

Resolving the Problem of the Expression “Faith as Small as a Mustard Seed” in Matthew 17:20



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ABSTRACT

Jesus’ use of mustard seed as a simile or an analogy in the description of faith has been translated and interpreted in diverse ways over the years. Whilst some vernacular and English translations referred to the size of the seed, some retained a fair comparison or analogy of the mustard seed to faith without referring to any salient trait or characteristic. Among both laity and scholars, it remains that some conclude, in reference to Matthew 17:20 and Luke 17:6 that small or little faith is of the essence and to it, acceptable in Christianity and to the Lord. The problem is increased as some also refer to the potency or potentiality of the seed rather than its size. In the attempt to resolve this confusion and to lay bare the veracity of the text in the African context especially, some vernacular translations, as well as English translations (several Africans read the biblical text in English), are compared and analysed *vis-à-vis* the Greek text. Lexico-syntactical, as well as literary analyses, are applied to the text, especially “*If you have faith as small as a mustard seed.*” In conclusion, this paper opines that Jesus’ analogy of faith in comparison to the mustard seed refers to the potency or the potentiality of the seed to produce great results although, it is seemingly one of the smallest seeds that nature produces. The emphasis or salient trait in the reference is its potentiality but not its size.

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INTRODUCTION

Faith is of essence among the various Religious Traditions of which Christianity is no exception. The word, faith as a Christian virtue is used and applied diversely in several circumstances in the biblical text, especially in the New Testament. The incomprehensibility of this virtue, faith, has led several people astray in both application and practice in their religious experiences.

In Matthew 17:20 (within a larger context of the periscope, 17:14-20), Jesus put forward an analogy of faith in comparison with a mustard seed. Both biblical exegetes and translators, who translate the Bible into various dialects, as well as laity have over the years had several struggles over this particular analogy. Whilst some refer to the size of the mustard seed as what Jesus is referring to in comparison with faith, others submit that it is rather the obvious potentiality of the seed that the text refers to rather than its size. It can then be argued that if it is the size that Jesus is referring to, then to some, small or little faith is acceptable and that, such in consequence can move mountains thus making the impossible, possible. However, within the larger context of the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke), both little or small and great faith are illustrated and spoken about in terms of condemnation or recommendation respectively. If this is the case, then Jesus must be speaking about something else in the comparison of faith to the

mustard seed rather than the size of it. However, in reference, one cannot easily denounce the possibility of assuming the size of the seed since it is indeed, one of the smallest seeds.

In this paper, an attempt is made to resolve the conundrum over *ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως* ("If you have faith as a mustard seed"), various translations, both in the English and vernacular are compared and duly analysed to ascertain the veracity of the issue. There is also a personal translation of the Greek text. The approach or methodology to this work is eclectic – applying the understanding of the principles of biblical text translation generally and lexico-syntactical analysis of the text and literary analysis of *ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως* especially. The work is organized with an introduction, an overview of the context and structure of the Gospel of Matthew, with a special focus on Matthew 17:14-20. Within this passage, verse 20 is particularly important. It includes a personal translation and a lexico-syntactical analysis of the text, a literary analysis of the phrase "*ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως*," a presentation and analysis of various translations, especially in the vernacular, and a conclusion.

Structure and Context of the Matthean Gospel

The healing of the epileptic, of which the mustard seed analogy in verse 20 is illustrated, forms a pericope (17:14-21). This portion of the Matthean narrative considered in this paper is part of Blomberg's third main section being 16:21-28:20 as the climax of Jesus' ministry.¹ This corresponds to Kingsbury's third section of the book, as well as labelled the Suffering, Death and Resurrection of Jesus as Messiah (16:21-28:20).² It again forms part of the narrative portion of Bacon's five books of the treatise, as mentioned above. It is actually part of the fourth book which according to Bacon deals with church administration (narrative, chapters 14-17; discourse, chapter 18).³ Carson et al also placed this pericope within the fifth section of their structuring of the Matthean gospel which is labelled as the glory and the shadow: progressive polarization (13:54-19:2).⁴

Matthew 17:14-20 comes on the heels of the episode of the transfiguration of Christ (verses 1-13). This was a major event reported in the Matthean narrative. Verse 14 provides a sense of transitions of both scene or setting and experience - *Καὶ ἐλθόντων πρὸς τὸν ὄχλον*. This depicts a movement from seclusion or solitude into public space and toward the multitude. Verses 15 and 16 provide information on the chronic state of the child's epilepsy to demonstrate the severity of the condition. The other disciples (whilst Jesus, James, Peter and John were away on the Mount of Transfiguration) could not cure him. Verse 17 places Jesus' rebuke on the disciples as a "faithless and perverse generation" due to their inability to cure the condition of the child. One is not sure whether this rebuke includes the three who were with Jesus earlier or to the rest of the disciples only. However, one may deduce that from earlier comments of Jesus concerning the faith of the disciples in Matthew 6:30 for instance, the three were also included in Jesus' rebuke. Jesus then, in verse 18 went beyond the epileptic condition and rebuked the demon instead and the child was healed of the epileptic condition in that same hour. It is this experience that led the disciples to question Jesus, "Why could we not cast it out?"

Verse 19 specifically begins with the Greek word, *τότε* which is a transition word commonly used by Matthew to indicate an upcoming new piece of information, especially of particular attention to the audience.⁵ *τότε* also gives a sense of time progression used as a time marker of subsequent time.⁶ Although *τότε* has varied functions, its use here specifically depicts events or things which take place immediately afterward, so that, it is somehow equivalent to what has been done or heard.⁷ This use of *τότε* coupled with the expression *κατ' ἰδίαν* literally meaning "according to one's own"⁸ shows that there is a time-lapse or gap between the healing of the epileptic in verse 18 and the disciples privately questioning Jesus about their lack of ability to cast the demon out - *οὐκ ἠδυνήθημεν ἐκβαλεῖν αὐτό*; Although verse 15-21 forms a

¹ Matthew Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 51.

² Matthew Kingsbury, *Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 45.

³ Benjamin W Bacon, "The 'Five Books' of Matthew against the Jews," *The Expositor* 15, no. 8 (1918), 253-262.

⁴ D. A Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 58, 59.

⁵ William D. Davies and Dale, C. Allison, *The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ed. J. A. Emerton, C. E. B. Cranfield, and G. N. Stanton, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 725.

⁶ Timothy Friberg, *The Greek Lexicon* (Chicago: University Press, 2001), 45.

⁷ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 30.

⁸ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 715.

pericope, verse 20 can be dealt with on its own since time-lapse separates it from the preceding events. *τότε* in verse 19 as mentioned above indicates an upcoming new piece of information which is of particular interest to the disciples. To this end, this paper focuses on verse 20 in an attempt to investigate the comparison of faith with the mustard seed.

Lexico-Syntactical Analysis of Matthew 17:20

In establishing the text, there is the need for a lexico-syntactical analysis to see the nuance(s) of the words and their relation with other words in the text. The text in Matthew 17:20 in Greek is -

ὁ δὲ λέγει αὐτοῖς· διὰ τὴν ὀλιγοπιστίαν ὑμῶν· ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως, ἐρεῖτε τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ· μετάβα ἐνθεν ἐκεῖ, καὶ μεταβήσεται· καὶ οὐδὲν ἀδυνατήσει ὑμῖν.

This can be translated as -

And Jesus says to them, on account of your littleness of faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a seed of mustard, you will say to this mountain depart from here to there, and it shall depart; and nothing shall be impossible for you.

In this lexico-syntactical analysis, the words would be analysed to make the needed meaning in relation to how they syntactically stand with others in the phrase.

ὁ δὲ λέγει αὐτοῖς

Since the conjunction, *δὲ* meaning but or and (depending on its role as a conjunction), does not begin a Greek sentence.⁹ The article, *ὁ* is used as a screen to maintain the rule of engagement. It, therefore, needs no translation as would be observed in the translation above. The third person present indicative, *λέγει* from *λέγω* meaning, he is saying, is used as an instantaneous (aoristic or punctiliar) present. This implies that the action of the verb is instantly completed at the same moment of speaking. In this sense, since time is of the essence, the progressive or continuous aspect of the present as a linear tense is actually suppressed so that the saying action ends with the saying itself.¹⁰ The dative masculine plural of the personal pronoun, *αὐτοῖς* functions not necessarily as an indirect object but as a dative of interest.¹¹ Jesus' statement that follows is for the benefit or advantage of the disciples, hence, the use of the dative *αὐτοῖς*.

διὰ τὴν ὀλιγοπιστίαν ὑμῶν·

When *διὰ* precedes a case in Greek, it is the case that it precedes that determines how it should be translated. In this particular instance, as it precedes an accusative, *τὴν ὀλιγοπιστίαν*, it is appropriate to translate it as on account of *διὰ*, which like other prepositions, is seen as somehow governing the various cases and the meaning is affected by the said case. *τὴν ὀλιγοπιστίαν* meaning, the littleness, poverty, inadequacy or imperfection of faith is a feminine noun in the accusative. It will be observed that *ὀλιγοπιστίας* is a combination of the adjective *ὀλιγος* and the noun, *πίστις*.¹² Therefore, it is clear here that the disciples were unable to heal the epileptic because of the littleness of their faith. The use of *ὑμῶν*, plural of the second person personal pronoun shows that they possess little faith rather than being possessed by it. It, therefore, implies that the level of their faith is by choice rather than an endowment from an external source. It, therefore, behooves them to possess more or great faith by choice rather than endowment.

ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν

ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν meaning, 'for truly I say to you' also has the same instantaneous function (see the discussion on *ὁ δὲ λέγει αὐτοῖς* above). In this instance also, *γὰρ* which does not begin a sentence is also preceded by *ἀμὴν*.

⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 15.

¹⁰ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 221.

¹¹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, 68.

¹² Joseph Henry, Thayer, Barbara Friberg, and Frederick W. Gingrich, *The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως

This ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως is a conditional clause meaning ‘if you have faith as a mustard seed.’ As a conditional clause, it makes use of the verb, ἔχητε which is in the present subjunctive. According to Fanning, the present tense depicts an action by focusing on its development or progress as a continuous action. Thus, it sees the occurrence of the action with regard to its internal make-up without its beginning or end in view.¹³ The aspect of the present tense actually represents the action or event as a process or in progress. The instantaneous or aoristic use of the present suggests otherwise. However, it still depicts progress just that since this usage usually works with thinking or speaking verbs, the progress of the action ends with the thinking or speaking itself.

The subjunctive mood suggests events whose reality is quite uncertain. The uncertainty of this mood makes the eventuality of the action of the verb quite improbable.¹⁴ This view implies that the subjunctive mood somehow advances the idea of speaking hypothetically. According to Mounce, “the subjunctive mood is used when a verb expresses a possibility, a probability, exhortation, or axiomatic concept.”¹⁵ So, ἐὰν ἔχητε, if you have, expresses the possibility or probability of having and as well expresses an exhortation by the Lord to His disciples to have because it is possible to have. Although the action of the subjunctive is uncertain, it is probable; hence, it may become a reality. According to Wallace, it cannot be accurate to refer to the subjunctive as a mood of uncertainty since the optative mood also represents the action of the verb as uncertain. He rather argues that the subjunctive may better be represented as the mood of probability.¹⁶ However, this argument does not negate the uncertainty in the use of the subjunctive; only the optative mood can be said that its representation of the action of the verb is more uncertain. The uncertainty, even of the subjunctive is tenable since the action pertains to the future.

Now, what the Lord desires the disciples to have is πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως, which is faith as that of the mustard seed. In this text, faith is only likened to a mustard seed without anything in particular about the seed mentioned. According to Thayer, the word, πίστις can be used in two distinct ways being i) conviction of the truth of anything and that is belief. In the New Testament, faith is a conviction or belief with respect to man’s relationship or connection with God and divine things. This generally includes the idea of trust and holy fervor. And ii) it is fidelity or faithfulness. This is the attribute or character of one who can be relied on. In Matthew 17:20, faith as belief or conviction of trust applies. ὡς functions here as an adverb of comparison although it has several other functions. κόκκον which appears in the accusative means grain or plant’s seed. σινάπεως is in the genitive case showing the genus of κόκκον. There is no lexical or syntactical difficulty except to further look at the literary device applied in this case (see below) which has created difficulty for translators and interpreters of the text alike.

ἐρεῖτε τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ· μετάβα ἔνθεν ἐκεῖ, καὶ μεταβήσεται·

This is the resultant effect of possessing such faith as a mustard seed. It appears hyperbolic but it is the symbolization of the potency or the potentiality of having much or adequate faith unlike ὀλιγοπιστία, that is littleness or poverty of faith. ἐρεῖτε meaning, ‘you shall say’ is in the 2nd person plural of future indicative active. This is the imperatival future, which indicates a sure possibility in the future.¹⁷ Whereas the present state of the disciples was inability due to their ὀλιγοπιστίαν, if they possess faith as that of a mustard seed, it then becomes possible to speak and what they say becomes a command that could cause the needed changes. The use of the demonstrative τούτῳ with the article, τῷ show that the Lord pointed to a particular mountain. If they were with the multitude, one would have adduced that the condition of the boy who was healed as the mountain Jesus was referring to. However, at this point, the disciples approached their Lord privately. Therefore, one is not sure whether Jesus, indeed, was referring to a literal mountain or to the situation at hand. μετάβα is the 2nd person singular aorist imperative of the verb, μεταβαίνω. In concord with the aspect of the aorist, the command of the imperative mood depicts punctiliar action and that is an action to be done once without reference to continuance or frequency.¹⁸ In this particular instance, the

¹³ Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 103.

¹⁴ “The Subjunctive Mood: Hypothetically Speaking,” 2019, <https://www.learnGreek.ca/paideia>.

¹⁵ William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 287.

¹⁶ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*.

¹⁷ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, 201.

¹⁸ C. R. Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspects in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 86.

disciples are to speak to the perceived mountain once *καὶ μεταβήσεται* ‘it shall depart’ *ἐνθεν ἐκεῖ*, ‘from here to there’. The author used the future middle indicative *μεταβήσεται* to show the result of their command. The use of the middle voice here is also very important to the discourse. This use advances that it is the mountain itself and by itself that departs from here to there in direct response to the command, *μετάβα*.

καὶ οὐδὲν ἀδυνατήσει ὑμῖν.

οὐδὲν meaning ‘nothing’ is the indefinite neuter pronoun in the nominative case. Here, it is used to negate the referent, *ἀδυνατήσει*, ‘shall be impossible.’ This transition from the inability to indefinite ability is significant. Formerly, it was impossible to cast out the demon or heal the epileptic because of inability, now with the faith as a mustard seed, nothing would be impossible for them.

Literary analysis of *πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως*

The biblical text like other literary works is chockfull with literary devices relevant for its audience and readers. In this particular instance, considering *πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως*, the literary device used is simile although analogy and comparison can also be inferred. Simile just like metaphor is an implied analogy that imaginatively identifies one thing with another, and so, similes are a subset of constructions that share the same basic syntactic form of comparisons.¹⁹ Hussain observes that one of the main objectives of literary texts is to say so much as briefly as possible. This way, few words are used to say more in order to achieve maximum efficiency and effectiveness,²⁰ hence, the use of literary devices or figures of speech. The biblical text without a doubt in all forms significantly provides a great heritage of ancient writings for literary explorations.

πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως, meaning, faith as a mustard seed, with all its ambiguities as a simile provides a unique opportunity to explore its nuanced meanings to reach a reasonable conclusion. The word simile is actually a derivative from the Latin simile which means resemblance and likenesses. It technically means the comparison of two objects with some similarities. Therefore, faith is likened to a mustard seed, meaning that the author is assuming a similarity or some similarities in comparison. Further, a simile is seen as two or more objects or entities, or processes belonging to very distinct semantic fields which are explicitly compared to one another on the basis of stated or implied similarities or dissimilarities to produce a particular picturesque effect in a person’s mind.²¹ Now, faith as a religious virtue or element is placed with a mustard seed which belongs to the flora category. They, therefore, seem not to belong to the same category. To this end, both analogy and comparison may also be adduced since the physical is compared to the spiritual and an abstract concept is compared to a concrete reality. However, since faith is likened to a mustard seed, it means there is something or some characteristic(s) of the mustard seed that faith bears a resemblance to although they are of two different and somehow distinct categories.

It is observed that a simile has mainly three elements, namely: i) the tenor, which is the entity or process that is compared; ii) the ground or the basis on which the comparison is made”; and iii) the vehicle or standard that is used to establish the comparison.²² For the comparison especially, some similarity markers such as, “like”, “as” are used.²³ In such comparison, “the words do not have their literal meaning, but are categorized as multi-word expressions that act in the text as units.”²⁴ So in practice, the verse, “if you have faith as a mustard seed” can be illustrated as:

you (tenor or topic) have faith (ground) as (marker) a mustard seed (vehicle).

The figurativeness of this type of simile is higher than when the vehicle has at least a trait for the comparison. For instance, a mustard seed is first, known for its size, as one of the smallest seeds; secondly, it is known for its potential of growing to become a huge tree although a small seed; and thirdly but not

¹⁹ Robyn Carston and Catherine Wearing, “Metaphor, Hyperbole and Simile: A Pragmatic Approach,” *Language and Cognition* 3, no. 2 (2011), 281-312.

²⁰ Rashid Hussain, “Metaphors and Similes in Literature,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 3, no. 9 (2014): 1-2.

²¹ Richard M Roberts and Roger J Kreuz, “Why Do People Use Figurative Language?,” *Psychological Science* 5, no. 3 (1994): 159-63.

²² Ivor A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 1936).

²³ Elaheh Fadaee, “Symbols, Metaphors and Similes in Literature: A Case Study of ‘Animal Farm,’” *Journal of English and Literature* 2, no. 2 (2011): 19-27.

²⁴ Ali Alhasnawi, “A Cognitive Approach to Translating Metaphors,” *Translation Journal*, 2007, 3.

exhaustively, it is known for its healing potency. Consequently, the comparison as a simile would be easier should the vehicle be qualified or characterized by any of the above-mentioned salient traits. Without such qualification, some translations and Bible versions (as would be demonstrated later), have introduced such traits assuming the Lord was referring to the size of the mustard seed when He compared it to the disciples' faith.

The conundrum in both translation and interpretation of *ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως*, 'if you have faith as small as a mustard seed' is appreciated because of the lack of any salient trait to the vehicle, however, it is all together possibly avoidable. This is because the Lord already rebuked the disciples about their *ὀλιγοπιστίαν* meaning, littleness, smallness, inadequacy or poverty of faith.²⁵ If this is the case, then why would the Lord expect little faith from His disciples as small as the size of the mustard seed?

Bruner opines that the keywords in the entire pericope are very well related to inability.²⁶ In verse 16, the father of the epileptic made it clear to the Lord that *οὐκ ἠδυνήθησαν*, 'they were not able to heal his son' to express the inability of the disciples he encountered. This *ἠδυνήθησαν* is the third person indicative aorist passive plural of *δυναμαι*, which is derivative of *δυναμις* meaning 'ability.'²⁷ The rendering of the word in the aorist, in the expression, *οὐκ ἠδυνήθησαν* meaning, 'they were not able' implies that the disciples were incapable and lacked the capacity or capability to heal. They gave up before Jesus and the three disciples arrived on the scene. In verse 19, the disciples, then asked the Lord, *τί ἡμεῖς οὐκ ἠδυνήθημεν ἐκβαλεῖν αὐτό;* meaning, "Why were we not able to cast it out?" Again, *ἠδυνήθημεν* is in the first-person indicative aorist passive implying their due acceptance of their inability. They knew they could not because they could not do so. Hence, Jesus' response to them in verse 20 that their inability is on account of their *ὀλιγοπιστίαν* further affirmed this inability of the disciples as a result of their lack or littleness of faith. Reasoning from the above, the Lord's comparison of faith to a mustard seed is definitely not based on the trait or characteristic of the size of the seed but its power, to potentially achieve great results. In essence, the Lord does not expect His disciples to have faith as small as the mustard seed but rather, a faith potent and powerful as the potential of the mustard seed. This is clear since Jesus' response to them was that they could not heal the epileptic as a result of their little faith.

Some English and Ghanaian Vernacular Translations and Analysis of the Text

Language/Version	Biblical Text
Dangme Somi He ɔ	Se Yesu de me ke: "Nye hemi ke yemi ne pi o he je. Ejakaa niine, i nge nye dee ke: Ke nye nge hemi ke yemi ne nge kaa sinapi wu ɔ , nye ma de yoku ne o ke: 'Hia nge hie o ke ya leje o.' Ne e maa hia; ne no ko be ne nye be nyee maa pee.
Baiblo Aloo Ngmami Klouklou ɔ	Yesu he no ke, "Ejakaa nye hemi ke yemi pi. Niine, i nge nye dee ke, ke nye nge hemi ke yemi ne kle kaa sinapi wu ɔ , nye ma de yo ne o ke, 'Hiaa ke je hie o ke ya leje o,' ne e maa hia. No ko no ko peemi be wae ha nye!"
New Revised Asante Twi Bible	Na osee won se: Efiri se mo gyidie sua; na nokore mese mo se, mowo gyidie se sinapi fua a , anka mobeka akyere bepɔ yi se: Tu firi ha ko nohoa, na ebetu, na anka biribiara nni ho a morentumi nye.
English: New International Version	He replied, "Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed , you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

²⁵ Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 30.

²⁶ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: Volume 2: The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28, Revised and Expanded Edition* (Waco: World Books, 2004), 184.

²⁷ Johannes, P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 10.

Amplified Bible	He answered, "Because of your little faith [your lack of trust and confidence in the power of God]; for I assure you and most solemnly say to you, if you have [living] faith the size of a mustard seed , you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and [if it is God's will] it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.
King James Version	And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed , ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.
New King James Version	Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed , you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.
Revised Standard Version	He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed , you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.
Good News Bible	"It was because you haven't enough faith," answered Jesus. "I assure you that if you have faith as big as a mustard seed , you can say to this hill, 'Go from here to there!' and it will go. You could do anything!"
New Century Version	Jesus answered, "Because your faith is too small. I tell you the truth, if your faith is as big as a mustard seed , you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. All things will be possible for you.
New Living Translation	You don't have enough faith," Jesus told them. "I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed , you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible. (Mat 17:20 NLT)
World English Bible	He said to them, "Because of your unbelief. For most assuredly I tell you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed , you will tell this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.
New American Standard	And He said to them, "Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed , you shall say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you.

In the data presented above, although not exhaustive, it is clear that whereas some of the translations, both in the English and the vernacular, have stuck close to the Greek text in terms of translation. Others have introduced traits or characteristics to define the comparison. The vernacular versions of Dangme, *Dangme Somi He ɔ* and *Baiblo Aloo Ngmami Klɔuklɔu ɔ* show this significant difference in translation. Whereas the *Dangme Somi He ɔ* versions did not introduce any characteristic or

trait to qualify the seed, the *Baiblo Aloo Ngmami Klɔuklɔu* version did. It introduced the size trait showing that you have faith as big as a mustard seed.

The English versions, the New International Version, Amplified Bible, Good News Bible, New Century Version, and New Living Translation have all introduced characteristics or traits to describe the faith as compared to a mustard seed. Whereas the New International Version and New Living Translation referred to and qualified the smallness of the faith as small as a mustard seed, the Good News Bible and the New Century Version have emphasized still the smallness but using the expression “as big as a mustard seed”. Of course, the ‘bigness’ of the mustard seed is obviously still small. The Amplified Bible on the other hand only mentioned and compared the faith to the size of a mustard seed which is still small. Whereas the above analyzed English versions are quite explicit referring to the smallness or bigness of the faith of the disciples in context to the size of a mustard seed, the King James Version, Revised Standard Version and World English Bible are quite implicit. They have introduced the term, grain which implicitly somehow infers to the size of the mustard seed as well. In the data presented, the New King James Version and the New American Standard have closely translated the text without introducing a characteristic or trait to define faith in context – “faith as a mustard seed”.

Observingly, it is quite clear that the translations followed established Bible Translation Approaches to arrive at the translations as shown above. These are the Formal Equivalence, being the word-for-word translation; Dynamic equivalence being the thought-for-thought or meaning-for-meaning translation; and the Paraphrased approaches. These approaches have their merits and demerits. For instance, the formal equivalence approach tries to reproduce the Greek and Hebrew as source languages into the receptor languages with possible exactitude, hence a word-for-word approach. In this attempt, words, figures of speech as well as, sometimes, even the structure of the sentence of the original or source languages are reproduced.²⁸ This kind of attempt of translation from a source language to a receptor language is quite a challenge. The King James Version translation, for instance, typically follows after the formal equivalence introduced “grain” which is not found in the Greek text. The dynamic equivalence approach on the other hand approaches the work of translation with the view that a message can be communicated effectively and efficiently to any receptor group from one language to another if the most effective form of expression, having the necessary meaning or thought expression is found.²⁹ Therefore, this approach extends the meaning of the text from a source language to a receptor language with a focus on thought or making meaning rather than a focus on the original words. In this way, such translations have effects on interpreting the text. No doubt the New International Version which is a typical example introduced a trait or characteristic of the mustard seed describing the “faith as small as a mustard seed”. The paraphrase approach may not necessarily be considered as translation since its perspective on the text is more of rewording, interpretation or rephrasing of the biblical text. The proponents of the paraphrase approach had the assumption that the New Testament, for instance, was written in *Koine* or Common Greek and that it was a common language of the people and not that of playwrights or philosophers. Their goal, therefore, is to have the Bible translated into everyday language. They believe that this would enable many people to read and understand the messages of the biblical text. The aim is to express Scripture in everyday language and not to give the most exact translation of Scripture.³⁰ Good News Bible, New Century Version and the New Living Translation are typical examples of the paraphrase approach, hence, their introduction of the ‘smallness or bigness’ of the mustard seed in comparison with the faith of the disciples is not surprising. This is more of an interpretation rather than a translation.

CONCLUSION

In the discussion thus far, an attempt has been made to resolve the conundrum of the salient traits or characteristics of faith being compared to the mustard seed in Matthew 17:20. The ambiguity of the text, especially *ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως*, as a simile is due to the lack of a salient trait or

²⁸ J G Van der Watt, “What Happens When One Picks up the Greek Text?,” *Acta Theologica* 22, no. 1 (2002): 246–65.

²⁹ E. A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating* (Netherlands: E. J. Brill: Leiden, 1964); Eugene A Nida, “The Paradoxes of Translation,” *The Bible Translator* 42, no. 2A (1991): 5–27; Eugene. A. Nida and C.R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1969).

³⁰ Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, “A Critical Study of the Translations of Logos in John 1:1 and 14,” *Journal of Biblical Studies* 15, no. 5 (2020): 5.

characteristic in the comparison. All translations looked at in this paper that attempted to supply a salient trait have focused on the size of faith, such as that of mustard seed in reference to its ‘smallness or bigness.’ However, the reading of the text proves otherwise. Although there is no salient trait that qualifies the mustard seed in the text, the study shows that the reference is rather the potency or the potential of the seed that grows into a huge tree rather than referring to the size of it.

The view above is substantiated by looking at the pericope of the text in its entirety. The pericope somehow focuses on the inability of the disciples to heal the epileptic which the Lord diagnosed as a result of the littleness, smallness or poverty of their faith expressed as *διὰ τὴν ὀλιγοπιστίαν ὑμῶν*. If the Lord already rebuked the disciples for their littleness of faith, why would He again commend faith as a small as mustard seed as something worthwhile? Therefore, from the discussion, this paper concludes that by the Lord’s reference to the mustard seed as an analogy of faith using the literary device of simile, He was referring to the power or potential of the seed, despite its small size, rather than focusing on the seed’s smallness or size itself. Whilst the introduction of trait or characteristic of the mustard seed as small in some of the translations stated above is misleading, it should be observed that such translations focus on making meaning in the receptor language rather than focusing on the equivalence of the word or expression in the source language.

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