



MANNA matters

Newsletter of MANNA GUM.

News from Manna Gum

The big news from us is that we have moved into our new home and new base of Manna Gum's operations. The house has been designed along passive solar principles to maximise energy efficiency, keep warm in winter and cool in summer. In the midst of Bendigo's coldest winter for 30 years I am very happy to report that it is warm! After living in rental properties for 20 years (we moved in for our 20th wedding anniversary), living in a house that has no draughts and consumes very little power is a wonderful blessing. Not to mention natural light! Now begins the big job of preparing the land to capture water and grow food. (Please note the new address and number on the back page.)

On the Manna Gum front, things have been quieter after a busy start to the year. In June, Manna Gum's Advisory Council and Management Committee spent a day together reflecting on the last seven years and trying to discern where God is leading for the next seven. Despite being a small and marginal ministry, we re-affirmed that Manna Gum's calling is in service to the Church with an emphasis on teaching, writing and practical learning experiences. We gave thanks for the partnerships that have facilitated Manna Gum's ministry - TEAR, Whitley College and the Baptist Union, Surrender, Ethos - and expressed our wonder at the generous support given by so many individuals which has made, and continues to make, Manna Gum's ministry possible.

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Manna Gum's new home. (More pics on back page.)



Money and the Misuse of Scripture

Revisiting the Stewardship Parables

by Jonathan Cornford

Finding Life in Jesus' Hard Teachings on Money (Part 2)

In 2000 Brian Houston, pastor of Hillsong Church, published a book entitled *You Need More Money*. In the introduction to his book he quotes a text from Ecclesiastes – ‘A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes merry; but money answers everything’ (10:19) – and then observes: ‘If that’s a shock to see a statement like that in the Bible—check it out for yourself. That is exactly what it says: MONEY ANSWERS EVERYTHING!’ For Houston, this obscure text from one of the more difficult Old Testament books (which also contains multiple texts in contradiction of this sentiment) somehow becomes the basis for an entire Christian theology of money. (Houston has since publicly regretted publishing this book, but not necessarily its underlying ideas.)

Brian Houston is something of an easy target for people who are outraged by misuses of the Bible, but the more uncomfortable truth is that his ability to screen out almost everything that Jesus teaches about money is fairly widespread across the Christian church. Since the time of the Protestant Reformation (but not really before) there have consistently been those who have somehow seen in Christianity a justification for the pursuit of wealth. How can this be?

In the previous issue of *Manna Matters* I began the process of exploring Jesus' controversial teachings on money. I argued that Jesus' teaching about money as *mammon* (Matt 6:24, Lk 16:13) acts as something of a key to understanding all his other teachings. At its heart is the revelation that money is in fact a *spiritual force* in human affairs – both personally and corporately – which has an immensely powerful tendency towards idolatry. That is, money is something which promises life but ultimately leads us away from life. I suggested that while many of Jesus' teachings on money may seem difficult, their deeper aim is to break the spiritual power of mammon and so lead us towards real fullness of life.

But before we can really unpack this ultimately positive message we need to deal with some of the most common mis-readings of the gospels on the matter of money, and foremost among these is the way in which we have mis-read and misused the ‘Stewardship’ Parables, by which I mean the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30) and the Parable of the Minas (or Pounds, depending on your translation) (Luke 19:11-27).

The Stewardship Parables are amongst the more well-known of Jesus' parables, and they are one of the few of Jesus' teachings on money that are likely to be regularly preached from the pulpit, especially on ‘Stewardship Sunday’. The basic story, common to both, seems simple enough: a rich nobleman goes away on a journey and entrusts a sum of money to three servants. Two of the servants gainfully invest the money, making a profit for their employer, and for this they are duly rewarded when he returns. The third does nothing with the money and cops it.

There are generally two variants of interpretation of this parable:

- (i) We should use our ‘talents’ (that is, the gifts and abilities we have been endowed with) to serve God as best we can;
- (ii) We should invest our money so that it is continually making a return. This is prudent ‘stewardship’ of the financial resources God has entrusted us with. Many have even gone so far as to argue

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that this teaching provides a Christian justification of capitalism.

Often these two interpretations come packaged together, and in both interpretations, the rich nobleman is Jesus, and we are the servants. Seems pretty straightforward doesn't it?

Most Christians implicitly accept these readings without question – the *interpretation* of the text has almost become as much an article of faith as the text itself. Nevertheless, in my experience, when paying proper attention to the text, many people are also vaguely uncomfortable about the whole thing. Something doesn't sit quite right. How is it that the Jesus who earlier denounced Mammon is now telling us to make lots of money? And if the nobleman is Jesus, how do we square his brutality with the picture of Jesus we get in the rest of the gospels? If only we paid more attention to these vaguely articulated discomforts when we read the Bible ...

Actually there is an entirely different way of reading this story that sits much more comfortably and consistently within the teachings of Jesus and the gospel narrative as a whole. But to get a clearer sense of this, we need to pay closer attention to the fact that there are indeed *two* stories, one in Matthew and one in Luke, and while they are basically the same they also hold some subtle but important differences. One of the main differences is the denominations of money entrusted to the slaves: in Matthew the first slave is given 5 *talents* (2 to the second, and one to the last), which is a ludicrously exorbitant amount of money equivalent to 75 years wages for a day labourer. In Luke's account he gives the servants 10 *minas* ('pounds' in many translations), equivalent to 2½ year's wages.

For some reason, Matthew's Parable of the Talents is by far the most well known – perhaps because it contains the word 'talents', even though it actually has nothing to do with our English word referring to gifts or abilities. A 'talent' here is merely the proper name for a coinage. However, although it is rarely acknowledged, in many ways Matthew's story is a more difficult and enigmatic story. Matthew has his story set amidst the judgements parables of chapter 25 (following the Ten Bridesmaids and preceding the Sheep and the Goats) and how these influence the reading of the Parable of the Talents is by no means a straightforward matter. Perhaps because of this difficult and enigmatic character, people have tended to suppress their questions about how it is to be interpreted.

But why haven't we noticed that none of these difficulties apply to Luke's story of the minas? Once we pay attention to it, everything about Luke's telling of the story and its placement within the overall gospel narrative makes it blindingly obvious that the dominant interpretation, so widely accepted, cannot possibly apply.

Luke's story of the minas is introduced with a very particular context which Luke wants us to keep in mind: 'he went on to tell a parable, *because he was near Jerusalem*, and *because they supposed* that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately

(19:11). They are getting close to the place where Jesus will be killed by the authorities, and Jesus is painfully aware that his disciples have completely false expectations about what is going to happen there. As Cleopas later confesses on the road to Emmaus, 'we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel' (24:21), by which he means that they thought Jesus would liberate them from the Romans and restore the Davidic kingship.

Very importantly, Luke does not begin the story with 'The kingdom of God is like ...'. This is not one Jesus' famous kingdom parables, it is a story about something else. We have become accustomed to reading all parables through one interpretive lens, when they actually are a quite diverse collection of teachings. As William Herzog has pointed out, rather than being 'earthly stories with heavenly meanings', they are often 'earthly stories with heavy meanings'.

So Jesus tells them a story about 'A nobleman [who] went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return' (19:12). He also pointedly lets us know that 'the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to rule over us.' (19:14). Here we should be alerted that this is not a heavenly story. As Jesus listeners were well aware, this was precisely how Herod the Great rose to become king of Judaea by appealing to Rome, against the opposition of his countrymen. Herod was remembered, not

just in the gospel accounts, as a notoriously brutal and unpopular king.

This unpopular nobleman appoints ten slaves (many translations have 'servants', but 'slaves' is more accurate) and divides ten minas among them, instructing them 'to do business with it' until his return. Upon his triumphal return, now

as a king, he summons the slaves back to give an account of their dealings. The first reports that his investment of the mina has earned the king another ten minas, a fantastical return on investment of 1000 per cent, while the second reports a 500 per cent rate of return! These two 'good slaves' are rewarded by being given rule over a number of cities commensurate with their financial success.

The third slave comes forward (for some reason we don't hear about the remaining seven) and returns the mina to the king, reporting that he did nothing with it but 'wrapped it up in a piece of cloth'. In the usual interpretation of this parable we are accustomed to seeing the third slave as lazy, apathetic, or unwilling to take risks. However, the reason he actually gives for his inaction is electrifying, and something that should make us sit up and take notice: 'I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow' (19:21). This slave shines light on the fact that this new king's wealth (and presumably the incredible profits of the other two slaves) has been built upon dispossessing others. Despite acknowledging his fear of the king, he has named him to his face!

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apud: phillip medhurst

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS. MATTHEW 25:14-30. JAN LUYKEN

excudit: harry kossuth

The king is outraged at this insolence, but curiously entirely accepts the third slave's description of him: 'You wicked slave! You knew, did you, that I was a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why then did you not put my money into the bank? Then when I returned, I could have collected it with interest' (19:22-23).

Bank? Which bank? There is no such thing as a bank in the ancient world, and won't be for over a thousand years. This is a trick of the translation into English. The actual word used (*trapeza*) refers to the table of the money changers. It is the same tables that Jesus will go and overturn in the Temple at the end of this very same chapter!

Collected interest? The charging of interest from a countryman is one of the most repugnant acts forbidden in the Hebrew Torah (see Exodus 22:25, Lev 25:35-37 and Deut 23:19-20). It was seen as a primary driver of dispossession, poverty and bondage, and thus understood as quintessentially oppressive and exploitative. And indeed, the time of Jesus was precisely a time of growing landlessness among the poor and huge consolidations of land by the wealthy elite, all driven by debt. Earlier in Luke, Jesus has instructed his followers to go further than loaning without interest and to lend without expecting repayment! (Lk 6:33-35)

The king then goes on to fully confirm the third slave's assessment of him: 'Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds.' (And they said to him, 'Lord, he has ten pounds!') 'I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine who did

not want me to be king over them – and bring them here and slaughter them in my presence' (19:24-27).

By this point we should be seriously wondering how it is that we have interpreted this as an allegory in which Jesus is the king. In telling this story, Jesus has piled up negative signals, each the exact opposite of the kingdom he has been proclaiming throughout the gospel. This is not a story of the kingdom of God but of the kingdoms of the world and how they really work. We have taken the verse – 'I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away' – and we have entirely spiritualised it to somehow extract a positive theological

message, without noticing that this is what has been happening in the world throughout history: the poor are disposed of what they have and the wealthy get wealthier. It was one of the major social phenomena of the time of Jesus, it is something I have witnessed time over in the

Mekong region, and it is what Thomas Piketty confirmed through his enormous assemblage of economic data in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.

When viewed from this perspective, we begin to see the third slave in a new light. He is the one who spoke truth to power and paid the price for it. Remember that this story is introduced by telling us Jesus is heading to Jerusalem, the place where he knew he would be executed by the powers. And remember that he told this story to his disciples because 'they supposed the kingdom of God was to appear immediately' when he got to Jerusalem. If Jesus is anyone in this story, he is the third slave. He has spoken the truth and he will pay the price.

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Finally, and most exasperatingly, to be able to somehow interpret this parable as a teaching in which Jesus is commending lucrative financial investments, we have to pretend that the rest of the Gospel of Luke does not exist. Of all the gospels, this is the one that most strongly and consistently sounds a strong warning against the dangers of accumulating wealth. This is such an important point it is worth a brief recap of what Jesus has already said concerning money in Luke (see table below).

As a whole, Luke's Gospel presents a consistently devastating critique of money and wealth, and especially the chapters directly preceding the Parable of the Minas. Let me stress: this is not a simple and straight forward subject. How we, the products of a vastly wealthy consumer society, practically make sense of such teachings, is an enormously difficult task that requires great intellectual and spiritual wrestling, and the slow unravelling of layers of complexity. All that is certain is that we cannot extract quick and easy answers to our questions. (At least, I know that I don't have such 'answers'.) Beginning to wrestle with this subject will be the subject for coming articles; for now, the simple point I want to make is that it is entirely inconceivable that following all of what has preceded in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus could here suddenly be advocating the accumulation of wealth as responsible discipleship, what we have often euphemistically meant by the term 'stewardship'. Jesus is categorically not saying, 'You need more money'. The fact that this parable has indeed been interpreted in this way should give us serious pause about the ways in which we have read and used the Bible.

But what about Matthew's Parable of the Talents? Although Matthew places the story quite differently in the overall gospel narrative, most of the negative signals in Luke's account also apply in Matthew's. With these more clearly noticed, the judgement parables surrounding the story (especially the sheep and the goats) tend to strengthen the reading I have advanced. Moreover, we cannot forget that Matthew's gospel contains all the same central teachings about money as Luke's, even if not presented quite so forcefully. And finally, if we believe there is an underlying unity to the New Testament (as I do), the clarity of Luke's story must have some bearing on the interpretation of Matthew's.

Where does this leave us then? What should be clear so far, I hope, is that Jesus' teaching on money and wealth was profoundly counter-cultural and found difficult by most people. The shock of the disciples is palpable when Jesus says, 'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God'. 'Who then can be saved?', they ask (Lk 18:26). What I hope will become clearer in the following articles, is that the difficulty of this teaching is not because Jesus wants us to prove our faith by heroic efforts, but because his central purpose is to save us from a powerful life-destroying force. The subject of money is but one subset of the greater subject of where true life can be found: 'For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it' (Matt 7:14).

Texts on Money & Wealth in the Gospel of Luke

6:24	'Woe to you who are rich'
8:14	In the Parable of the Sower: 'As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.'
11:3-4	The Lord's Prayer: 'Give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our sins as we forgive those indebted to us'
12:13-21	The Parable of the Rich Fool who increased the size of his storehouses: 'And God said to him "You fool!"'
12:22-31	'Do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. ... Instead strive for his kingdom and these things will be given you.'
12:33-34	'Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, and unfailing treasure in heaven where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'
14:33	'None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions'
16:9	'make friends for yourselves with mammon so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.'
16:13	'No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.'
16:14-15	'The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God."'
16:19-31	The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus: 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.'
18:18-28	The encounter with the rich ruler: "'Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'" But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."
19:1-10	[The story immediately preceding the parable of the minas] The story of Zacchaeus who repents of his unjust wealth, giving half his possessions to the poor and repaying those he defrauded fourfold.



SO SHALL WE REAP

A biblical perspective on the agricultural challenges of the coming century

by Jonathan Cornford

*'Be not deceived; God is not mocked:
for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'*
Gal 6:7 (KJV)

In 2008 I sat in a rice field in Laos and listened to a proud farmer explain how he had increased his rice production and abandoned any need of risky credit. Xienloua, then 48, was one of the first in his village to pioneer an organic, low-cost, low technology form of rice production – the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) – first developed in Madagascar. Using this method, which he had learnt through an Oxfam project, Xienloua and his family of eight had increased the yield of rice from their single hectare of land, from around two tonnes to six tonnes and no longer needed to borrow at high interest rates to buy seed and fertiliser. A fantastic result for them, and now for their village, who are starting to emulate their efforts.

A few months later I sat in a ute in the New South Wales' Riverina district, and watched as an elderly rice farmer – a distant relative of mine – radioed in a helicopter to come and spray his 900 hectares of paddy with pesticide. He had shown me his shed with four tractors bigger than I had realised existed, and his irrigation pumps, which looked to me more like a metropolitan water-supply system. When I asked him about yields he casually replied that he was getting around ten tonnes per hectare. My head spun.

A Lao family of eight achieving, by a Herculean effort, the hitherto unheard of result of six tonnes from their measly one-hectare plot, and a single Aussie octogenarian casually extracting ten tonnes per hectare from his 900 hectares of land. These are two radically different agricultural worlds; but can they both continue to exist in the future that lies before us?

That same year, while we fixated on the GFC, another global crisis was unfolding whose human impact put the financial crisis in the shade. During the 2008 Food Crisis, the price of the three grains that supplies half of the world's calories – wheat, corn and rice – spiked dramatically, even though it was little noticed here. The sudden un-attainability of food for millions around the world sparked food riots in over thirty countries across three continents. Some see it as the spark that lit the Arab Spring. It is estimated that an additional 76 million people starved that year. For those watching the deep structures of the world economy, it seemed a harbinger of things to come.

In another thirty-five years the world will need to feed at least nine billion human mouths, and for many this simple fact determines what sort of agriculture will be needed. The weight of the numbers seems to push aside all other considerations, but do the numbers in fact conceal the bigger truth?

It is an indictment of the thinness of Christianity in the modern era that many will be surprised by the contention that the Bible has something vital to say about agriculture. Yet, not only does it have something vital to say about agriculture, I believe it offers a prescient and historically accurate explanation of the crisis confronting humanity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. More than that, the Biblical vision of the interrelated subjects of human relations to the natural ecology, of

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Photo by Glenn Daniels.

agricultural production, and the form of our economic relations, offers, I believe the most realistic and most hopeful way for us to negotiate the coming crisis.

Crisis? If you look out your window you won't see people screaming in panic just yet, and indeed, if the content of our political debate is any indication, we are rather relaxed about our present position. However, many of those who by profession or interest spend time looking into the big picture of human affairs are getting decidedly anxious. Let me sketch out some of the components of the picture.

As mentioned above, by 2050, according to UN estimates, the human population will reach nine billion and plateau somewhere around that mark (some think the plateau will be at ten billion). It is expected that by this time, 70% of the world's population will live in cities (currently it is 50%), leaving perhaps 15-20% of people to raise enough food for everyone (currently it is about 30%). If current trends apply, there will also be less productive soil in which to raise food – over the last forty years perhaps as much as 30% of the world's arable soil has become unproductive, and by one reckoning, 10 million hectares of cropland is currently being lost annually to soil erosion. In many regions of the world, soil salinity and compaction are growing problems. On top of this, if climate change predictions are correct, then the timing and duration of rains upon which agriculture worldwide has been based, is likely to become seriously disrupted. Indeed, there is little doubt that this is already happening.

But not all of our food comes from the soil. Wild-capture fisheries (from both oceans and inland waterways) still supply a significant portion of humanity's protein intake – but not for long. Of the 232 ocean fisheries for which there is data, well over half have suffered a collapse at least 80% of their population, largely due to over-fishing, destructive fishing, and ocean pollution. Inland fisheries are in similar crisis; the world's most productive inland fishery – the Mekong River and its tributaries – currently supplies 70-80% of the protein consumed

in that region. However, if currently plans for hydropower development proceed (as is happening) this fishery is also set to collapse dramatically, which means that all this protein will presumably have to be raised on land somehow, land which is becoming increasingly scarce.

I could go on, but you get the picture. More food is needed from less land and less people involved in growing food. This is widely accepted as the great challenge that is confronting

More food is needed from less land and less people involved in growing food. This is widely accepted as the great challenge that is confronting us in the unfolding century, and it is undoubtedly unprecedented territory for humanity.

us in the unfolding century, and it is undoubtedly unprecedented territory for humanity. For we who have suckled on the Enlightenment myth of progress, this is a shattering prognosis of the future. If only we had paid more attention to those texts that Christians call sacred, we would not be so surprised and confused. For our current predicament is only what the

Bible always said would happen if we followed the path that collectively we have chosen.

'THUS SAYS THE LORD'

Agriculture is the imposition of human culture upon nature; it is the imposition of order upon wildness. And culture, even secular culture, is always a development of cult – that is, our deep beliefs about the order of the universe. To uncover the depth of what the Bible has to say on agriculture we need to uncover what it has to say about the natural world, about the human place within it, and the human task in the world.

The Bible opens with a stunning hymn about the nature of nature and our place within it. While the dominant imperial creation myth of the time (the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*) taught that the world was born of the murderous and gory conflict of vindictive gods, Genesis 1 proclaims that the world is created out of a good God's intent – it was born of love – and that the fullness of this natural (created) order is good; indeed, it is *very good*. Ellen Davis, in her seminal book, *Scripture, Culture & Agriculture*, describes the Hebrew of Genesis 1 as almost falling



over itself to emphasise the place of seed and fruit in creation. Where the ancient pagan fertility cults demanded that sacrifices be made to capricious Gods (and the kings who represent them) to ensure the next harvest, Genesis 1 proclaims that God has endowed creation with its own wondrous fecundity, a natural order that wills towards fertility. Where the *Enuma Elish* says that humans are created to be slaves of the Gods and their representative on earth (the Babylonian king), Genesis 1 states that every human being has an inestimable dignity – that of bearing the very likeness of God within themselves. Here, not in Ancient Greece, is the beginning of radical democracy. And, controversially, this image-bearing creature is given a special role within this wondrously fertile creation.

Contrary to the quite modern distortion that Genesis 1, in attributing ‘dominion’ to humans (vv.26, 28), has mandated the wanton exploitation of the earth, Davis demonstrates that the only possible reading that is faithful to the Hebrew text and its place within the narrative that follows, is that Genesis 1 is calling humans to the exact opposite of exploitation. She argues that for us moderns, a better translation is that humans are called to exhibit ‘mastery among’ the creatures of creation. Like a master craftsman who works with reverence and respect for both his tools and materials, God’s intention is that humans achieve a level of, reverence, respect, skill and understanding in working with creation that can be regarded as ‘mastery’. And central to the idea of mastery, both for the Bible and the craftsmen, is the necessity of understanding and observing limits.

The second, complimentary creation story of Genesis (chapter 2) further establishes humanity’s special role within creation, and thus the necessity of observing limits. In this story of human origins, *adam* (the human) is formed out of the *adamma* (the soil) – the human comes from the humus – and filled with the breath of God. This soil-creature, animated with the divine breath, is then given a foundational vocation ‘to work and to keep’ the garden in which he has been placed. The Hebrew words are stronger than our English renderings: the verb ‘to work’ (*abad*) is more fully ‘to work for’ or ‘to serve’, and is standardly used of the work of a servant for its master. The verb ‘to keep’ is the rich Hebrew word *shammar*, used to indicate careful nurture, as in the Aaronic Blessing: ‘The Lord bless you and keep you’. But it is also used in the frequent exhortation to ‘keep the commandments’ of God. Such commandments are by definition limits on human conduct, and therefore we already see that here, care and nurture are intrinsically linked to observing limits. The same word is also sometimes translated as ‘observe’ (‘Observe my Sabbath and keep it holy.’) and here the English rendering well suits the subtlety of the Hebrew: to keep within limits requires that those limits be care-fully watched and understood. Thus, we might say that from the perspective of Genesis 2, the original vocation of humanity is ‘to serve and observe’ the earth.

The call for humanity to exhibit its mastery by the observing of limits is one of the primary themes of the unfolding instruction of the Hebrew Torah. The foundations are laid in the story of the manna in the wilderness. Here, in the archetypal story of salvation in the Old Testament, the Israelites are liberated from slavery to Pharaoh’s excess, where they undertook limitless work

in his fields and building his store-cities. By contrast, in God’s graced economy they are instructed to gather only enough for each day, to not store up it up, and to cease all economic activity one day a week.

The manna story sets the tenor for the laws of the Promised Land, which in their context, represent a detailed vision of a community of *shalom* – a community where people are in right relationship to God, to one another, and to the earth itself. The laws concerning agriculture form a significant component of this vision of shalom. The laws concerning harvesting and reaping, often referred to as the gleaning laws (Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:20, 23:24-25), establish that while property rights are protected, they are not absolute; others, in this case the poor, also have a right to the fruit of the land. In effect, this means a farmer does not have the right to completely maximise productive efficiency; indeed, we might say that a level of ‘care-full’ *inefficiency* is built into the system. (Of course, I am using ‘efficiency’ in its very limited modern sense, which is completely focussed on *financial* efficiency – if we have a broader and more rational view of the proper use of people and resources, then it is not inefficient at all.)

Similarly, the Sabbath laws prohibit the maximising of labour efficiency. All people, whether slave or free, local or foreign are entitled a rest from labour; but not just the people, the

labouring animals, too, are entitled to rest. The Sabbath laws extend to the land itself, mandating a rest for the soil every seven years (Lev 25:1-7). Once again, the right to maximise production is curtailed, this time with the intention of ensuring the continuing fertility of

the soil for future generations. However, the command explicitly states that this is not just for human benefit, but also to benefit the ‘wild animals of the land’; they also have their right to the fruit of the earth, and their proper place within the community to which humans owe a duty of care. Here is a clear view, which we are only just beginning to reclaim, that human agriculture does not exist as its own quarantined natural order – it always take place within, and remains dependent upon a far broader ecology, what Wendell Berry calls ‘the Great Economy’.

In the great Jubilee vision of Leviticus 25 limits are also extended to the ownership and control of land. This remarkable set of laws, which sets out perennial re-distribution of alienated land back to its original heritors, is still much debated and argued over; however, what is clear is that it represents the pinnacle of a consistent Biblical vision of widely distributed access to land, and a horror of the consolidation of land in the hands of a few. In Micah’s wonderful vision of a world set to rights, where shalom reigns, the final requirement is that ‘each sit under their own vines and their own fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid’ (Micah 4:4).

Obviously, in an ancient agrarian society, such a strong embrace of small-holdership represents a deep concern for social justice. But might it represent more than that? Wendell Berry, the pre-eminent agrarian prophet of our own age, has argued consistently that, even with modern technology, human ‘mastery’ of land – which requires deep and intimate knowledge of particular places – can only ever happen on a certain scale.

The call for humanity to exhibit its mastery by the observing of limits is one of the primary themes of the unfolding instruction of the Hebrew Torah.



Beyond that scale, the land will always pay a price for the breadth of human ambitions.

In summary, then, what we can see in the Old Testament law, is a fleshed-out picture of what the Genesis mandate of 'dominion' and 'working and keeping the land' might look like. And the picture we are given, again and again, is the need for humans to place limits on their own activities. What we *can* do and we *should* do are two different things. What is also clear is that the purpose of these limits is not to place a bit between our teeth and make us compliant rule-followers; the purpose is to ensure social, economic, ecological and spiritual health.

Masters of the Universe?

You can see where this is going. In the age of science and modernity, humans have indeed come to consider themselves masters of the natural world. However, the modern view of mastery has been formed precisely around the conception of refusing to acknowledge limits, perhaps nowhere more so than in the field of agriculture. From the improvers and enclosures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through to the Green Revolution of the 1960s, and the current revolution in genetic modification, the increases in yields furnished by modern agricultural methods over the last two centuries have been nothing short of astounding. Beginning with the re-organisation of fields and selective breeding, moving to the adoption of mechanisation and large-scale control of water, through to the development of inorganic fertilisers and pesticides, then the application of advanced genetics to develop high-yielding varieties, and finally in the bursting of the limits of the gene itself, humanity has appeared at each step to transcend the known limits of nature.

Agriculture is no longer just agriculture, it requires new appellations: *scientific* agriculture; *intensive* agriculture; *industrial* agriculture. This last term is perhaps the most useful for describing the shift that has taken place: agriculture has undergone a wholesale shift from the craft of husbanding living things, to the commercial science of inputs, outputs, distribution, efficiency, markets and profit margins. As E.F. Schumacher notes, the ideal of industry is the elimination of living substances. The shift has, of course, been one of material organisation, but it has also been more profoundly a mental shift in how we think of food, the earth, and even of human community.

Now, a country like Australia can produce a surplus of grain, meat and dairy, with under 2% of the population involved in farming. The hubris is palpable. But at what cost?

The objection to industrial agriculture is not one of nostalgia. In a little remembered book from the 1950s, *Topsoil and Civilisation*, Tom Dale and Vernon Carter wrote:

Civilised man was nearly always able to become master of his environment *temporarily*. His chief troubles came from his delusions that his temporary mastership was permanent. He thought of himself as 'master of the world', while failing to understand fully the laws of nature. ... One man has given a brief outline of history by saying that "civilised man has marched across the face of the earth and left a desert in his footprints".

The image of 'a desert in his footprints' is perhaps the hyperbole of poetic license; nonetheless, it well describes what has perhaps been the central effect of industrial agriculture all over the world: the rendering of soil into dirt. Adam, who is soil brought to life, is himself taking the life from the *adamma*. He has engaged in un-creation. Whether it be the eradication of the micro-organisms who form the basis of soil fertility, through the application of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides; or the compaction of soils from heavy machinery; or the salinisation of soils from over-irrigation; or the destruction of soil structure through over-tilling; industrial agriculture has enabled humanity's predilection to exploit the soil to be practised on a hitherto unimaginable scale. In some regions of the world, 'desertification' in its literal sense is becoming the defining crisis.

But human agriculture is also making a desert of wild spaces. To earth-systems scientists, the current 'mass extinction event' – with species loss at perhaps 1,000 times the background level – warrants its own geological time period: the age of the anthropocene. And of all of humanity's impacts on the other creatures who need this planet, the clearing of habitat for agriculture is the single greatest.

The image of deserts can also be applied to the social landscapes being left in the footprint of industrial agriculture. While having 2% of the population producing a nation's food may seem like a triumph to technocrats, for rural communities and farming families it has been a catastrophe. Isaiah pronounces his horror against an economic system where house is joined to house, and field is added to field until 'you are left alone in the land' (Isa 5:8). However, where Isaiah was denouncing the predation of the rich, in industrial agriculture the joining of field to field has





been *a condition of survival*. How many farmers have bought out their neighbours, not in triumph, but in tears? The economic decline of rural towns, the drift of children away from the farm, the increased scale and complexity of farm economies and the suicide rates of farmers, can all be plotted on the same graph. Berry, a farmer himself, writes with angry passion on this issue:

It ought to be obvious that in order to have sustainable agriculture, you have got to make sustainable the lives and the livelihoods of the people who do the work. The land cannot thrive if the people who are its users and caretakers do not thrive.

Industrial agriculture is rendering the soil and the human soul barren through its failure to acknowledge the limits of health and the conditions of goodness. The place in which we now find ourselves, ecologically and sociologically, has borne out strange warnings made by those ancient Hebrews:

Your wrongdoing has upset nature's order and your sins have kept away her bounty. (Jer 5:26)

Again and again the biblical story draws a link between human sin and the ecological productivity of the earth. From the very outset of humanity's fall, the effect is felt in creation: Adam is told 'cursed is the ground because of you' and Cain learns that the earth soaked with his brother's blood 'will no longer yield its fruit to you'. The promised abundance of the Promised Land is always conditional - 'if you follow the way that I am showing you' – and accompanied by dire warnings: if you go your own way and go after your own gods 'there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit' (Deut 11:17). Leviticus 26 makes the chilling observation that if you do not give the land its Sabbaths, then it will indeed have them, but they will be Sabbaths of desolation (Lev 26:34).

Industrial agriculture is rendering the soil and the human soul barren through its failure to acknowledge the limits of health and the conditions of goodness.

What we so long assumed was the overly superstitious mindset of ancient peoples is now the single great fact with which we are confronted: human sin – our greed, our violence, our overestimation of our capabilities, our unwillingness to learn – has brought us to a place where we can no longer rely on the planet to yield its fruit and the rains to fall in season. We can now empirically verify that, mixing ancient and modern concepts, the curse of the earth is *anthropogenic*.

Feeding the world

To some minds, all this is evading the point. All this concern about soil, species and suicide is very nice, but the big question is: how are we going to feed 9-10 billion people? The proponents of the current system will argue that, whatever your objections to industrial agriculture (which they are wont to bracket as nostalgia, Ludditism, or hippy radicalism), there simply is no alternative for feeding the world. The numbers are wielded as a moral bludgeon: if you are against industrial agriculture, then you must be willing to let millions starve. But, of course, numbers lie.

There are a number of powerful misconceptions about the role of industrial agriculture in feeding the world. Perhaps most powerful is the argument that only industrial agriculture produces food in quantities that can keep the masses of the world's poor from starving. Norman Borlaug, the 'father' of the Green Revolution in the 1960s is credited by the proponents of industrial agriculture with saving a billion people from starvation. Yet while the Green Revolution undoubtedly dramatically increased yields, especially in Southeast Asia, it also by necessity created more thoroughly commercialised and globalised agriculture which



Photo by Glenn Daniels.



led by turns to increasing farmer indebtedness, landlessness and concentration of land in the hands of a few. Millions were transformed from producers of food to consumers of food and left no choice but to try their luck in the merciless megalopolis.

The Western caricature of poverty in the developing world has so often centred on the 'backwardness' of agriculture, where lack of modernity is almost the definition of poverty. The nature and causes of poverty is a subject too deep and complex to explore here, suffice to say that a fair case can be made to suggest that perhaps the reverse of this caricature is more true. The most grinding poverty, the most desperate suffering, the most soul-destroying powerlessness of the modern age has not been experienced by those in 'backward' agriculture, but by those who have been dispossessed of their land and heritage by the juggernaut of progress; and the vanguard of that juggernaut has been 'agricultural development'. This was the case in the English 'agrarian revolution' in the eighteenth century and it is the case in Colombia, Nigeria, Bangladesh, the Philippines and Laos today.

And where can the dispossessed go but to cities? Was it coincidence or an omen that 2008, the year of the Food Crisis, was also the year that humanity became an urban species, with over half of us now living in cities? As Berry notes, the worst social and economic consequences of industrial agriculture have not been noticed, because they are 'erroneously called "urban problems"'.¹

Industrial agriculture is not a technique, it is a food system. Controlling the system are the multinational agri-corporations – Monsanto, Cargill, Bayer, Du Pont – who have an absolute strangle-hold on seed, on patent rights and on fertilisers and pesticides. They are partnered by the global food giants who own most of the brands we eat – Nestle, Kraft, Unilever, Coca Cola – and by the supermarkets who now account for nearly all of our food purchases. It is a system that dictates to farmers how to farm, that dispossess the vulnerable and turns them into dependent food consumers of a globalised food market. Its proponents – who are amongst the wealthiest and most powerful corporations on the planet – argue that it works well to produce an abundance of food, but this is a distortion on two serious counts.

Firstly, the global food system is more than abundant – it is *glutted*. It has long been known that around one third of food produced now goes to waste. A recent study in the UK is now arguing that the true figure might be closer to 50%. Whatever the number, anyone operating at any point in the food industry – from farming, to transport, to storage, to retail, to the home consumer – can tell you that the waste is colossal. All the talk of agribusiness about the challenges of producing enough for 9 billion people has been evading the scandalous fact that we probably already produce enough for 9 billion people. But that is not the biggest scandal.

In 2008, when so many more of the world's poor went hungry, there was never actually a shortage of grain. The causes of the Food Crisis were multiple and complex – they involved such things as oil prices, diversion of grain to biofuel and livestock and financial speculation on commodity markets – but it was

fundamentally a *market-driven crisis* and not an agricultural crisis. That year the world had its largest wheat crop ever, and at the end of the buying season in the US there was a record amount wheat left-over in the silos. We live in a perverse system that simultaneously produces obscene excess and unconscionable hunger. Never before have the biblical prophets seemed so sane and reasonable.

This may all seem thoroughly depressing, but from a biblical perspective having a proper grasp on the bad news is the only way to properly comprehend the good news. And the first, most important piece of good news is that the earth, despite our depredations of her, remains yet fruitful enough to supply our needs, if only we can become gentler and fairer.

It is not within the scope of this article to properly describe the movement of hopeful agricultural alternatives, but the contours are simple. There are now in most regions of the world farming

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practices which are productive yet 'non-industrial', making good use of our best scientific knowledge and the best of traditional insight, and which can be all characterised as methods which farm the soil first, and then the crop. 'Organic farming' is the best known of these methods, however it is too simplistic a term

to properly describe the range of farming practices which now seek to be kind to the soil and surrounding ecology. Another common factor in these movements is a return to farming on a smaller scale – involving more human labour on smaller pieces of land. By extension, a good case can be made that our best hope lies in reversing the great movement that most see as a *fait accompli* – the continuing urbanisation of the human species. No social engineering can accomplish this; however, what no government can achieve may yet be forced by what is going to happen to food prices. And accompanying such movements is both the need and the possibility of achieving some measure of re-localisation of food markets. Autarchy is neither possible nor desirable – the 100 mile diet is a fun exercise but not a broadly viable option – but some measure of regional food sovereignty is required to wrest power from the global behemoths who currently control the system.

The hope for humanity remains where it has always lain:

If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land. (Lev 26:3-5)

As the Apostle Paul says, the calling of God is irrevocable. We are still people who are called to become masters, not of the natural order, but of ourselves: people who understand the limits within which we operate, most important of which is the limit of our understanding. The earth remains good, indeed very good, if only we can serve and observe her. The laws of creation are immutable: 'God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow ... So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.' (Gal 6:7-9)



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Manna Gum is an independent non-profit organisation that seeks to:

1. Help Christians reclaim and practise Biblical teaching on material life; and
2. Promote understanding of the ways our economic lives impact upon ourselves, others and the earth.

Manna Gum is motivated by a vision of renewal of the Church in Australia as an alternative community that witnesses to the Kingdom of God.

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