

an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

In this fourth part in the series Elaine Wainwright uncovers the subversive message in the parable of the sower in Mark 4:1-9

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Lake and shore of Galilee

It could be easy to think that the familiar “parable of the sower” is simple to read ecologically. Certainly it is rich in materiality with seeds, birds, soil, a sower and many other aspects. As readers we will find that the finely woven interconnections of habitat, human, and holy give depth to this parable.

place – sea and land

Two opening verses before the parable begins can easily be overlooked but they weave together the materiality and the sociality of the human/other-than-human. Mark 4 begins “in place” — Jesus began to teach “beside the sea”. However the social nature of “large crowds” gathered around him is firmly linked to this place. The relationship between text and context is highlighted further when Jesus gets into “a boat on the sea”, sitting there to teach while the crowds are “beside the sea on the land”. The boat, the sea and the land function to create meaning. They give relational authority and power to Jesus. They both separate him from and yet relate him to the crowd on the land. As readers we are drawn into the interconnections in this habitat and we need to attend with all our senses to the narrative that will unfold.

listen

Jesus’ opening word: “Listen!” — alerts our sense of hearing. The disciples in the text and we, the listeners to the text, are invited to listen/to hear and so engage our bodies in the act and art of listening. To ensure that the listeners are responding by bringing their bodies to the hearing of Jesus’ parable, the narrator follows the imperative, “Listen!” with the word *idou* (often translated “behold”) which is the marker of something of importance. Listeners are now doubly attentive and the parable begins: “A sower went out to sow”.

sower and sowing

“The sower” in the Markan text may be imagined in a number of ways. He or she may be a slave or tenant farmer on one of the large Herodian or Roman estates that were becoming more numerous in first century Galilee. She or he might also be imagined as a self-sufficient small farmer, a member of a farming family. Each would have been intertwined in their social fabric in different ways but would have shared the understanding of the seasons with their rhythms of time for planting and for harvesting. The sower is engaged in the work of sowing. The type of seed is not specified. It is likely to be wheat

or barley, the two most common agricultural products of Galilee in the first century. An attentive reader will notice how the material and social embedded in the story reveal the ecological texture of Mark’s gospel.

The seed seems to have been thrown by hand rather than carefully planted in rows. This links the sower to the process of planting in order to grow grain to feed the family, the animals and also to have seed for the following year’s planting. However the pressure on farmers or tenants to produce abundant harvests for exports for the Empire also lurks within this world that the parable creates.

The parable draws the reader into the ecosystem, or ecocycle, of sower and seed. Birds take up the seeds on the pathway and are fed. Weeds take up their ground-space so there is insufficient room for the sower’s seed in some places. The sun with the wind and the rain, elements not explicitly named in the text, enable the seed to grow but if the root is not deep enough, some plants will wither under the sun. Others will be choked out by plants which are not useful in the agricultural cycle. The seed that falls on the prepared soil produces richly. An ecological reader will pick up on the network of living

and non-living materials in the hybrid habitat — from sower, to seed, to bird, sun, earth/soil, weeds and thorns.

first century grain farming

Stephanie Nelson, a classical scholar, says that “because farming is inescapably a part of human life it may provide a clue to what is most basically human, and so a clue to our place within the cosmos.” Jesus, the parable teller, and his audience would have been thoroughly familiar with the agricultural system of first century Galilee. In this teaching by the sea Jesus invites listeners/readers to attend to the processes all around them. They would have known the prolific nature of grain given the right conditions. As well they would realise their need for such abundance in the face of the Roman taxation on a small farmer’s grain or soil.

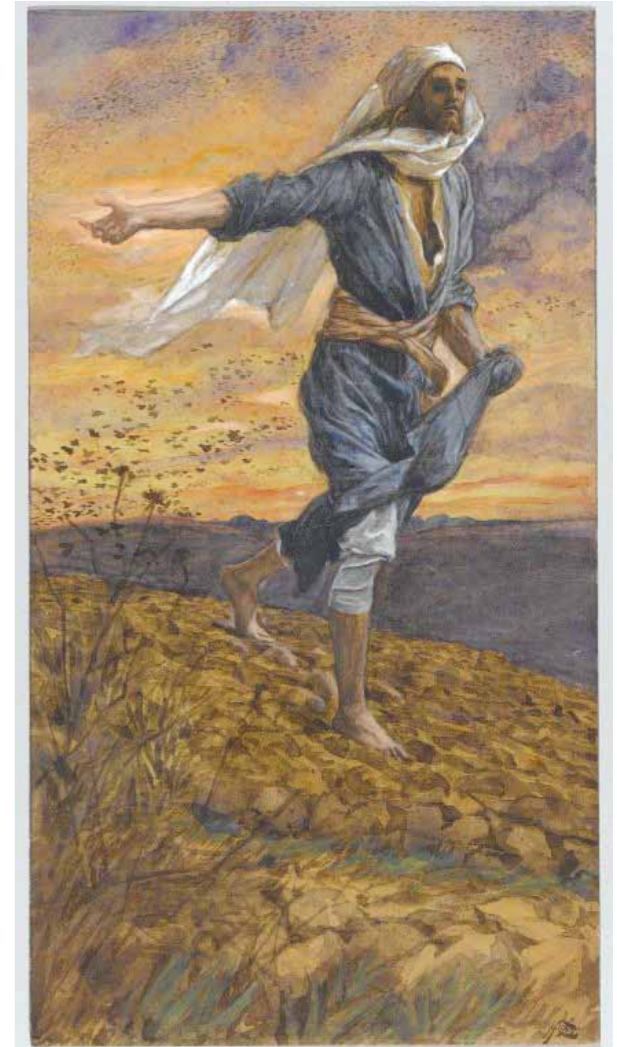
Varro, a first century BCE scholar and agriculturalist, notes the variety in yields: tenfold in one district, fifteen in another, even a hundred to one near Gadara in Syria (Varro, *On Agriculture* 1.44.2). Pliny, the Roman naturalist, proclaims that nothing is more prolific than wheat giving yields of 150, 360 and 400 (*Natural History*, 18.21.94-95). However, as Pliny’s figures in particular are in the context of impressing the emperor, such figures may be exaggerated. Moldenke and Moldenke, who have studied plants of the Bible, suggest that a yield of about 20-fold can be expected of a crop of wheat in the Levant but that good soil and certain strains might produce 60 or even 100 grains each.

Many interpreters of this parable view the yields to be extraordinary — especially at 60 or 100. However it seems that these extraordinary yields are more descriptive when we consider the first century agriculture encoded in the text.

God’s abundance

The subversive aspect of the parable lies elsewhere. Again materiality and its symbolism can assist us to discover it. On the two-sided coin minted by Agrippa I, the Roman-appointed ruler in Galilee 37–44 CE, are three ears of grain containing multiple seeds springing from one stalk. Like the seeds of the parable, they symbolise the fertility of the land.

However on the coin their abundance is attributed to Agrippa’s reign indicated by the royal umbrella-style canopy and the inscription on the obverse of the coin, “king/*basileus* Agrippa”. But the material context of Jesus and a



The Sower by James Tissot [Brooklyn Museum]

first century audience is embedded in the parable and proclaims not the *basileia*/empire of Rome — but the *basileia* of God/the holy (Mark 1:15).

Jesus’ parable draws listeners/readers into the complex world of the more-than-human in which multiple participants, including the human, are interwoven. Two different cosmologies are implicitly in tension within the parable and the network of associations it evokes. First there is that of the emperor and his representatives, whether a Herodian king in Galilee or landowners supporting the imperial system, who are claimed to be the source of abundance. On the other hand, the parable offers a more complex system of intertangled elements that intersect in the process of sowing seed. The surprise is that there is an ecology that can produce abundance. It is, however, hybrid, consisting of multiple participants. Jesus simply invites reflection on, or attentiveness to, the richness of habitat/human/holy and what such attentiveness will allow us to hear: “Let those who have ears, let them hear.” ■

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