The Bible and Bread

Context, Themes, and Word Study

Ecological Reading

2026 Week 7

Mark 4:3-8

Mark 4:3-8 NRSVUE

3 “Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed
fell on a path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Other seed fell on
rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up
quickly, since it had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose, it
was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away. 7 Other
seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and
it yielded no grain. 8 Other seed fell into good soil and brought
forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and
sixty and a hundredfold.”

Mark 4:13-20 NRSVUE

13 And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? Then how
will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 These
are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan
immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. 16 And
these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they
immediately receive it with joy. 17 But they have no root and endure only for
a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word,
immediately they fall away. 18 And others are those sown among the thorns:
these are the ones who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the age and the
lure of wealth and the desire for other things come in and choke the word,
and it yields nothing. 20 And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they
hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a
hundredfold.”

In the parable of the sower, a farmer is interacting with their environment by sowing seed…types of soil and ground conditions – some have been compacted as a path by human activity; some are naturally rocky with only a thin covering of soil; and there are also fertile and productive areas. There are weather and climate considerations, most notably, the hot sun. Then there are other living organisms besides the human farmer that interact with the seed – birds that eat it and brambles that out-compete it for nutrients in some places.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (pp. 144-145). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

- **Mark 4:13-20** “anthropocentric reading” focuses on the human subject and utility: Greek “anthropos” ~ humans at the center

- **sower** ~ evangelist
  - ~ sows
    - ~ **seed** ~ word ~ good news of Jesus
- **birds** ~ satan
- **sun**
- **soil** ~ humanity
  - path ~ word~ hear ~ no root ~ *immediately* taken by satan
  - rocky ground ~ word~ hear ~ *immediate* joy ~ no root ~ trouble b/c of word *immediately* fall away ~ sun whithers
  - thorns ~ word ~ hear ~ root ~ cares ~ greed ~ desire ~ choke ~ no yield
  - good soil ~ word ~ hear ~ root ~ accept ~ bear fruit (grain) ~ multiply

Ecological Reading: using our new scientific and old lived understandings of ecosystems and their interactions to look afresh at the biblical narrative.

Ecology: not just looking at individual plants and animals but paying attention to their interactions with other organisms and with their wider environment.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 143). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

The Bible uses a lot of organic imagery:
Vines and vineyards are recurrent images for Israel and for God's work on earth, while trees are often images for the growth of kingdoms, dynasties or nations. Perhaps one of the most instantly recognisable biblical images is of the garden of Eden, with Eve picking and eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Throughout the Bible, humans interact with their environment. They struggle to grow food and worry about the provision of water; they battle wild animals and tend domesticated ones; they use natural resources to build structures and cities, and cope – with varying degrees of success – with natural disasters, weather and climate phenomena.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 144). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

Ecologists think in terms of five layers or levels of increasing complexity.

- individual organisms;
- populations;
- communities;
- ecosystems;
- biosphere.

At each of these levels there might be both biological and non-biological factors (such as the sun and the rocks in the parable) that come into play.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (pp. 145-146). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

1. Organisms are individual living things (a bird, a seed, a bramble plant, etc.). Ecological studies of individual organisms consider behaviours and adaptations as the organism interacts with and adapts to its environment.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (pp. 145-146). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

2. Several of a single organism become a population, so we might talk about the population of birds in a particular area or the population of brambles. Ecological questions to ask about populations include their size, density, structure and how they change over time.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (pp. 145-146). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

3. The combination of all the populations in a particular area is a community, in which different populations interact with one another – birds eating seeds and berries or humans planting seeds, for example. At this level, the focus is on the interactions between different populations, and how those interactions shape and are shaped by the community and the physical environment.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 146). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

4. An ecosystem is made up of the community in an area along with the non-biological factors (sun, rocks, soil type, availability of water) that affect and influence that community. Ecological studies of ecosystems often focus on the recycling and circulation of nutrients.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 146). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

5. Finally, the biosphere is the globe, the planet Earth, and ecologists working at this level look at the interactions between different ecosystems and global patterns, such as climate and the movement and distribution of species.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 146). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

At each level ecology looks for emergent properties, things that are greater than the sum of their parts because they arise (emerge) not from the individual components themselves but from their interactions.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (pp. 146-147). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

We can use this structure as a guide to noticing and considering the organic imagery in the story holistically. First, what are the individual organisms involved? Notice each one – in our case, human, seed, birds, brambles. It sounds obvious, but we are conditioned to focus on the human subject and the objects they particularly interact with. The first step in an ecological reading is not to give greater weight to the human subject and what is useful to them in the story. Rather, notice and name each individual organism as of equal value.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 147). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

Second, look for populations. In this story, there are two: 'the birds' and 'the thorns'. We don't know the size of these populations, but we do hear something about the density and development of the population of thorns – they grow up, thickly enough to out-compete for nutrients those seeds that have taken root in the bramble patch.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 147). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

Third, consider the community that is described here: how do the various populations interact with one another? For example, in this story notice that those seeds that take root in the bramble patch do grow (they're not entirely killed by the brambles) but they don't receive sufficient nourishment to set seed. The brambles are better at taking up the available nutrients, perhaps, or maybe just limit the seeds' access to sunlight. The birds have at least two potential sources of food: the seeds that the farmer sows and no doubt berries from the brambles later in the season. The brambles in the story are in their spring growth phase, though, so the farmer's seed is currently the only other source of food mentioned for the birds, unless there are other plants growing in the area. We don't know if there are, but a farmer may well have cleared and weeded the field in order to sow the seed, quite probably in the process removing plants that otherwise would have fed the birds at this time of year.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 147). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

What about the whole ecosystem, with this community of birds, seed, brambles and humans interacting within a physical environment? It sounds like fairly marginal land, hard to farm, with its rocks and hot sun. concentration of rocks in certain areas has been caused by human activity over time, moving scattered rocks and stones to the margins of the field, to make the ground easier to cultivate. Human activity has also clearly made a path, where either soil has been compacted by frequent traffic or perhaps stones have been deliberately placed to form a boundary path. So human activity over time has altered the environment in which the birds and the brambles and the seed interact, creating areas where the seed will take root more easily, but also contributing to the fact that the seed can't flourish in other places.

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 148). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

Consider the story of the seeds themselves, in terms of the cycle of nutrients within an ecosystem. Some of the seeds are eaten by birds, providing them with nutrition at a time of year when it may well have been hard to find. That nutrition will in turn return to the earth eventually, in the birds' guano and later in their corpses. The seeds that grow up and wither in the shallow soil will probably remain where they lie. Over time, they will contribute to the deepening of that shallow soil layer over the rocky ground, and eventually that soil will provide a home for other plants – seeded here by the birds – which will flourish in such conditions. And next year the seeds that grow thinly among the brambles will provide a layer of compost-mulch for the bramble roots... when the brambles die back...provide more winter cover for insects and small mammals, who will add further complexity to the ecosystem.

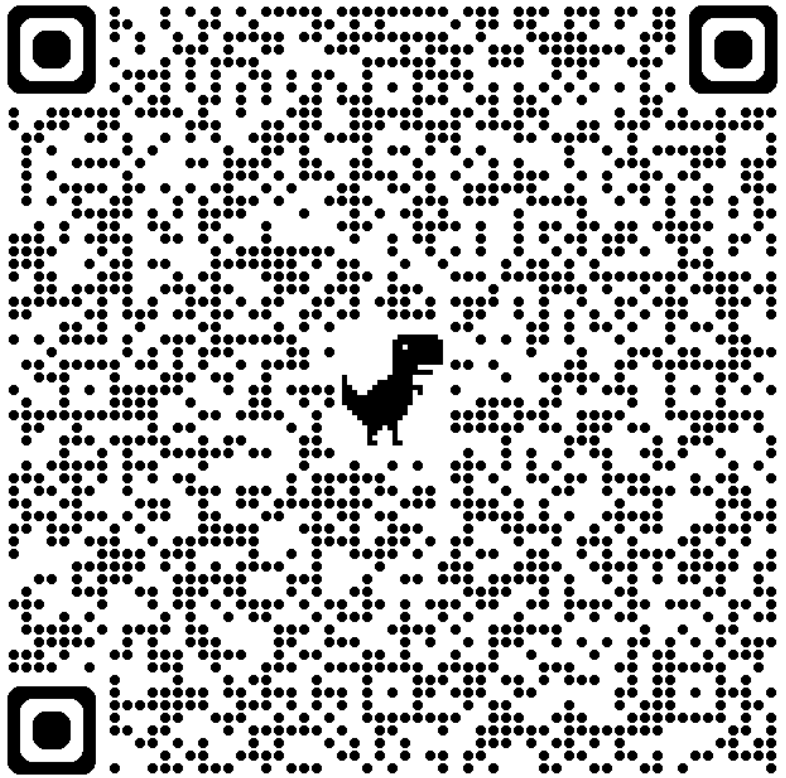
Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (pp. 148-149). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

In an anthropocentric reading, the seeds that don't grow to harvest are wasted, while those that do flourish are valued numerically according to how fruitful they are for the human agent. From an ecological perspective, though, nothing is wasted. In traditional readings of this parable, seeing it as a parable for mission and evangelism, the assumption is that the seed that doesn't fall on fertile ground, and so does not produce its harvest – thirty or sixty or a hundredfold – is wasted effort. But on an ecological reading, even the seed that doesn't produce the desired harvest has an important part to play in the ecology of the whole system. How does this perspective change the impact of this story on you?

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 149). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

How would this story go if it were being told by a bird? Or a seed? Or a bramble?

Threlfall-Holmes, Miranda. How to Read the Bible: 21 Ways to Enjoy and Understand Scripture (p. 149). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

Ecosystem Comeback

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFHmtVNu97E