, which clearly serves another purpose in this parable than botanical realism. It is worth noting that the Hebrew לפטן has a cognate in the rare Greek word λαψάνη (see Str-B 1. 668), suggesting that the word σίναπι was usually reserved for the cultivated crop—a pattern confirmed by the papyrological and literary evidence I have surveyed.

Further regulations restrict the planting of mustard and similar seeds in fields:

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. They may flank [with a Diverse Kind] a plot of untilled or newly broken land, or a loose stone wall, or a pathway or a fence . . . or a ditch . . . or a tree that overshadows the ground, or a rock. (2.8)

If a man would lay out his field in patches each bearing a different kind [of crop] . . . if [in a field of grain] there was but one patch or two, he may sow them with mustard-seed; but if three, he may not sow them with mustard-seed, since it might appear like to a field of mustard. (2.9)

The logic of these *mishnāyôt* is governed by the concern to preserve orderly distinction among similar plants. Flanking a grain field with mustard is problematic because the two crops could not easily be distinguished: not only are the plants similar in appearance,³⁴ but also it is prohibitively difficult to separate their seed once commingled. Flanking a field of vegetables with mustard causes no such difficulties.³⁵ Planting more than one or two patches of mustard in a single grain field is problematic because of the resulting ambiguity about what kind of field it is.

A few observations are in order: First, there is no evidence here of a proverbial significance for mustard. Mustard appears as a potential crop with no greater symbolic significance than any other. Second, contra Scott, there is no particular “potential for uncleanness in planting a mustard seed”;³⁶ rather, there is potential for an infraction of the law of diverse kinds in planting any kind of seed. Mustard seed is no greater threat to purity and order than any other seed.

Finally, since in Luke and probably Q, the parable of the mustard seed narrates the sowing of mustard in a garden,³⁷ it is necessary to comment further on the

³⁴ Mandelbaum, *Kilayim*, 103; and, rightly, Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 382.

³⁵ Mandelbaum, *Kilayim*, 103.

³⁶ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 382.

³⁷ Luke’s account specifies the place of planting as a “garden” (κῆπος), whereas Matt 13:31 has “field” (ἀγρός). Mark 4:31 does not specify the location (ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς); *Gos. Thom.* 20 has “tilled ground” (ΠΚΛ2 ΕΤΟΥΡ̄ ΖΩΒ ΕΡΟ4). It is possible that Luke’s use of the unusual word κῆπος is an adjustment conforming to urban custom (see Luke 5:19; so Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* [2nd rev. ed.; New York: Scribner, 1972] 36 n. 64; Harvey K. McArthur, “The Parable of the Mustard Seed,” *CBQ* 33 [1971] 198-210, here 201); however, ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ appears to be a favored Matthean expression and is therefore likely redactional (cf. Matt 13:24, 27, 31, 44; 24:18, 40; so Franz Kogler, *Das Doppelgleichnis vom Senfkorn und vom Sauerteig in seiner traditions-geschichtlichen Entwicklung: Zur Reich-Gottes-Vorstellung Jesu und ihren Aktualisierungen in der Urkirche* [FB 59; Würzburg: Echter, 1988] 115; Harry T. Fleddermann, *Q: A Reconstruction and Commentary* [Biblical Tools and Studies 1; Leuven/Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2005] 662; Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 375; Laufen, *Doppelüberlieferung*, 175; Siegfried Schulz, *Q: Die Spruchquelle der Evangelisten* [Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972] 299; Crook, “Synoptic Parables,” 31-32). Luke’s κῆπος is preferred as the Q reading by IQP, Fleddermann (*Commentary*, 662), and Petros Vasiliadis (ΛΟΓΟΣ ΙΗΣΟΥ: *Studies in Q* [University of South Florida International Studies in Form-

implications of *m. Kil.* 3.2: “Not every kind of seed (זרעים) may be sown in a garden-bed (ערוגה), but any kind of vegetable (ירקות) may be sown therein. Mustard and small beans are deemed a kind of seed and large beans a kind of vegetable.” Scott argues on the basis of this regulation that the parable’s audience would have seen in the planting of the mustard seed the creation of an “unclean space.”³⁸ This argument is problematic for a number of reasons: First, although there are undoubtedly Mishnaic regulations that preserve first-century tradition, it is not clear that this particular law has a history that predates our parable. Jacob Neusner abstains from rendering judgment on such specific regulations as *m. Kil.* 3.2; he induces only that the general principle of maintaining separation among diverse kinds was at work in the first century.³⁹ Second, even if the prohibition against planting mustard in a garden does preserve first-century tradition, the assumption that the parable’s tradents were well versed in the developing Mishnaic tradition is unwarranted. As Neusner emphasizes, the Mishnah cannot be taken as representative of the religious expression of the majority of first-century Jews.⁴⁰ The increasingly familiar reference to ancient *Judaisms* in scholarly discussion underscores the difficulty of extrapolating normative first-century religious practice from rabbinic literature.

Moreover, as Jacobus Liebenberg notes, the argument that the parable of the mustard seed evokes this diverse-kinds regulation makes the unwarranted assumption that κηπος in Luke/Q is equivalent to the “garden-bed” (ערוגה) discussed in *m. Kil.* 3.1-2.⁴¹ In 3.1, the ערוגה is specified as a patch of land six handbreadths square that someone intends to sow with multiple kinds of plants. The following regulations (3.1-7) concern the number of different kinds of vegetables that may be planted in such a patch and the permissible arrangements of the various plants. In this context, ערוגה is therefore a much more specific designation than Luke/Q’s κηπος, which, of course, need not denote a mixed vegetable garden.⁴² Thus, the

ative Christianity and Judaism 8; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999] 108). Scott argues that Luke’s “garden” preserves the “originating structure” of the parable (*Hear Then the Parable*, 375-76, 79).

³⁸ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 383.

³⁹ Jacob Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 54: “The conception of an autonomous field and the requirement to add to such a field an area of tillage, not to be sown with diverse kinds, go back to the period before the wars.” Mandelbaum (*Kilayim*, 119) suggests, based on the structure of *m. Kil.* 3.2, that the reference to mustard is a later gloss. David Instone-Brewer (*Prayer and Agriculture* [Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004] 200) sees no evidence that *m. Kil.* 2.6-3.7 predates 70 C.E.

⁴⁰ Neusner, *Evidence*, 26-28; see also Alan F. Segal, *The Other Judaisms of Late Antiquity* (BJS 127; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).

⁴¹ Jacobus Liebenberg, *The Language of the Kingdom and Jesus: Parable, Aphorism, and Metaphor in the Sayings Material Common to the Synoptic Tradition and the Gospel of Thomas* (BZNW 102; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001) 318-20.

⁴² See, e.g., the very different usage of κηπος in its three other NT uses (John 18:1, 26; 19:41).

legislation in question is not an absolute prohibition of sowing mustard in a “garden” (κήπος); rather, mustard is not eligible to be planted as one of the five different varieties that can legitimately inhabit a mixed vegetable garden (ערוגה).⁴³

Moreover, it appears that even planting mustard in an ערוגה was not completely forbidden. In fact, *t. Kil.* 2.5 explicitly permits surrounding the vegetables in a garden bed with mustard or safflower.⁴⁴ What *m. Kil.* 3.2 appears to argue, then, is that *different kinds* of vegetables may be sown in the same garden, subject to the regulations for such ערוגה as specified in 3.1; *different kinds* of seeds may not, presumably because their produce is much more difficult to keep separate in such a small area.⁴⁵ In short, even if the parable’s hearers were familiar with this specific regulation—which seems doubtful—it is not at all clear that the parable provides enough details for the hearers to conclude that this planting is an infraction of the law of diverse kinds.

Although in the *Kilayim* tractate mustard is not accorded any particular symbolic value, elsewhere in rabbinic literature we do see mustard seed used proverbially for smallness. The pattern of argumentation in *m. Nid.* 5.2 and *b. Ber.* 31a is almost identical to that of Q 17:6, where faith “like a mustard seed” (ὡς κόκκον σνάπεως) is sufficient to move a mulberry tree:

If a man was eating Heave-offering and he felt his limbs tremble, he must lay hold on the member and swallow the Heave-offering. And [the discharge] renders him unclean whatsoever its bulk, even though it be like to a grain of mustard (כעין הזרדל), or less than this. (*m. Nid.* 5.2)

The Daughters of Israel have undertaken to be so strict with themselves that if they see a drop of blood no bigger than a mustard seed (כזרדל) they wait seven [clean] days after it. (*b. Ber.* 31a)⁴⁶

Particularly in the latter text, the conventionality of the metaphor is evinced by the omission of an adjective explicitly specifying the mustard seed’s small size as the

Liebenberg cites a number of texts from the LXX that illustrate the various uses of κήπος, including the designation of an herb garden: Deut 11:10 (κήπον λαχανείας); 3 Kgdms 20:2 (κήπον λαχάνων); Cant 6:2 (spice garden), 11 (nut garden); Ezek 36:35.

⁴³ Note that mustard is mentioned here only because of the potential ambiguity concerning whether it should be considered a vegetable or a seed.

⁴⁴ See Mandelbaum, *Kilayim*, 105.

⁴⁵ So *ibid.*, 119-20. Note the congruence of this reading with the logic of *m. Kil.* 2.8-9, where commingling mustard with grains, which are similar, is considered problematic, but planting mustard alongside vegetables is acceptable. Scott’s contention (*Hear Then the Parable*, 382-83) that planting mustard in a garden is disallowed in 3.2 because seeds should not be planted with vegetables since “this would be mixing dissimilar things” is an inexplicable reversal of these principles, which provide 3.2 with its immediate context.

⁴⁶ Translations of the Babylonian Talmud are from I. Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud* (34 vols.; London: Soncino, 1935-48).

tertium comparationis—an omission obscured here by Herbert Danby's interpretive translation. It seems evident that this pattern of argumentation presupposes an established figurative meaning for mustard.

As Scott points out, mustard in these texts is not only proverbially small; it also represents an intrusion of impurity.⁴⁷ But since mustard can be symbolically small in rabbinic texts without having implications of impurity (e.g., *m. Naz.* 1.5), it seems best to see the repeated connection between mustard seed and impurity not as an inherent aspect of the metaphor but as a function of the dominant subject matter of these texts.

It will be helpful to summarize the evidence I have surveyed: Mustard appears in agricultural, horticultural, medical, and food-related contexts. There is no evidence that σίναπι denotes a weed; the word frequently is used for mustard as a cultivated crop. The relevant literature contains no extant references to mustard seed's proverbial smallness that antedate the Synoptic tradition. In the Mishnah and related literature, however, mustard repeatedly appears as a figure for smallness, sometimes in contexts that concern minute but effective quantities of contaminant.

Were it not for the striking similarity between the rabbis' proverbial use of mustard seed and its metaphorical function in Q 17:6, the chronology of these texts would call into question the relevance of these references to an understanding of the parable of the mustard seed. Q 17:6, however, appears to demonstrate the currency of this metaphor in early-first-century Palestine.⁴⁸ As in the rabbinic references, mustard seed appears in the protasis of a conditional sentence, representing something very small but nevertheless decisive in establishing the applicability of the condition laid out in the apodosis. It is of particular interest that, like the rabbinic texts, Q 17:6 does not specify precisely what characteristic of mustard seed is comparable to the faith required to move a mulberry tree; Q apparently assumes that ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως unambiguously refers to mustard seed's minuteness, again suggesting that this is already an established figure for what is small.

It appears, then, that mustard seed could be used proverbially among first-century Jews. The question that remains, however, is whether the parable of the mustard seed provides its audience with cues that would activate this metaphorical potential. Among the various possible significations of σίναπι, both literal and metaphorical, which would the parable's audience hear?

A number of differences between the proverbial use of mustard (seed) described above and the symbolic use of mustard seed in this parable are important here. First, unlike Q 17:6 and the rabbinic references, where mustard seed

⁴⁷ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 381. See also *m. Toh.* 8.8.

⁴⁸ It would also be possible to argue from this evidence that Q 17:6 is the *origin* of the proverbial use of mustard seed. It is difficult to see, however, how a single reference in early Christian tradition could have generated a stock image that became familiar in a different strand of Jewish tradition.

appears in the protasis of a conditional sentence, the parable of the mustard seed places the comparison between kingdom and mustard seed in the context of a parabolic narrative. Accordingly, different syntax is used to establish the comparison: Whereas Q 17:6 has the particle ὡς and the rabbinic references are similarly structured with the prepositional prefix כּ, the parable of the mustard seed utilizes a predicate adjective (ὁμοία ἐστὶν κόκκῳ σινάπεως). Moreover, in the proverbial references, the comparison being made concerns mustard seed as a static object; unlike in the parable of the mustard seed, there is no evocation of its potential for growth. The question, in short, is whether the proverbial signification of mustard seed persists when the object of comparison is no longer the mustard seed per se, but rather the dynamic role of mustard seed in the parable. I will return to this question after surveying the symbolic use of leaven in antiquity.

III. Symbolic Valences of Leaven in Antiquity

In contrast to the paucity of evidence for the proverbial status of mustard seed in the ancient world, leaven (ζύμη) does frequently function metaphorically. But sweeping claims of its ubiquity as a symbol of moral corruption are misleading.⁴⁹ Leaven was used with a variety of metaphorical senses in the ancient world; corruption was merely one possibility.

In the OT, leaven (לֶשֶׂם) is never explicitly given metaphorical significance. It appears exclusively in the context of prohibitions against its use in cultic contexts, specifically during the feast of Unleavened Bread.⁵⁰ The symbolism of the traditional etiology does not concern leaven itself, but rather unleavened bread, which represents Israel's hurried departure from Egypt (Exod 12:39; cf. Tacitus *Hist.* 5.4).

Though one might expect the Jewish prohibition of leaven to engender metaphorical valences, there is scant evidence of this in Second Temple Jewish literature. Josephus describes the Mosaic legislation without indulging in any symbolic explanation (*A.J.* 3.10.6 §252; 3.10.7 §255).⁵¹ Philo, predictably, does interpret leaven symbolically, but his predilection for such interpretation should caution one against inferring that his usage is representative. Moreover, leaven can be, for

⁴⁹ Scott cites A. Kennedy with approval: "In the view of all antiquity, Semitic and non-Semitic, panary fermentation represented a process of corruption and putrefaction in the mass of the dough" ("Leaven," *Encyclopaedia Biblica* [ed. T. K. Cheyne; 4 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1899-1903] 2754; cited in *Hear Then the Parable*, 324).

⁵⁰ Exodus 12:15, 19; 13:7; Lev 2:11; Deut 16:4; cf. Exod 23:18; 34:25.

⁵¹ The reference to leaven in *Ezek. Trag.* 189 should also be understood in this way: The subsequent statement, which concerns the "evils" (pl. κακῶν) from which Israel will be released, is manifestly not a reference to leaven (sg. ζύμη) but rather to the suffering of Israel at the hands of the Egyptians (cf. κακῶν in line 6).

Philo, either a positive or a negative symbol. Leavening is an unambiguously positive process when concrete food is discussed: “It stands for food in its most complete and perfect form, such that in our daily usage none is found to be superior or more nourishing” (*Spec.* 2.184 [trans. Colson, LCL]).⁵² A variation on this theme appears in his comments on Exod 23:18, where leaven is a symbol of vain sensual pleasure—“since leaven is a sweetener of food but not food (itself)” (*Q.E.* 2.14 [trans. Marcus, LCL]). Leaven has an allegorical meaning as well, but here Philo is not consistent: twice leaven represents being puffed up with conceit (*Q.E.* 1.15; 2.14); elsewhere, however, the leaven is compared to joy, since “joy is the rational elevation or rising of the soul” (*Spec.* 2.185).

Metaphorical use of leaven in Greco-Roman literature is also diverse. Notably, those texts typically cited in the biblical dictionaries are not evidence of metaphorical conventions at all. Plutarch’s oft-cited comments concerning yeast do demonstrate the *potential* of leaven as a symbol of corruption, but Plutarch himself does not exploit these possibilities. He notes that leavening is similar to putrefaction, but leaven is the tenor, not the vehicle, of this trope:

Yeast is itself also the product of corruption, and produces corruption in the dough with which it is mixed; for the dough becomes flabby and inert, and altogether the process of leavening seems to be one of putrefaction. (*Quaest. rom.* 109 [trans. Babbitt, LCL]; cf. *Quaest. conv.* 3.10.3)

If texts could be cited that exploited the apparent similarity of leavening to corruption, Plutarch’s comments would indeed expose the logic of the metaphor; without them, Plutarch provides no evidence at all.

In fact, figurative use of leaven does not capitalize on the observations of Plutarch. Plautus repeatedly uses the process of fermentation as a metaphor for anger (*Cas.* 2.5.17; *Merc.* 5.3.3). And leaven’s power as an agent of growth appears as least as frequently as its kinship to corruption. Aristotle compares the process of leavening to the development from egg to animal (*Gen. an.* 3.4). Persius uses leaven to describe the hidden growth of knowledge acquired by studying:

I. What’s the point of studying, if this yeast (*fermentum*), this wild fig tree, once it’s taken root inside, can’t rupture the liver and burst out? P. . . . Is your knowledge so worthless unless someone else knows that you know it? (*Sat.* 1.24-28 [trans. Braund, LCL])

Persius’s metalepsis compares yeast to a wild fig tree, the roots of which were renowned for their ability to dislodge stones;⁵³ the *tertium comparationis* is the power of growth.

⁵² Cf. *Congr.* 161. Pliny (*Nat.* 18.26) also considers leavened bread superior, even asserting that those who eat fermented bread are physically stronger.

⁵³ Susanna Morton Braund, ed., *Juvenal and Persius* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) 50 n. 7.

Rabbinic literature likewise evinces a diversity of metaphorical use.⁵⁴ Most often cited is *b. Ber. 17a*, which preserves a prayer of R. Alexandri (third century) in which leaven symbolizes the soul's evil impulse: "Our will is to perform Thy will, and what prevents us? The yeast in the dough and the subjection to the foreign powers."⁵⁵ But a contemporary, R. Joshua b. Levi, uses leaven to describe the peace that sustains the earth: "Great is peace, in that peace is to the earth as leaven to dough; for had not God set peace in the earth the sword and the wild-beast would have depopulated it" (*Der. Er. Per. 1*).⁵⁶ And R. Ḥiyya b. Ba described the redemptive leavening influence of the Torah: "If they should forsake me but keep my Torah, the leaven that is in [the Torah] will bring them closer to me" (*y. Hag. 76c.42-43*).⁵⁷

It is in the NT itself that we have the clearest evidence of leaven used as a metaphor for corrupting influence. Paul twice quotes what appears to be a proverb: "A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough" (1 Cor 5:6; Gal 5:9). In 1 Corinthians, leaven represents the corrupting power of boasting and malice,⁵⁸ in Galatians, it stands for the negative influence of false teachers. It appears from Paul's usage that leaven can function as an established metaphor for pervasiveness. In both of these texts, it is clear that the pervasive influence is unwelcome; however, considering the diversity of usage elsewhere, two instances in Paul hardly provide sufficient grounds for assuming that the proverb Paul quotes necessarily concerns unwelcome or corrupting influence.

Concern for the corrupting influence of outsiders is also in view when leaven appears in the Synoptic tradition: "Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees

⁵⁴ The majority of rabbinic references to leaven, however, are not metaphorical; instead, they concern the prohibition of leaven at Passover (e.g., *m. Pes. 10.3-5*; *t. Pes. 2.1-3*; *b. Pes. 30a*).

⁵⁵ *Gen. Rab. 12.10.3* is also frequently cited as evidence that yeast was equivalent in rabbinic thought to the "evil impulse" (יצר הרע) in the human heart. Commenting on Gen 8:21 ("the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth"), Abba Yose remarks: "Miserable is the yeast concerning which the one who kneaded it testifies that it is no good" (trans. from Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis; A New American Translation* [3 vols.; BJS 104-6; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985]). That interpretations presuming a conventional symbolic valence are untenable is evident from the subsequent line, which is structurally identical but utilizes a different metaphor: "Miserable is the planting when the one who planted it testifies that it is no good." Leaven is not inherently evil in this passage any more than a sprout—which is precisely why the kneader's judgment on this particular leaven is significant.

⁵⁶ Trans. from I. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917-24) 1. 53.

⁵⁷ Trans. from Jacob Neusner, *The Two Talmuds Compared* (3 vols.; South Florida Academic Commentary Series 66; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).

⁵⁸ Interestingly, Paul does connect this idea of leavening as moral corruption with the prohibition of leaven at Passover (1 Cor 5:6-8). The logic of the passage seems to be that Christ's "sacrifice" has instituted a perpetual Passover that necessitates perpetually "unleavened" lives—that is, lives free from "the yeast of malice and evil."

and the yeast of Herod” (Mark 8:15 par. Matt 16:6, 11-12; Luke 12:1). Although Mark does not clarify his meaning here, Matthew specifies the leaven as “the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” For Luke, the leaven symbolizes hypocrisy. Notably, Mark appears to be intentionally obscure in this passage in order to highlight the disciples’ failure to understand Jesus’ metaphor (8:16-21); the fact that Matthew and Luke both feel compelled to clarify its meaning suggests that it would not have been self-evident.

In summary, leaven carries a variety of symbolic valences in antiquity, both positive and negative. The OT contains a cultic prohibition of leaven during the feast of Unleavened Bread, but does not develop the potential symbolism of leaven. Philo provides multiple allegorical interpretations, ranging from conceit to joy. Greco-Roman writers exploited the symbolic potential of leaven to describe both anger and powerful growth. In rabbinic literature and three times in the NT, leaven symbolizes a pervasive agent that transforms the character of the whole. The influence of this agent can be either positive or negative.

IV. The Role of Repertoire in Parable Interpretation

The symbolic valences of both mustard and leaven in antiquity evidently were not sufficiently uniform to govern the meaning of the parables of the mustard seed and leaven. Though metaphorical use of mustard seed and leaven was not unknown, it was certainly not ubiquitous. Therefore in both parables the significance of the symbols must be derived from the parabolic narratives in which they are embedded, not only or even primarily from an established cultural repertoire. Despite *potential* metaphorical valences, mustard seed is simply mustard seed and leaven is simply leaven until these symbols are given figurative value by their parabolic contexts.

Moreover, the evidence I have surveyed suggests that nonliteral use of mustard seed and leaven occurred only in simple metaphors or similes and proverbial sayings. Nowhere do we see symbolic *narratives* featuring mustard seed or leaven. Therefore, it is important to note that these parables do not compare the kingdom of God to leaven or mustard seed per se, but rather to the function that leaven and mustard seed have in their specific parabolic narratives.⁵⁹ For this reason, the embedding of mustard seed and leaven within their respective parables actually

⁵⁹ This is true regardless of whether one accepts Jeremias’s broader claim that the parables’ introductory formulae do not imply that the first-named element is the object of comparison, but rather that “it is the case with [the kingdom of God] as with [the situation the parable describes]” (Jeremias, *Parables*, 100-102). My argument is rather that the comparisons made in the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven concern not static objects but objects that undergo—and effect—transformation in the course of their respective narratives.

serves to suppress potential symbolic signification derived from their putative proverbial status—at least until narrative cues dictate otherwise.⁶⁰

This does not, however, preclude the possibility that the narrative contextualization of mustard seed and leaven may itself establish allusions to familiar symbolic overtones. If the characteristics of mustard seed or leaven that are emphasized by the roles they play in these parables resemble the characteristics brought to the fore in proverbial or metaphorical usage, then familiar symbolic valences may inform the connotations of these symbols despite their relocation to a different figurative mode. Since the parable of the leaven explicitly highlights the pervasive ability of yeast to permeate an entire batch of dough (ὄλον), an audience familiar with the proverb cited by Paul or the type of metaphor used occasionally by the rabbis would have recognized a familiar theme. It must be emphasized, however, that since leaven could symbolize the pervasiveness of either positive or negative influence, the decision whether it is a positive or negative symbol in this instance must derive from the parable itself. The use of leaven as a cipher for the kingdom of God makes it clear that here leaven represents the pervasive power of something good.

There is no such evident correlation between the function of mustard seed in this parable and its potential symbolism in antiquity. Except when imported from the audience's putative repertoire, the smallness of the mustard seed does not appear to be a significant issue in the original structure of the parable.⁶¹ The implicit contrast is not between the small seed and the full-grown tree but rather between the expected herb or shrub and the surprising tree.⁶² The figurative use of mustard seed in the parable does not appear to resonate with other conventional symbolism.

Notably, this is not the case in Mark, Matthew, or the *Gospel of Thomas*. The addition to the parable that designates mustard seed as “the smallest of all the seeds on earth” (Mark 4:31; cf. Matt 13:32; *Gos. Thom.* 20) may in fact be an attempt to encourage a reading that does resonate with metaphorical conventions regarding mustard's smallness.

⁶⁰ This would clearly not be the case with established tropes that are native to narrative contexts; an ancient audience's understanding of a story about a parasite, for example, would certainly be informed by the conventional role of such characters in Greek comedy.

⁶¹ The notation in Mark 4:31; Matt 13:32; and *Gos. Thom.* 20 that mustard is the “smallest of all the seeds” is probably a later addition to the parable (McArthur, “Mustard Seed,” 201; Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 378; John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* [New York: Harper & Row, 1973] 46).

⁶² Contra, e.g., Fleddermann, *Commentary*, 669-70. See Eckhard Rau, *Reden in Vollmacht: Hintergrund, Form und Anliegen der Gleichnisse Jesu* (FRLANT 149; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990) 115-17.

V. Conclusion

It is clear from an assessment of the literary evidence that neither mustard seed nor leaven was employed symbolically frequently enough or uniformly enough to achieve “proverbial” status. Mustard was cultivated for use as a condiment and medical treatment; *σίναπι* does not denote a weed. There is no reason to suppose that the parable evokes knowledge of the law of diverse kinds. In rabbinic literature, mustard is occasionally used metaphorically to refer to a small quantity that nevertheless has implications for the status of the whole. A similar trope in Q 17:6 demonstrates that this usage was current at the time of the parable’s transmission; however, except when provided by later redaction, the parable of the mustard seed provides no cues for its audience that this particular symbolism is relevant to an understanding of the parable. Interpretation must therefore begin from the premise that mustard seed is simply mustard seed.

Figurative use of leaven is more common, but the diversity of symbolism precludes sweeping conclusions about the role of leaven in the cultural repertoire of Q’s audience. Here, however, there is a striking similarity between the pervasiveness attributed to leaven in the parable itself and the emphasis on leaven as a pervasive agent that we find in rabbinic and early Christian proverbs. Although proverbial usage is not uniform enough to prejudice the question of whether this influence is positive or negative, it does seem clear that the parable evokes a familiar trope.



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