The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Like the parable of the sower, the parable of the mustard seed occurs in all three synoptic Gospels: Matthew 13: 31, 32, Mark 4: 30 – 32 and Luke 13: 18, 19.

Matthew has Jesus introducing the parable with “the kingdom of heaven is like” whereas both Mark and Luke record Jesus beginning with a rhetorical question, “What is the kingdom of God like, what parable shall be used to illustrate it?” Each account refers to a grain a mustard seed which Matthew and Luke says a man took and sowed but which Mark records that it was sown. Matthew reports Jesus saying that the seed was sown in a field, Mark, in the ground and Luke in a garden. Matthew and Mark have Jesus narrating that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds. Each of the Gospels refers to its growth. Matthew and Mark record Jesus saying that when it develops it is the greatest of (Mark: all) herbs. In Matthew it becomes a tree In Mark it produces large branches. In Luke it became a tree. All refer to “the birds of the air settling” there, with Matthew and Luke reporting “in its branches”; Mark, “in its shade”. All three Gospels, but particularly Matthew and Luke, proceed as though it were a story, though there are some differences as regards tense or aspect.

The Contexts for the Parable in the Gospels

The context for the parable in Matthew is similar to that for the parable of the sower which occurs before it but is separated from it by the parable of the wheat and the weeds. Both that parable and this parable are introduced with something like, “He produced another parable for them.” In Mark it occurs soon after the parable of the sower and the explanation of that parable, but is separated from it by the parable of the patient farmer. In Luke the context is that of Jesus interacting with some of his opponents. Some endeavour to entrap Jesus by getting him to make a political comment and a synagogue ruler upbraids Jesus because he has healed a woman with a bent back on a Sabbath day. Both Matthew and Luke follow the parable with the parable of the yeast. Matthew concludes with a comment about Jesus teaching the crowds in parables. Mark makes a similar comment. Luke moves on from the parable of the yeast to Jesus teaching in cities and villages and relates a conversation about the few that are saved. For Matthew and Mark the parable sits within a nest of parables about the kingdom. For Luke, the parable may relate to whether or not one is in the kingdom, as marvellous as the growth of the kingdom is.

The Interpretation of the Parable – Difficulties

Given that Matthew and Mark record Jesus explaining his parables to his disciples and others (see especially Mark 4: 34), Jesus may have explained this parable to them but no explanation is offered to us. Apparently, given that we have each of the Gospels before us, we are supposed to be able to correctly interpret the parable ourselves. By way of proceeding cautiously however we should endeavour to understand what is precisely being said in the parable itself before proceeding to understand how it illustrates something of the kingdom of God. This may not be as easy as it might first appear. Looking at the contexts, understanding the specific words used, recognising any allusions to Old Testament texts and examining the differences among the Gospel texts might help us. Additionally knowledge of the nature of
mustard plants and birds in connection with them, in Israel at the time of Jesus, might not go astray. Medema and Musselman deal with some of the botanical issues raised by the parable and comment on some of the interpretations that have been on offer.¹ Their paper was one of the main sources for the botanical information provided below.

**The Height of the Mustard “Tree”**

One of the central problems that the exegete confronts is the height that a mustard “tree” might reach. When reading the parable there could be a tendency in the reader to envisage the mustard tree, which begins as a very small seed, reaching a considerable height when fully grown. That when it develops “it is the largest of herbs”, even “the largest of all herbs”, with the addition description “and becomes a tree” (Matthew) or the simple statement that “it became a tree” (Luke), does not seem to be the description of a plant adequate for the depiction of what we think is at the heart of the parable – something very small becoming something very large. A search of some literature dealing with the parable reveals that commentators feel they have to have the height of a mustard “tree” as great as possible. While there is a claim that it grows to 8 feet, others mention “over 8 feet”, “up to nine feet”, “10 feet”, “greater than 10 feet”, “10 to 15 feet” and even “10 to 20 feet”. There are appeals to “favourable soil”, “warm climate” “enough sunshine” and “a tree like plant” “a very large plant” and “approximating the size of a tree”.

Though there are a few different species of mustard “tree”, the reality is that they don’t grow to a great height. There is a prevailing view that what Jesus had in mind was the species known popularly today as “black mustard” or alternatively the species “white mustard”. The Greek word used in the Gospels, translated “mustard”, is simply, “sinapi”. Of course people of his day did not think in terms of “species” as we might do so today. Jesus simply referred to “a mustard seed” that develops into a substantial plant, whether or not the mustard seed he had in mind was of the black, white or any other “variety”. One assumes that his hearers would have had a reasonable idea as to what seed he was referring to and that it was quite small and that they would understand how it normally developed.

Apparently the mustard seed can germinate rather soon after planting or sowing and in its early stages can develop quite quickly. It might be thought that these particular aspects of the mustard seed and plant lie behind the idea in the parable that the seed develops into a large shrub², even a tree. However, in the text no such notion is apparent. To claim that its rapid germination and growth is somehow behind the idea of the plant obtaining a large height or size is simply to read that idea into the text.

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² The Greek word, translated “herbs” is “lachnon”. It really is a reference to herbs or vegetables, items that someone might grow in a garden or cultivated in a field. However, because we normally understand by “herb” a plant of fairly small dimensions, in this paper, reference to a mature mustard plant will sometimes be in terms of it being a shrub.
The Size of the Mustard “Tree”

If we have the “black mustard” or “white mustard” in mind, the seed is about 1 – 3 mm in size. The mature plant that develops from such a mustard seed, where it has space to grow, is a large dense bushy shrub with an extensive number of small branches, and having a roundish shape. Where it has little space to develop it can become a thin slender plant with a few small spindly branches, being supported largely by the surrounding bushes. In an environment unhindered by other plants and when grown under reasonable climatic conditions, the seed develops into a reasonably large shrub.

In Matthew Jesus is recorded as saying, “When it has grown it is the greatest of herbs (shrubs) and becomes a tree.” That it is a “greatest of herbs” and yet becomes a tree, might suggest that it is stretching reality a little to call it a tree. Mark has Jesus saying, “It grows and becomes the greatest of all herbs (shrubs) and produces large branches.” He makes no mention of it becoming a tree. Given that Mark’s account could be the more original description of what Jesus said, the absence of reference to “tree” may have some significance. It may have been that for whatever reason both Matthew and Luke (see following) felt the need to state that it becomes or became a tree. The reference by Mark to “large branches” (Matthew and Luke only refer to “branches”) suggests that Mark wishes to indicate that Jesus is portraying the mature plant as something reasonably substantial in size, even if not referred to as a tree. Luke simply has Jesus narrating, “It grew and became a tree.” (Some manuscripts have “a great tree”). What readers would have made of Luke’s account we do not know. Perhaps many of them would have been familiar with a variety or species of mustard “tree” that in not uncommon favourable conditions did grow to such a height to be called unquestionably, a tree.

On any account, however, the Greek word, “dendron” (tree) may have been understood to include in its reference largish shrubs as well as those much larger plants that we would normally call trees. None the less there seems to be an effort by the Gospel writers to convey an image of the mature plant that suggests it is fairly large and substantial, while still acknowledging (at least in the case of Matthew and Mark) that it is after all, the size of a shrub. The matter of it being described as a tree and the reference to its having branches will be discussed again later.

Where the Mustard “Tree” is Sown

For Matthew, a man took and sowed (speiro) the seed in his field (agros). For Mark, the seed has been sown (speiro) upon the earth (ge). For Luke a man took the seed and cast (ballo) it into his garden (kepos). Mark has adopted the more general term for where the seed is sown, whereas Matthew and Luke have chosen the more specific terms, “field” and “garden”, respectively. There is a Jewish tradition that mustard is grown in fields and the “Jewish” Gospel Matthew is consistent with that tradition. There is a Greek and Roman reference to it being sown in gardens and the “Gentile” Gospel Luke is consistent with that position. Mark

3 For these Jewish and Greek and Roman perspectives see Medema, H.P. and Musselman, L.J. ibid.
may have based his Greek on the original Aramaic word that Jesus uttered, but we cannot know whether that is true or not. By and large it seems unimportant which Greek word is used. However, for Luke, that the seed is sown in a garden suggests that the tree that develops could be viewed as a “garden tree”, not necessarily all that large in size or girth.

That it is sown or cast is unimportant, although “casting” (i.e. “throwing”) is suggestive of spreading seed, as one might do when sowing in a field. It could be that Luke endeavours to retain something of the sowing tradition and in spite of his reference to a “garden”, considers that referring to “throwing” is a little more appropriate. Alternatively, Luke could be reflecting a Greek and Roman claim that the plant needs no cultivation but grows readily. Perhaps the idea is that the seed can simply be thrown on the garden soil. With such little effort it will still readily germinate.

The Smallest of Seeds

Matthew reports Jesus speaking of: a grain (kukkos) of mustard that is the smallest of all the seeds (sperma), Mark: a grain of mustard that is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, Luke: a grain of mustard.

Medema and Musselman maintain, “There would be numerous plants familiar to (Jesus’) audience, with smaller seeds of which the best example would be the seed of the black orchard.” However, they also state that, “It is the smallest seed ‘you plant in the ground’” and that is what Jesus had in mind. This latter claim may be true but in no Gospel is that made clear and in Mark’s Gospel the reference to “all the seeds on earth” would seem to contradict that claim. It may have been that in Israel, there was no great interest in the seeds of plants growing in the wild and no great knowledge of the sizes of such seeds. The situation may have been that proverbially or otherwise, a grain of mustard was actually considered to be the smallest of all seeds. Whatever position we take on this issue, for the purposes of the parable a grain of mustard is a very small seed.

The Birds of the Air

Some detailed attention will be given to “birds” and the phrase, “the birds of the air” as they are found in the Old and New Testaments for reasons which should become apparent towards the end of this section and in later sections. One of the issues being dealt with is whether or not the birds in the parable that Jesus told are to be associated with something evil. There is a view that they are to be so considered.

The phrase, “the birds of the air” is found a number of times in both the Old and New Testaments. It may be that the term “of the air” is a way of distinguishing flying birds from non – flying birds but it is not at all clear that that is the way the term is used in the Scriptures. In Genesis, for example, “birds of the air” is quite likely a phrase referring to birds in general.

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Medema, H.P. and Musselman, L.J. *ibid*
In the Old Testament, the literal reference is to “the birds of the heavens” The most common Hebrew word for “bird” there is “<oḥ” and it occurs as part of the phrase “the birds of the air” almost 40 times: Genesis 1: 26, 28, 30; 2: 19, 20; 6: 7; 7: 3, 23; 9: 2; Deuteronomy 28: 26; 1 Samuel 17: 44, 46; 2 Samuel 21: 10; 1 Kings 14: 11; 16: 4; 21: 24; Job 12: 7; 28: 21; 35: 11; Psalm79: 2; 104: 12; Ecclesiastes 10: 20; Jeremiah 4: 25; 7: 33; 9: 10; 15: 3; 16: 4; 19: 7; 34: 20; Ezekiel 29: 5; 31: 6, 13; 32: 4; 38: 20; Hosea 2: 18; 4: 3; 7: 12; Zephaniah 1: 3. There is another Hebrew word for bird, “tsippor”, possibly meaning in some contexts, “small birds” or “hopping birds” but the distinction, if any, to be made between “<oḥ” and “tsippor” is unclear. There are three instances where “tsippor” occurs as part of the phrase “birds of the air”: Psalm 8: 8 and Daniel 4: 12, 21. There are of course, many references to “birds” in the Old Testament without any reference being made to “the heavens”.

In the New Testament, the literal reference is to “the birds of the heaven”. The most common Greek word for “bird” there is “πτεινός” and that is the word used in the parable of the mustard seed. Of its 14 occurrences, nine are found in the form, “the birds of the air”. Matthew 6: 26; 8: 20; 13: 32; Mark 4: 32; Luke 8: 5; 9: 58; 13: 19; Acts 10: 12; 11: 6. There are two other words, translated “birds” in the New Testament. They are: “πτένος” which occurs once (1 Corinthians 15: 39) and “ορνέα” which occurs three times (Revelation: 18: 2; 19: 17, 21). Neither “πτένος” nor “ορνέα” occurs as part of a phrase “birds of the air”.

About thirteen texts in the Old Testament make reference to “the birds of the air”, the birds being birds of prey: 1 Samuel 17: 44, 46; 1 Kings 14: 11; 16: 4; 21: 24; Psalm 79: 2; Jeremiah 15: 3; 16: 4; 19: 7; 34: 20; Ezekiel 29: 5; 31: 13; 32: 4. In the New Testament there are two references to “the birds of the air” where the birds are described as unclean: Acts 10: 12, 11: 6. These are “the birds of the air” that Peter sees in a vision. The word “ορνέα” is used in Revelation 18: 20 to refer to unclean birds and in Revelation 19: 17 and 21 to refer to birds of prey. In Leviticus 11: 13 – 19, there is a list of birds to be regarded as “unclean”. However it is clear from this list that not all birds are unclean. Texts such as Genesis 8: 20; Leviticus 17: 13; 20: 25, where the word is “<oḥ” and Deuteronomy 14: 11; Leviticus 14: 4, 49 where the word is “tsippor” also make it clear that not all birds are to be regarded as unclean. Most references to “the birds of the air” in the Old and New Testaments depict the birds as neither birds of prey nor unclean.

In Ezekiel 31: 6, 13; 32: 4, references to “the birds (‘<oḥ’) of the air” form part of a metaphorical description of the greatness of the Assyrian nation, depicted as a tree. Upon its downfall, “the birds of the air” are pictured as dwelling (that is, acting as birds of prey) on its ruin. It may be that the birds represent the peoples that originally obtained their security by making alliances with Assyria but upon its downfall benefitted from its ruin.

In Daniel 4: 12, 21 “the birds (‘tsippor’) of the air” feature metaphorically in a vision in which Nebuchadnezzar is described as a tree. Upon it being cut down, the birds flee. In this instance the birds may represent his supporters and advisers.

In Ezekiel 17: 23 there is a reference to “every bird (‘tsippor’) of every wing” dwelling in the shade of the branches of a majestic cedar that has grown as a result of Yahweh having
planted a twig taken from a cedar. Here “every bird of every wing”, probably meaning “every bird of every kind”, probably refers to peoples of all nations, not only “Israel”. There is no reference in this text however to “birds of the air”. References to “birds (‘tsippor’) of every wing” are also found in Ezekiel 39: 4, 17. Here the reference is to birds of prey. Interestingly, there is an instance of the phrase, “every bird (‘<op’) with wings after its kind” (Genesis 1: 21) and the words “<op>” and “tsippor” are found together in the combined phrases, “every bird (‘<op’) after its kind, every bird (‘tsippor’) of every wing” (Genesis 7: 14).

On the basis of the usage of the phrase “birds of the air” in both the Old and New Testaments, there is no compelling reason to assume that in the parable that Jesus told, the phrase is a reference to something evil, unclean or distasteful.

**The Birds of the Air and the Branches**

As already indicated, in the Old Testament, the phrase, “the birds of the air” is sometimes associated with mention of a tree. That should not strike us as unusual. Birds often appear in trees for one reason or another! In Ezekiel 31: 6 the birds of the air nested in the branches (“<se<ppah>”) of the tree. In Daniel 4: 21, the birds of the air lived in the branches (“<eneep>”). In Ezekiel 17: 23 the birds shall dwell in the shadow of its (dangling) branches (“daliyah”). Birds are in trees because they find one or more aspect of trees valuable.

In the parable that Jesus told the birds of the air perch in the branches (“klados”) of the tree (Matthew and Luke) and the result of their being large branches (“klados”) is that the birds of the air “perch” in its shadow (Mark). The Greek word, “kataskenog” translated here as “perch” has the general meaning of “lodging”, “settling down”, “making camp”.

Jesus uses the imagery of “birds of the air” in association with “branches” to indicate that they come to the tree because they find something about the tree valuable. In real life however, the birds will tend to be small birds. The mustard “tree” is not all that substantial. And in the parable, they don’t just flitter in and out. They lodge there – on the branches.

**The Contexts Reconsidered**

In Matthew the parable is preceded by the parable of the wheat and the weeds and followed by the parable of the yeast. One could deduce from this that because the first parable, as later explained by Jesus, refers to both the sons of the kingdom and the sons of the evil one and because the second parable refers to yeast which is sometimes considered as an evil influence, that the parable of the mustard seed, should also have some “evil” element in it. However there is no suggestion in the parable of the yeast that yeast in that parable is meant to indicate something “pernicious”. Furthermore, what the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the wheat and the weeds have in common is the idea of sowing. This could have led Jesus to utter one after the other or influenced Matthew to recite them one after the other. The simplicity of the parable of the yeast, together with its notion of growth could have similarly influenced Jesus or Matthew to place both this parable and the parable of the mustard seed in close proximity to one another. In fact, the parable of the yeast has much
more in common with the parable of the mustard seed than does the parable of the wheat and the weeds.

In Mark the parable is immediately preceded by the parable of the patient farmer and followed by some general statements about Jesus teaching in parables. The parable of the patient farmer and the parable of the mustard seed share in common the notion of sowing and the general idea of the development of the seed. There is no indication that “evil” is somehow involved in the parable of the patient farmer.

In Luke, the parable is immediately preceded by the healing by Jesus of the woman with the bent back and the confrontation that resulted between him and the ruler of the synagogue because he had healed on the Sabbath. The episode concludes with his opponents being humiliated but with the crowd rejoicing “over all the glorious things being done by him.” As in Matthew, the parable is followed by the parable of the yeast. Given that the final words concerning the healing of the woman with the bent back relate to rejoicing and his wondrous acts, and given the apparent absence of the notion of “evil” from the parable of the yeast, suggests that whatever the parable of the mustard seed is about it is about “the really good”, not “the really bad”.

**Old Testament Allusions?**

If there is an allusion to an Old Testament passage or passages in the parable of the mustard seed, possible contenders as references to which the allusion could be made would be those “parables” found within Ezekiel 31, Daniel 4 or Ezekiel 17. The Ezekiel 31 and Daniel 4 texts both contain references to a tree and “the birds of the air” in that tree. However both conclude with the tree being destroyed. And in one case the birds become birds of prey and in the other, the birds flee. In the parable of the mustard seed there is no hint of the tree being destroyed or “the birds of the air” changing their relationship to the tree.

What of the tree referred to in Ezekiel 17 (verses 22- 24)? In Ezekiel 17 the tree is planted by Yahweh which has some parallel with the tree that developed from the mustard seed for the parable of the mustard seed concerns the “kingdom of heaven”. It does not concern the kingdom of the evil one or of any earthly potentate. Furthermore, the tree of Ezekiel is planted on a high and lofty mountain – the high mountain of Israel and in parallel, the kingdom of heaven of the parable that Jesus told obviously has its roots in Jesus himself and his 12 disciples – the members of the true Israel. The Ezekiel tree begins as a mere twig, while the mustard “tree” begins as a very small seed. While in the Ezekiel parable the birds are not described as “the birds of the air” they do come to dwell in the shade of its (dangling) branches and there are a lot of them – every bird of every wing – probably meaning every bird of every kind. In the parable that Jesus told, “the birds of the air” perch in its branches (Matthew and Luke) or perch in its shade (Mark). The tree in Ezekiel 17 brings forth boughs and becomes a stately cedar. In the parable, the seed develops into the greatest of (all) herbs (Matthew and Mark) and produces large branches (Mark) even becoming a tree (Matthew and Luke). The tree of Ezekiel 17 is a good contender as a reference to which an allusion is being made in the parable of the mustard seed.
Yet there are some difficulties. The birds that might relate to the tree that develops from a mustard seed are not normally going to be large birds. The tree could not cope with large birds. They will be small ones, whereas the tree of Ezekiel has birds of every kind. Yet in the Ezekiel 17 passage the Hebrew word translated “birds” is “tsippor” and the suggestion has been made above that the word can refer to “small birds” or “hopping birds”. The Authorised Version translates “tsippor” in Psalm 84: 3 and 102: 7 as “sparrows”. However, it is not being suggested that in the Ezekiel passage the birds there are all small birds of every kind. That would go against the general impression being conveyed that there was a multiplicity of different kinds of birds. Furthermore, Jesus could have referred to “small” birds” but he did not. The size of the birds does not seem to be an issue in either parable.

Another matter to consider is how the parable is related in the Septuagint version. There the text reads, “Every bird (“orneon”) shall rest beneath it and every bird (“peteinos”) shall rest under its shadow; its branches (“klema”) shall be restored.” (17: 23). In the parable of the mustard seed, the translation “birds” is based on the Greek word “peteinos” but in the Septuagint the birds of any kind are not explicitly said to be dwelling in the shade of its branches. They simply “rest under its shadow”; though presumably that means they are in the branches which provide the shade. This aspect is not unlike the relevant part of the version of the parable told by Jesus as recorded in Mark.

That the Ezekiel 17 parable refers to “every bird of every wing” or even simply “every bird” could be understood to suggest that the birds referred to have some special significance. As mentioned above I suspect that the reference is to “peoples of all nations”. The birds of Ezekiel 31 and Daniel 4 could also be understood to have special significance. In one case the reference is possibly, if not probably, to other nations and in the other the reference is possibly, if not probably, to supporters of the monarch. That all three parables can be understood as portraying the birds as especially significant lends weight to the idea that the reference to “birds” in the parable that Jesus told is also especially significant.

However, if Jesus wanted to make a clear allusion to Ezekiel 17 why did he refer to a mustard seed and not a twig from a cedar tree and to “birds of the air” rather than “every bird of every kind.”? Does the answer lie in his choice for the parable of “the grain of mustard”, “the smallest of all seeds” (Matthew and Mark)?

Yet a further matter to consider is the context of the Ezekiel 17 parable of the great cedar. Prior to the parable, the prophet writes of how Lord (Yahweh) in judgment will bring the king (Zedekiah) to Babylon. The king has broken his covenant with the Babylonians (by making an alliance with Egypt against Babylon), a covenant which is spoken of as a covenant with the Lord. That is, the kingdom associated with Zedekiah, shall fall. It is then that the parable of the great cedar is introduced - a parable which at heartly conveys the idea that God will establish a kingdom of his own making. At the conclusion of the parable, the prophet writes of Yahweh saying, “And all the trees of the field shall know that I Yahweh

5 In the Greek Septuagint, what is “tsippor” in the Hebrew text is sometimes “peteinos” (e.g. Ezekiel 39: 4) and sometimes “orneon” (e.g. Ezekiel 39: 17)
bring down the high tree, exalt the low tree, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.” This seems to be a reference to other kingdoms recognising the power of God as he removes a kingdom and replaces it with one that has an inauspicious beginning but indeed flourishes. The parable that Jesus told makes no reference to others perceiving what God does yet it does contain the idea of greatness coming from small beginnings. Again, there are aspects of the Ezekiel 17 parable which are paralleled in the parable that Jesus told and there are aspects that are not so reflected.

The Construction of the Parable

If Jesus had the Ezekiel 17 “parable” at the back of his mind he is not simply going to repeat that parable if he wishes to make a particular point that is not present or not as sharply made in that parable. He will make his own point in his own way but with allusions to the Ezekiel parable, if thought appropriate.

The parable that Jesus creates focuses on the smallness of the mustard seed. The twig in Ezekiel 17 is small, but the mustard seed is much smaller, very small. Possibly, speaking proverbially, it is the smallest of all seeds. Jesus then describes, similarly to the description in the Ezekiel parable, how it becomes a great tree! Well, not really. Haven chosen the mustard seed for its very small size, Jesus can but acknowledge the limitations of the mustard plant. Its seed will not develop into an enormous tree. That Mark makes no mention of a “tree” may indicate that originally Jesus made no reference to a “tree” as such. None the less Jesus wishes to say that it will develop into something quite substantial. It becomes the largest of (all) herbs, almost a tree, large enough to be called a tree (by Matthew and Luke) anyway!

And birds come to lodge in it. Well, normally, small birds do. It is only a mustard tree after all. But according to the parable, they come to lodge in it, not to fly in and out, which many in reality might well do. In Ezekiel there is no restriction on size. In that parable the tree will cope with birds of all sizes and in real life, some may well lodge there.

Why do the birds come and lodge there? With respect to this matter Mark may reflect the original words of Jesus better than the other Gospels. They come to be sheltered from the sun, they come for the shade. The Ezekiel parable also has the birds coming for the shade. It may be that in both parables one could imagine that they come for other things, for example to nest and in the parable that Jesus told, that they come to be safe from predators or to eat the fruit. But Jesus simply says they lodge there with only the one reason being given, the one that appears in Mark.

Jesus could have concluded his parable at that point where he describes that the plant becoming the largest of (all) herbs, having large branches (Mark) even a tree (Matthew and Luke). And what appears to be his main point would still have been made. That he then referred to the birds of the air lodging in its branches may have been because he also wanted there to be an allusion to the Ezekiel tree.
But why did Jesus not refer to “the birds of every wing” rather than “the birds of the air” if he wished to make the allusion to the Ezekiel parable obvious? Perhaps, because, as discussed above, with respect to the mustard “tree” one would not find “birds of every wing”. In the main, they would only be small birds and only birds of certain types. To speak of “birds of every kind” would stretch the “reality” being portrayed too far. It could be that it was being stretched enough as it was.

And if Jesus wanted any allusion to the Ezekiel parable to be obvious, why after concluding his parable did he not refer to other “kingdoms” recognising the greatness of the kingdom that God would establish? In a sense there was no need to. Any Jew of the time of Jesus would have assumed as much anyway. The parable that he told was cryptic, plainly told and complete within itself. The listener was required to “connect the dots” if “dots” there were.

In the end what drives the parable that Jesus told is the smallness of the mustard seed and if there are allusions to the Ezekiel tree they will have to suffer a little if necessary.

An Interpretation

In the light of the considerable discussion above, the interpretation of the parable turns out to be a simple one - embarrassingly simple, given the length of this paper.

The kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God has very small beginnings. But it is God’s kingdom. It will grow, expand, and develop into something of enormous proportions. And many will come into that kingdom and find shelter there.

And what is said to happen in the future has already happened.

Is there also a reference in the parable to peoples from many nations finding security in the kingdom of God? If there is no allusion to the Ezekiel 17 parable one might reply, “Maybe, maybe not”. But if the Ezekiel 17 passage is in mind, the answer may well be “Yes”. That all three “parables” – those in Ezekiel 31, Daniel 4 and Ezekiel 17 may well set the “birds” in an especially significant light adds further weight to the idea that in the parable told by Jesus the birds are meant to have special significance also. It is possible that the parable that Jesus told, together with the parable of Ezekiel, to which it may well allude, do together, what on their own, they could not do. My own view is that the parable has overtones of Ezekiel 17, though somewhat muted. My guess is that if anyone had some reasonable knowledge of that parable it would be odd for it not to come to mind upon hearing Jesus tell his parable, no matter whether one’s language competency was in that of Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek. Provided people had some reasonable theological astuteness they would sense the idea that the parable that Jesus told was referring among other things to “peoples from every tribe and tongue” finding their rest under the rule of God.

But what if they did not have such astuteness? Would the situation be similar to that which existed for so many other parables – that hearing people did not hear and that seeing they did not perceive, for their hearts were hardened so that they did not understand? Probably, “Yes”!
The Oddities of the Parable

For many what seems to stand out as an oddity of the parable is the fact that in reality the mustard plant is neither all that large nor all that high, yet it is spoken of as though it was fairly substantial, one way or another. As a herb, it is substantial. As a tree, it is not large at all. And it has branches – large branches (Mark) when in reality they appear to be what you might expect with a bushy shrub – not all that large. The mustard seed is very, very small – but not the smallest of all seeds. Did Jesus know that? Birds of the air might shelter in its shade but is it just a little too much to say that they lodged there? I am not sure. In the final analysis, if there are oddities, it is simply Jesus dictating theological truths which if needs be, must distort reality, rather than his telling a story about nature to which he must fit theological truths.

In Conclusion

John the “immerser” came announcing that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Jesus came and proclaimed the same. God had already been working throughout history fulfilling his purposes through those before Abraham and then through such as Abraham, the Fathers of Israel, Moses, David, the prophets, Israel herself. But now the time had come for the kingdom of God to burst in upon history with the coming of the king. It would have small beginnings – the Messiah and his followers. But the kingdom would soon take on enormous proportions even only 50 days after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This parable must have been or should have been of enormous encouragement to the believers in the early days when persecution began to rear its ugly head and when it might have been thought that the kingdom was in danger of collapsing. Paul knew of the greatness of the kingdom as the gospel was preached around the world and many became believers, no matter how great the difficulties to be endured by him and others.

Through the centuries that followed, in spite of the distortions that were introduced into the gospel, the kingdom continued to flourish, through thick and thin. In the devastating times and places of today, the kingdom continues to expand. There are believers in what once may have been considered or today are considered the most extraordinary of places – Siberia, Uzbekistan, Jordan, Mongolia, Nepal, Thailand, East Timor, Japan, Mexico, Ecuador, China, Zambia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Libya, Niger, Cambodia, even Great Britain, the United States, New Zealand and Australia!

People of God, take heart, no matter what your circumstances. The Kingdom of God has always been growing and growing vigorously. It had the smallest of beginnings but it is the kingdom of God. It had to develop enormously as people from every tongue and tribe have been pouring into the kingdom, willingly submitting to the great king and saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. His dominion of loyal subjects has been ever only expanding. Praise be to him.