The rise of Q is both a product and catalyst of the popularization of source criticism in the study of parables. Q has assumed its place near the forefront of parable studies; however, one would do well to exercise caution before allowing ubiquity to define merit. While vast amounts of literature have been dedicated to the history, validity, and content of Q, this effort will seek to discern its limitations in the interpretation of parables. Interaction with Earnest Van Eck’s work on the parable of the Mustard Seed in *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean* will serve as our guide due to his exemplary research and interpretive reliance on Q.¹ Form criticism will be utilized to reveal weaknesses in Van Eck’s Q-guided interpretation, at which point limitations will be discerned regarding the impact of Q on the interpretation of the parable of the Mustard Seed, and a conclusion will be offered regarding the interplay between source and form criticism in the parable of the Mustard Seed. The form of the parable of the Mustard Seed should take interpretive precedence over the source of the parable because identifiable redaction does not necessitate interpretive shift.

**The Synoptics, Q, and Modern Scholarship**

Before Van Eck’s Q-guided interpretation of the parable of the Mustard Seed can be evaluated, it is imperative that the connection between the Synoptics, Q, and modern scholarship—as it pertains to this particular parable—be understood. There are four texts containing the parable of the Mustard Seed (Gos. Thom. 20:1–4; Mark 4:30–32; Matt 13:31–32; and Luke 13:18–19). Van Eck asserts that “the Matthean and Lukan versions of the parable probably stem from Q (Q 13:18–9).”² Others hold to Markan priority, or an overlap between

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² Van Eck, 71. For further discussion on the relationship between the Synoptics and Q—outside of the parameters of this effort—see Z. A. Crook, "The Synoptic Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven: A Test-Case for the
Mark and Q. Another segment of source critics claim the priority of Q, but assert that Q is best maintained in the Lukan account. The lack of consensus regarding the relationship between Q and the parable of the Mustard Seed is understandable. The lack of evaluation regarding Q’s impact on individual parables is startling.

Mark Goodacre and Francis Watson represent the current forefront of those against the utilization of Q-guided interpretation. Both have demonstrated Q’s fragility by offering textual and logical arguments against the merit of the Q hypothesis. However, their disposition is not

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3 Markan priority has been asserted by Craig Blomberg. He does, however, recognize its debate. “It is debated whether Mark or Q preserves the most literal rendering of the original; either way this is a classic example of an instance in which the Two-Source hypothesis of Markan Priority and Q has to postulate an overlap between these two sources.” Craig Blomberg, Interpreting the Parables. 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 391. T. A. Friedrichsen advocates for Markan independence from Q in the parable of the Mustard Seed. See T. A. Friedrichsen, "The Parable of the Mustard Seed -- Mark 4, 30-32 and Q 13, 18-19: A Surrejoinder for Independence." Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses 77, no. 4 (2001): 297-317. For further reading on Crossan’s work—in which he concludes that priority should be given to the Gospel of Thomas 20—on the relationship between the Synoptics and the Gospel of Thomas, see John Dominic Crossan, The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 47. Cf. 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 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001).

4 Dodd is perhaps the most notable to claim superiority for the Lukan preservation of Q. Charles H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom (New York: Scribner, 1961), 191. Jülicher asserts the priority of Q, but offers Mark as the first to draw from Q. While in the forthcoming quotation Jülicher does not necessarily uphold the Lukan account as the best preserved from Q, he does attribute his opinion regarding the difference in the Markan and Lukan accounts to that of intentional agrarian interplay. “In der Quelle, aus der Mc diese Perikope übernahm, waren ihr nicht schonmehrere gleichartige Stücke vorangegangen, vielleicht war sie überhaupt ohne Zusammenhang überliefert worden, und Le hat ihr einen solchen erst künstlich beschafft, geradeso wie Mc. Mt fand sie bei Mc an einem Platz, der ihm gefiel, weil drei Saatparabeln dort auf einander folgen; da er aber in der andern Quelle eng verbunden mit der Senfkornparabel die vom Sauerteig las, nahm er keinen Anstand, diese über Mc hinaus auch hier mit unterzubringen, zumal er in den Weiteren ja noch mehr Bilder aus andern Lebensgebieten als dem Ackerbau mitzuteilen vorhatte.” Adolf Jülicher, Die Gleichnisdreden Jesu (Freiburg i.B: J.C.B. Mohr (P. Siebeck), 1888), 570. I am indebted to Ernest Van Eck for his structure, and much of his research, that I have utilized in this paragraph for his clarity and depth on the matter. See Van Eck’s unrevise structure and depth of research in Van Eck, 71.

one of incredulity, rather it is one of benevolent caution. Watson summarizes the intent of this effort by reminding his reader what hypothesis is for, “[the purpose of hypothesis] is to present itself for ongoing critical testing, in order to ascertain whether it can provide a more plausible explanation of the relevant data than its rivals.”

The attempt to discern the relationship between the Synoptics and Q in the parable of the Mustard Seed is assisted by the peculiarities in each text. Each of the Synoptic texts share various aspects of content, yet each appears to diverge—in one form or another—from the content of its parallels. Each Synoptic parallel will be briefly surveyed in order to examine their respective divergences.

Matthew 13:31-32

Ἄλλην παραβολήν παρέθηκεν αὐτοὶς λέγων· ὡμοία ἐστὶν ἢ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν κόκκως σινάπεως, ὡν λαβόν τὸν ἄγρᾳ ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ· ὁ μικρότερον μὲν ἐστὶν πάντων τῶν σπερμάτων, ὅταν δὲ αὐξηθῇ μεῖζον τῶν λαχανῶν ἐστίν καὶ γίνεται δένδρον, ὦστε ἐλθεῖν τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ κατασκηνοῦν ἐν τοῖς κλάδοις αὐτοῦ.

In Matthew, the text is introduced with an indication that the audience and genre remain unchanged from their preceding context (Ἄλλην παραβολήν παρέθηκεν αὐτοὶς λέγων). The grain of mustard seed is sown by a man in his field (ἀγρῷ). The grain of mustard seed is referenced as the smallest of all seeds (μικρότερον μὲν ἐστὶν πάντων σπερμάτων). The seed grows to be larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree (δένδρον). Matthew’s inclusion of μὲν

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7 The Gospel of Thomas is of reduced interest in the present discussion—and will not be included in the upcoming discussion of divergence—due to its early to mid-second century composition. For a survey of its role with the Synoptics in regard to this particular parable, see Van Eck, 72. A nuanced and detailed effort on the Gospel of Thomas has been offered by Stephen J. Patterson. While he would conversely argue for a late first-century date, his presentation of research is both well-structured and relatively impartial. He concludes by insisting an inability in current scholarship to determine the date of any singular saying. See Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 128-30. Cf. Mark Goodacre, *Thomas and the Gospels: The Case for Thomas's Familiarity with the Synoptics* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012).
indicates and affirms the explicit comparison of the seed and the tree. This depiction of growth is connected to a statement of purpose using the conjunction ὅστε. The purpose of the growth is then revealed, “so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” The parable of the Mustard Seed is immediately followed by the parable of the Leaven.

Mark 4:30-32

Καὶ ἠλέγεν· πῶς ὁμοίωσομεν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἢ ἐν τίνι αὐτήν παραβολῇ θόμεν; ὡς κόκκῳ σινάσως, ὡς ὅταν σπαρή ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, μικρότερον ὅπως πάντων τῶν σπερμάτων τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, καὶ ὅταν σπαρή, ἀναβαίνει καὶ γίνεται μεῖζον πάντων τῶν λαχάνων καὶ ποιεῖ κλάδους μεγάλους, ὅστε δύνασθαι ὑπὸ τὴν σκιὰν αὐτοῦ τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατασκηνοῦν.


Ἔλεγεν οὖν· τίνι ὁμοία ἐστίν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τίνι ὁμοιόσως αὐτήν; ὁμοία ἐστίν κόκκῳ σινάσως, ὃν λαβὼν ἀνθρώπος ἔβαλεν εἰς κῆπον ἑαυτοῦ, καὶ ἤγειρεν καὶ ἐγένετο εἰς δένδρον, καὶ τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατεσκήνωσεν ἐν τοῖς κλάδοις αὐτοῦ.

* Ἐλεγεν ōν initiates the parable in the Gospel of Luke with ōn indicating that the audience and preceding context remain unchanged. An individual is depicted as sewing the grain of mustard seed in a garden (κῆπον). The seed then grows into a tree (δένδρον). The purpose of
the growth is then stated, “and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.” Similarly to the Matthean account, the parable of the Mustard Seed is immediately followed by the parable of the Leaven.

**Van Eck: A Q-Guided Interpretation**

**Determining a Methodology**

A cursory glance at the text showcases multiple divergences in the content of the parable. Those in favor of a Q-guided interpretation seek to identify the content of Q—presuming Q contains the original content of the parable of the Mustard Seed—before determining why a text has diverged from the content of Q. The parable of the Mustard Seed presents a complex maze of potential scenarios for the Q-guided interpreter. Are these Synoptic parallels evidence of Mark and Q overlap? Does each rendition of the parable contain divergence from Q? Why has a given text diverged from Q?

Making matters more complicated, the Q-guided interpreter is tasked with determining whether or not details have been added or subtracted in each respective text. Determining whether a detail was added or subtracted is informed by the source critic’s awareness of Q’s content, however, it is simultaneously informing the source critic’s awareness of Q’s content. If something of substance has been added or subtracted, then the original intent of the parable has presumably shifted after first being spoken by Jesus. Van Eck encapsulates the goal of the Q-guided interpreter, “Only [after discerning redaction] can one postulate a version that is most probably the closest to the ‘original’ parable Jesus told. The details of this version then can be used to postulate the possible intent Jesus had with the parable.”\(^8\) The methodology of the Q-guided interpreter can now be simplified: (1) determine the original content of the parable, (2)

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8 Van Eck, 73.
determine the divergence in a given Synoptic retelling, (3) interpret the parable in light of the value given to its divergence from Q.

From Theory to Praxis

Van Eck’s Q-guided interpretation is no exception to this methodology. He first sets out to determine the original content of the parable. He begins with the Markan account. He references Mark’s introduction to the parable as also being inserted in 4:2, 11, 21, and 24, thus this would be Markan redaction. He also sees Mark’s description of the seed as “the smallest of all seeds on the earth” as redaction. Since this redaction was not a part of the original parable, then Mark’s statement of growth regarding the mustard seed becoming “the largest of all plants” was also not original. Thus, Van Eck concludes, “In short, Mark changed the parable of Jesus into a growth parable.”

If Mark added the smallest to largest comparison, and Matthew has utilized the same comparison, then Matthew is assumed to have utilized the Markan material.

Luke is then discussed in light of Van Eck’s own conclusions regarding Markan redaction and its Matthean parallel. Van Eck notes that Luke is “The only version that does not have any element of Mark’s redactional ‘smallest and largest’ [comparison]”. He posits that because of the absence of a size comparison, as well as Luke’s divergence—including the seed being specifically planted in a garden (κῆπον)—that Luke must be closest to Q. Van Eck

9 Van Eck 73-4.

10 Van Eck, 74. While Van Eck is the focus of this effort, he is by no means the only scholar to place elevated importance in the lack of explicit comparison in the Lukan account. Garland’s treatment of Luke 13:18-19 also compares Matthew 13:31, 17:20 and the Lukan account. In his estimation the “proverbial smallness” of the mustard seed is not mentioned in the Lukan account, thus the parable of the mustard seed cannot be related to the contrast of “small beginnings and great results.” This argument from silence fails to take into account an assumed and engrained “proverbial smallness” of a mustard seed that would simply not need stating in the context of an agrarian first-century audience consisting predominantly of Palestinians already familiar with the concept. See Garland’s treatment of Luke 13:18-19 in David E. Garland, Luke (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011).
concludes his study of redaction with a bold statement that will greatly impact his interpretation, “Luke’s version constitutes a definite difference in the meaning of the parable, a meaning that has to do with the essence of what Jesus wanted to convey when he compared the kingdom of God with a mustard seed.”

From Praxis to Problem

With Van Eck concluding that we only began interpreting the Lukan account as a parable of growth because of the smallest-largest comparison in the Markan account, he determines that Luke must be interpreted differently. His interpretation—while filled with exceptional research—leads to a rather problematic theology. He takes his readers through his interpretation by first positing that the original audience would have understood the conceptual grain of mustard seed in the context of the Torah.

He associates the individual who planted a mustard seed in a garden with mischief. “First, planting a mustard seed in a garden was prohibited according to the purity rules of the kingdom of the temple.” He references the Levitical law and the Mishnah as evidence that things that were not alike would never have been mixed in a purity driven culture, and the mustard seed planted in the midst of a garden would certainly fit this description. It is at this point in his study that we see an example of a Q-guided interpretation leading to theological incoherence. Van Eck asserts that “the garden is unclean, a symbol of chaos. If mustard seed in a garden is a metaphor for the kingdom of God, then the kingdom of God is polluted and unclean. An ordered kingdom

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11 Van Eck, 75.
12 Van Eck, 80.
13 Van Eck, 81.
has been replaced by a chaotic and polluted kingdom.” Despite clear theological incoherence within this interpretation, Van Eck goes even further down this interpretive trail. “Therefore… the kingdom of God, like the plant, is dangerous and deadly… Order is turned into chaos…”

From Problem to Appraisal

With Van Eck’s interpretation briefly surveyed above, we can now depict his line of argumentation as syllogism:

(1) The Lukan account does not contain an explicit smallest-largest comparison.

(2) An explicit smallest-largest comparison is present in the Matthean and Markan accounts.

(3) The Matthean and Markan accounts must be interpreted separately from the Lukan account.

Van Eck builds his Q-guided interpretation upon the foundation of two questionable premises. The first questionable premise is that the Lukan account does not contain the smallest to largest comparison. The second questionable premise is that grammatical redaction must necessitate interpretive shift.

The entirety of Van Eck’s Q-guided interpretation of the parable of the Mustard Seed stems from his assumption that Luke must be closest to Q simply because Luke does not contain the smallest-largest comparison that is present in both the Matthean and Markan accounts. Since Luke does not include this comparison, according to Van Eck, the parable as presented in the Lukan account simply cannot be primarily interpreted with the concept of growth in mind. Van

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14 Van Eck, 82. Emphasis mine.

15 Ibid. Emphasis mine.
Eck has seemingly ignored his own description of the original audience, “The first hearers of the Mustard Seed were first-century peasants from Galilee who, in an advanced agrarian society, worked the land in an effort to make a living.”\textsuperscript{16} Van Eck classifies the original audience as “emic listeners” which he then describes as listeners who would have understood parables that “evoked certain cultural norms or scripts (social values) of the first-century Mediterranean world that are implicitly embedded in the story Jesus told…”\textsuperscript{17} He even goes so far as to admit that “the mustard seed was proverbially known for its smallness and used as a familiar term to mean the tiniest thing possible…”\textsuperscript{18} Nevertheless, Van Eck’s own research presents an obstacle for his premise.

It is true that Luke does not explicitly reference a smallest-largest comparison in his account, however this does not mean that the comparison is not inherently intended to be understood through implication. The Lukan account utilizes the depiction of the mustard seed—proverbially understood as the smallest of seeds—growing into a tree. With the smallness of the seed implied, and the high likelihood that an experienced farmer would have differentiated from a tree and the shrub of the mustard seed plant, we can see hyperbolic growth as the central factor of the entire illustration.

Luke utilizes ηὐξησεν in 13:19, and uses the same verb for growth in 1:80, 2:40, and in 12:27 (in reference to the lilies). He also utilizes ηὐξησεν in Acts 6:7 to discuss the growth of the kingdom through the growing numbers of disciples in Jerusalem, in Acts 7:17 to discuss the

\textsuperscript{16} Van Eck, 75.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. Emphasis mine.

previous growth of Israel, and in Acts 12:24 and 19:20 with both referencing the growth of influence that the word of God had among the people. Is it not possible—and probable—that the author’s textual evidence paired with the original audience’s elevated familiarity of agricultural concepts would have rendered the explicit inclusion of a smallest-largest comparison unnecessary? The argument that any given hearer or reader in the first-century would have experienced the Lukan account of the parable of the Mustard Seed and not considered the concept of growth as a primary interpretive framework is problematic. The parable of the Mustard Seed as depicted in the Gospel of Luke was the primary referent for Van Eck’s Q-guided interpretation, therefore it will also serve as the lens through which we observe an alternative interpretation.

Form Over Source

In Luke 13:18-20, we find two compact parables that are—upon first glance—rather unassuming. The parables immediately follow the healing of the woman depicted in Luke 13:10-17, and are connected by the coordinating conjunction οὖν. The parables are immediately followed by a change in topography as Jesus continues toward Jerusalem, and with the change in scenery comes a change in focus. Thus, the narrative of Jesus healing the woman (13:10-17), and the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven (13:18-20), can effectively be considered one “scene” in Luke’s Gospel, and it is this “scene” that forms the immediate context for the parable with which this study is concerned.

Setting the Scene

The narrative of 13:10-17 takes place in the synagogue on the Sabbath likely after the Sabbath service. James R. Edwards posits that, “Jesus must have seen the woman after the
Sabbath service as women were not permitted in the sanctuary of a Jewish synagogue.” Jesus has not appeared in the synagogue since his journey to Jerusalem began in 9:51, and he has already warned his followers of possible persecution in the synagogue (12:11), yet Jesus has entered the synagogue and began to teach (13:10). He encounters a woman in poor condition who has been the victim of a disabling spirit (Gk. πνεῦμα ἀσθενείας) for eighteen years. She is depicted as being bent over and unable to straighten her posture. Jesus calls her to meet him, lays his hands upon her, and pronounces her free from her current state (13:12). Immediately occurs a physiological response affirming the declaration and authority of Jesus; the woman is made straight, and she responds appropriately by glorifying God (13:13).

The ruler of the synagogue directly challenges the honor of Jesus. By utilizing Deuteronomy 5:13, and publicly questioning Jesus’ obedience of the Torah, the ruler of the synagogue implies that Jesus has disobeyed the will of God by disregarding the Torah in his healing of this woman on the Sabbath. The amount of real-time lapse between the narrative in 13:10-17 and the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven is left unstated. Any consideration

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20 A line of a public questioning was often a direct assault on one’s honor. Craig Blomberg adds depth to our understanding of honor and shame, “Honor was either ascribed or acquired. Repeatedly, the Jewish leaders challenged Jesus’ honor by asking him questions designed to trap him (most notably, see Mark 11:27-12:34 pars.). Jesus not only avoided the traps but asked questions in reply that they could not answer (e.g., Mark 12:35-37 pars.). In so doing he acquired greater honor while they were shamed.” Jesus rebuts the ruler of the synagogue with the inclusion of Deuteronomy 5:14, and its contextual amendment of Sabbath prohibitions to allow for the care of oxen and donkeys, implicating that ruler of the synagogue does not understand the will of God (13:15-16). Jesus goes on to contrast the Torah’s allowance for the care of these lowly animals on the Sabbath with the ruler’s declaration that the woman should not have been healed on the Sabbath. In doing so, Jesus recalls the true dignity of this ostracized woman by titling her a ‘daughter of Abraham’ (13:16), and puts the ruler of the synagogue and all those in opposition to Jesus to shame (13:17).” Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables. 2nd ed.* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 149-50. Cf. J. K. Chance, "The Anthropology of Honor and Shame: Culture, Values, and Practice." *Semeia* 68 (1994): 139-51; Z. Crook, "Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 3 (2009): 591-611; and W. R. Domeris, "Honour and Shame in the New Testament." *Neotestamentica* 27, no. 2 (1993): 283-98.
of the unstated temporal aspects in the Lukan account is far beyond the parameters of this effort and bear little impact on our study. However, by placing the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven directly after the narrative of 13:10-17, and connecting the parables to the preceding narrative, Luke has forced the reader to consider the contextual relationship of the narrative and the following parables.

Form and Focus

With the context of the broader stage now in view, we will narrow our focus to the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven in order to assess the value of the Lukan form in our interpretation. In order to depict the expansion of the kingdom, Christ utilizes unexpected character(s) and unconventional methods. Full exegesis of the parables is beyond the parameters of this effort; however, a brief survey of the Lukan form will showcase its interpretive value in comparison to a Q-guided interpretation.

It would be natural to assume that a self-acclaimed king would attempt to depict his kingdom as powerful and triumphant. The form of the Lukan account indicates that this is simply not what Jesus had intended to communicate, at least, not in the ways in which power and triumph would have commonly been understood. Yes, the kingdom is ruled by an all-powerful and triumphant king, but the power and triumph of Christ are wholly other than that of the empire of which this parable of the Mustard Seed subverts. As previously noted, Van Eck interprets this parable as a depiction of the kingdom as polluted, unclean, dangerous, chaotic, and deadly. Does the Lukan form lend itself to such an interpretation?

As we have seen in the preceding narrative, Christ has demonstrated his authority as the

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21 Van Eck, 82.
ultimate interpreter (13:15-16), and in so doing has asserted his understanding of the divine will as being greater than that of the leader of the local synagogue. Here, in the parable of the Mustard Seed, Christ continues to showcase his intimate knowledge of the divine will, as well as demonstrate his embodied revelation of the Father, by illustrating the kingdom through the uncommon growth of the common mustard seed. Jesus has already warned his followers of possible prosecution in the synagogue (12:11). He then heals a woman on the Sabbath in the synagogue, publicly shames the ruler of the local synagogue through his interpretation of the Torah, and follows his shocking teaching by reinterpreting the kingdom of God through the lens of a humble mustard seed.

The context surrounding the parable of the Mustard Seed appears to indicate a Christocentric reorientation of kingdom theology, but there is simply no indication of a kingdom that is polluted, unclean, dangerous, chaotic, and deadly. The only way to arrive at Van Eck’s conclusion is to isolate the parable from its context, introduce a literal reading of first-century agricultural practices in the midst of metaphor and hyperbole, and reject any and all influence of the intimately connected parable of the Leaven that is present in both Luke and Matthew. This

22 Ibid.

23 Any detailed exegesis of the Lukan text is beyond the parameters of this effort. However, it should be noted that Van Eck’s assessment also deemphasizes the possible aspect of Gentile inclusion seen through the metaphorical function of the birds. Joachim Jeremias and I. Howard Marshall have argued on behalf of the birds as an allusion to Gentile inclusion. Marshall goes so far as to describe this as “fact.” I. Howard. Marshall, Eschatology and the Parables, Reprinted with corrections. ed. The Tyndale New Testament Lecture; 1963. (London: Theological Students' Fellowship, 1973), 28, n. 81. Cf. Joachim Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus (1972), 147. If it can be said that the birds are the inclusion of the Gentiles, it is intended to reveal the expansion of the kingdom, and nowhere else in the immediate context of this passage does Gentile conclusion appear to be of pressing literary concern. Each of the parables as well as the preceding narrative bolster the case of the seed/tree being a key character. At best, the birds are a secondary character intended with rhetorical and pedagogical purpose, no doubt, but not with purpose of making a second point (rather it is best understood as an illustrative and beautiful coloration of the image in which the seed/tree are fixed firmly in the center). While important, the evidence and corresponding argumentation on behalf of their priority is not enough to warrant a shift from a monadic to dyadic interpretive model.
reading is unnecessary if context and form rather than Q guide our interpretation. Joel B. Green states, “Jesus does not… turn to the experiences of the elite; he does not reach for images normally associated with royalty and kingdom-making… instead, he draws on first-century Palestinian village life.”

Green further argues the depth at which the parable is intended to meet the common Palestinian:

> Why is this point not made with reference, say, to the mighty cedar of Lebanon (cf., e.g., Ezek 17:23)? No doubt, this is grounded in the dissonance of Jesus’ message… [God’s] dominion purposefully seeks out persons who do not represent the socially powerful and privileged.

The absurdity associated with the idea of kingdom advancing through the utilization of the powerless is nearly overwhelming, yet according to the parable of the Mustard Seed this is precisely what God has done. Two kingdoms occupying the same space at the same time is a recipe for conflict. In the midst of this conflict, there would be no need for the social and religious elite to wage war against the empire. Jesus, as the authoritative interpreter (Luke 13:15-16), depicts the kingdom of God through the most common of images and invites the most common of people.

Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan provides insight on the intent of parables when she comments that, “By their nature, parables are meant to involve hearers and challenge them to change their perspective, their hearts, and their behavior. The parables invite us to live in a new way, in a way worthy of the Gospel.”

The parable of the Mustard Seed was no insinuation of neo-Maccabean

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25 Ibid.

26 M.A. Getty-Sullivan, *Parables of the Kingdom: Jesus and the Use of Parables in the Synoptic Tradition* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007).
revolt, but an unconventional invitation to participate in the expanding kingdom’s inevitable victory.27

In the shadow of the empire, there are few ways one could imagine a subversion of Rome. Any attempt to establish a kingdom and overthrow the dominion of current powers would presumably include coercion, violence, and militaristic force. Those awaiting the messiah that Jesus claimed to be may have been anticipating a revolt of Maccabean proportions; liberating them from oppression and terminating their exile. But what they received was unconventional. In the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven, the divine will for kingdom expansion was both communicated and demonstrated. It is through the seed and the leaven that Jesus communicated intimate realities of his forthcoming reign and extended an invitation of union to those unconventional enough to follow.

Conclusion

Form should take interpretive precedence over source in the parable of the Mustard Seed. While evidence of redaction in the Synoptic parallels of the parable of the Mustard Seed is clear, the texts do not lend themselves to the identification of the original source. It is one thing to identify redaction, but the identification of redaction and the traceability of redaction are two separate tasks. It cannot be successfully argued that Luke shares an exclusive relationship with Q that would allow Q to guide its interpretation. Conversely, it cannot be successfully argued that Matthew and Mark do not stem from Q simply because they contain an explicit smallest-largest comparison. Redaction, therefore, may be identified, but cannot be traced with certainty in the parable of the Mustard Seed. Thus, a Q-guided interpretation of the parable of the Mustard Seed

is left wanting, and should instead be used to assist a form-guided interpretation.


