

Manna Matters

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Manna Matters is a publication of Manna Gum. Manna Gum is an independent non-profit organisation which seeks to help Christians reclaim and practise biblical teaching on material life, and promote understanding of the ways our economic lives impact upon ourselves, others, and the earth.



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NEWS FROM LONG GULLY

The big news from Manna Gum is that we have expanded Jacob Garrett's role, paying him an extra day a week (now two days/wk). With his extra day, Jacob will be extending Manna Gum's work in two important areas:

- Making Manna Gum's message more accessible to youth.
- Deepening Manna Gum's teaching about the role and place of technology in our lives.

Obviously, there is a strong overlap between these two. Jacob is already making significant headway in reaching out to youth networks. If you are interested in exploring how Manna Gum's message can connect with your youth, please get in touch.

We have wanted to expand into this work for a long time, but the money has not been there. However, the amazing response to our Advent Appeal last year has emboldened us to give it a go. It is risky, as we still need to grow our income by an extra \$13k per year to make it sustainable. Our longer term hope is to expand Jacob's role to three days/wk, but first things first.

If Manna Gum were a normal organisation, and Jacob and I just employees, expanding like this so soon after a mini-financial crisis would not be responsible. Ensuring predictability and sustainability for staff (to the extent that it can be ensured) is only just and fair. But that is not

the right category for what we are doing. Manna Gum is merely a vehicle for a ministry to which Jacob and I feel called. We aspire to the model laid down by the Apostle Paul: to be content 'whether in plenty or in want' (Phil 4:12).

We presume no *entitlement* to be paid for doing the things that Christ has laid on our heart, but being paid releases more of our time to put into the work that is before us. And there is no shortage to be done!

In March, Jacob was interviewed for *Soul Search* on ABC RN about giving up acquisition for Lent - make sure you check it out. Since last edition, we have recorded a couple more podcasts, and a couple more will follow shortly. Jacob has had

the opportunity to speak to a couple of youth camps, and I have had the privilege of having some ongoing conversations with a church in Brisbane that is thinking hard about the economic shape of its communal life.

But I have primarily been buried in a couple of writing projects, which I hope will bear fruit later in the year.

Continued on back page.

If you are interested in exploring how Manna Gum's message can connect with your youth, please get in touch.

All written and artistic contributions to *Manna Matters* are graciously provided for free.

Editorial team: Jacob Garrett & Jonathan Cornford
Production & layout: Jacob Garrett



HOUSEHOLD WATER RECYCLING

by Jonathan Cornford

Australia is the driest inhabited continent on the planet, and yet we use water as if it were superabundant. We flush our toilets with some of the highest quality drinking water in the world! When the rain falls and the dams are full, there doesn't seem to be a problem. But during the Millennium Drought (roughly 1999-2010) the majority of Australians were faced with critical water shortages, whether urban or rural. Melbourne households learned to reduce their water consumption by half; Brisbane households by more than that. As the climate continues to change, it is predicted that some parts of Australia will become dryer, and some wetter (predominantly in the north), but in all cases it is predicted that rain events will become more sporadic and more dramatic: more of our

It is madness that there has not been much higher development and uptake of grey water systems.

water will come in big downpours with longer gaps between. With growing urban populations and increasing laxity in water use, the water supplies of most major cities will again face critical challenges when we have our next major drought. When, not if.

Given the dryness of Australia and the almost-certainty that many of us will face Millennium Drought-style water restrictions again in the coming decades, it is madness that there has not been much higher development and uptake of grey water systems. Municipal authorities





and state health regulations have been a major barrier here: there are real issues with the use of grey water that require care; however, current regulations are based on old assumptions that we have ample water, and so they don't really incentivise responsible water re-use.

When we moved to Bendigo in 2014, we knew we were moving to a semi-arid climate (only 400-450mm of rain per year), and the experience of the Millennium Drought was still fresh in our minds.

We wanted a large food garden, and we knew water would be a problem. Even after installing 30 000 litres of water tank capacity to catch all the rain falling on our roof, we knew it would not be enough.

Our property is on town water, and we could simply pay large water bills to keep our garden going through the hot months, but that would

not be possible if and when tighter restrictions come back in. We knew we needed to get the most out of every drop, which led us to think hard about grey water.

Bendigo is blessed with a large, active, and highly regarded local sustainability group, so I started

by approaching them for advice on suburban residential grey water systems. I was shocked to discover no one in the group was using a grey water system, or knew of anyone who was, or who could even provide information on

them. I dialled around local plumbers and had the same response.

So I had to figure it out myself. With a bit of research, a few stumbles and mistakes, and some dumb luck, we now have a system that ensures the only water that leaves our property is that which gets flushed down the toilet. Everything

Roughly 75% of household water use ends up as grey water and therefore, theoretically, can be re-used.

Page 3 (top right): After parenting two children, digging the hole for this bad boy still ranks as one of my greatest life achievements.

Page 3 (bottom right): Installing the system. On the left you can see two PVC pipes coming out of the earth: the right-hand pipe is the greywater line that flows into the Greyflow Pro system. There is then an outlet/overflow coming out of the system that returns to join the second pipe, which is the black water (sewerage).

Page 4: Part of our orchard, with raspberry patch behind.

else gets a second life and ends up in the soil. What follows is a brief distillation of what I have learnt. It applies to a suburban residential block, and so I do not consider composting toilet systems, which—while theoretically possible (see the article by Clint Bergsma, *MM* Aug 2023)—are not (yet) achievable for most people.

Grey water

‘Grey water’ is the name for the water that goes down the drain from your showers, hand basins, and laundry sink. Toilet waste is ‘black water’, representing a higher level of health threat. Water from your kitchen sink is also considered black water due to the oils and food waste present in it. Grey water can be used in gardens under the right conditions, whereas black water cannot (although there is a naughty exception I will save for another article). Using grey water responsibly means:

1. It doesn't sit in a storage tank for more than 24 hours. Because grey water contains high levels of phosphorous from soaps and detergents, it very quickly goes rancid if left to sit.
2. It be kept on your property and doesn't spill onto a neighbour's land or storm water.
3. Using garden-friendly, biodegradable soaps, shampoos, and laundry detergent. These are easily available in supermarkets.
4. It doesn't contain any faecal matter (e.g. from washing nappies).
5. It isn't used to water vegetables. Fruit trees are ok. Ideally grey water irrigation pipes are subsurface or underneath mulch.

You might ask what various council regulations dictate. My approach is that it is best not to ask. Knowing the unreasonableness of council bureaucracies and their slowness to adapt to a changing situation, seeking information or approval from a council may land you in quicksand. But if you go ahead and do the work to implement grey water responsibly, you won't have an issue.

Roughly 75% of household water use ends up as grey water and therefore, theoretically, can be re-used. The trick is to get access to it and then deliver where you want it, in useful ways. One easy method is to get an extension pipe for your washing machine outlet, and pump directly out onto the garden. However, that pumps large amounts of water in a small time to a single place, which is often not that useful, and can create problems.

The best solution is to get a purpose-built grey water system that collects, filters, and pumps the grey water out to your garden automatically. The trick is to get access to your grey water plumbing. If your house is built on a slab, this may be difficult, but if your house is on stumps, it is usually quite easy.

When we built our house (on a slab) we actually got all our grey water plumbed separately from the black water so that we could tap the grey water pipes once it left the slab (it joins the sewerage plumbing further down our block). After much research, I ended up purchasing a larger grey water system from WA (a 'Greyflow

Pro' from Advanced Waste Water Systems) that can handle all our household grey water and is able to pump to various locations on our large sloping 1/3 acre block (ie. pumping uphill). There are also smaller 'plug and play' systems which are easier to install. Now a substantial part of our mini food and ecological system (our yard!) is watered entirely by our recycled household water (19 fruit trees, three shade trees, two berry patches, and two native gardens), and it is immune to water restrictions or empty rainwater tanks.

This is very satisfying, but it was not cheap. The system I purchased today costs around \$3000 to set up, plus I made a few mistakes in setup and maintenance, and not protecting the irrigation pipes adequately from our dogs (X@\$&!). These mistakes have cost me a bit more money. Things are definitely harder when there is not a large body of experience easily to hand.

Purchasing a grey water system is not easy either—you will have to do your own online research. There is no one selling or installing greywater systems locally in Bendigo. This is all because the market for grey water systems is still so small. Wider uptake of the technology is needed for systems to improve and for prices to fall.

This also means that you do have to learn how maintain and solve various problems that crop

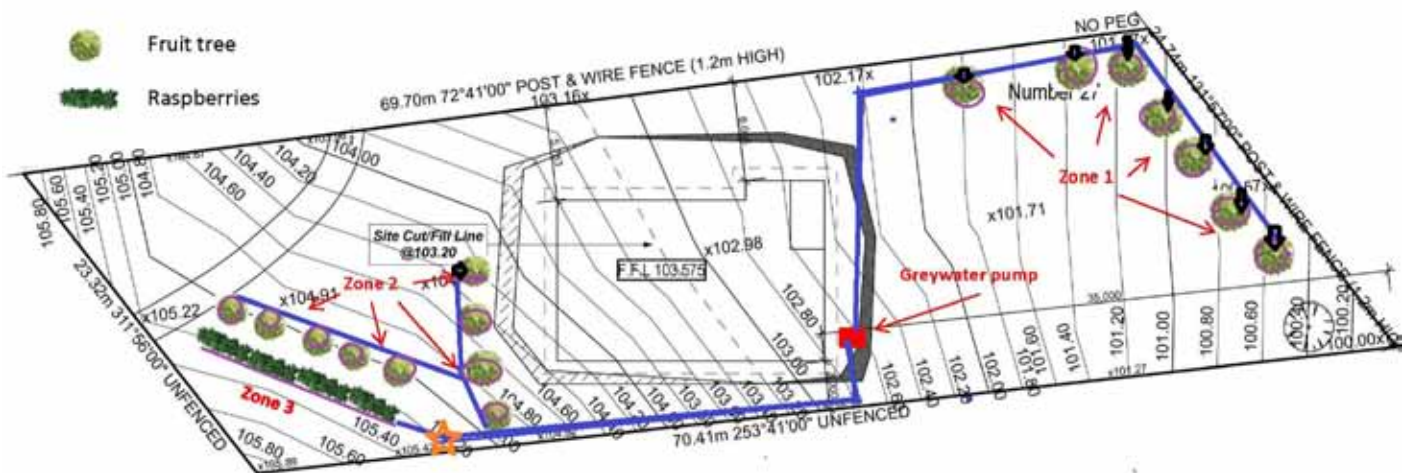
up with a grey water system. I am very happy with our system, but it has not been problem-free. Despite having 'self-cleaning' filters, I still have to manually clean them every six months and give the pipes a flush of clean water once a year. When it works well, you hardly know it is there, but that means you actively need to schedule check-up times to make sure it actually is working how you assume it is. The system we bought still had a few niggles, which have since been fixed by the developer (including a different circuit board), but which did create some headaches in the first couple of years.

I am very happy with our system, but it has not been problem-free.

Once again, this is basically a factor of a small market which is still in the very base stages of product development. Wider uptake will result in more product development and wider collective

experience in installing and using greywater. I am happy to report that we now seem to have it all bedded down, and for the last five-six years the system has hummed along perfectly, doing exactly what we want.

My experience is that if you do go down the grey water path you need to consider that you are still in the pioneering phase of the knowledge and technology, which may involve its share of headaches and swearing, but which will ultimately be very satisfying and support a lot of productive greenery.



The rough plan of the greywater distribution on our block.



Zacchaeus, Wisnu Sasongko (b. 1975).

JESUS ENCOUNTERS ZACCHAEUS

READING LUKE 19:1-10

by Deborah Storie

If you were among those who witnessed Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus, how would you have felt when Jesus, entering Jericho, approaches the ruling tribute collector? What memories and fears might their encounter have provoked? What hopes might it have inspired?

Two earlier articles published in *Manna Matters* (spring and autumn, 2025) examined how Luke 19:1–27 is often misread, and explored the world inhabited by Jesus, Zacchaeus, and all those who witnessed their encounter. In this article, I share a reading of 19:1–10 that resonates with the alternative tradition of interpretation previously introduced. Two further articles will share a reading of the story Jesus told in Jericho (19:11–27), and reflect on how Luke 19:1–27 might equip us to engage the pressing challenges of our day.

Rather than telling us *about* Jesus, the Gospels invite us to *enter into* their stories *as if* we were

there, participating in events as they unfold. To read this way, we need to engage each scene as part of the wider narrative to which it belongs, appreciate the political, economic, social and cultural realities of first century Palestine, and learn to speak, think, and feel as surrogate members of that world.

Accompany me now as I imagine myself into the story. Along the way, we'll switch between characters, recall the Jewish Scriptures or earlier episodes in Luke's Gospel, and even step out of the story now and then. As we begin, recall the dynamics of tribute, land and debt relations, slavery and militarization in first-century Palestine, and the Scripture-inspired hopes and longings rekindled each Passover. Let's put aside our previous encounters with Zacchaeus and experience the story *as if for the first time*.



Left: Christ Speaks to Zacchaeus, William Hole (1846-1917).

Right: Zacchaeus Welcomes Jesus (1973), JESUS MAFA, Cameroon.

Stepping into the text

We enter the gospel world *as if* among the twelve travelling with Jesus to Passover. He takes us aside. We're going to Jerusalem where, Jesus says, he'll be handed over to the Gentiles, mocked, insulted, spat upon, flogged, and killed (18:31–34). In one sense, that makes sense. Everyone knows that the scribes and Pharisees spell trouble for Jesus. Everyone knows that Herod wants to kill him. In another sense, we can't imagine it happening. Would we have left everything to follow someone destined for humiliation, degradation, death?

Stepping out of the gospel world, I recall reading and re-reading the Gospel of Luke during its lectionary year. At first, the Gospel's early chapters seemed to have a PG rating. Caesars, Herods, Roman procurators, and ruling priests are named (1:5; 2:1; 3:1–2), but not, or so I'd thought, in overtly ominous ways. With each re-reading I became aware of textual dimensions I'd not noticed before. The first shadows fall with 'the sword' to pierce Mary's soul, the imprisonment of John, and the devil's departure until 'an opportune time.' The sense of threat builds from there: the Nazareth

congregation turns against Jesus; the scribes and Pharisees mutter; John is executed; the spectre of Herod remains; and Jesus speaks of the cost of discipleship, risk, danger, conflict, persecution, death. Belatedly, I realise that the Gospel's references to rulers and hegemony are anything but innocuous. For most inhabitants of Galilee and Judea, their reigns signified hunger, dispossession, desperation, death. Mary's song and Zechariah's Spirit-inspired words defy a reality in which the powerful remain firmly enthroned, the rich enjoy the fruit of the land and the hungry are sent empty away. Augustus's decree 'that all the world be registered' enforces the humiliating head tax and deeply resented rule of Rome. Angelic injunctions, 'Do not be afraid,' alert readers to real and ever-present danger.

Re-entering the story as we approach Jericho, I remember the city's past (Josh 2; 5:13–7:26): the prostitute's house and scarlet thread; the 'commander of the Lord's army' who, meeting Joshua outside Jericho, commanded him, like Moses, to remove his sandals: he stood on holy ground. Jericho's walls fell at the people's shout. Joshua declared: 'Cursed before the Lord be anyone who tries to build this city—this Jericho!'



How hollow those words sound as the massive walls, extravagant palaces, and crowded thoroughfares of Roman Herodian Jericho come into view. Slaves, bent double, tend plantations on either side of the road. Other slaves, barely visible through the dust, toil on construction work, aqueducts, and storehouses. Long lines queue at toll stations. Now, as then, Israel is humiliated because some have broken faith, transgressed the covenant, taken devoted things, stolen, and acted deceitfully (Josh 7:1-12).

I hear Joshua's challenge: 'Choose this day whom you will serve.' How the Scriptures taunt a defeated people! How *can* we keep the Sabbath, maintain the covenant and observe the fast the Lord chooses, loosing the bonds of injustice, releasing the thongs of every yoke, setting the oppressed free (Isa 58:6; 61:1-2)? We ourselves are bound, harnessed, captive, oppressed. It's not as if we *choose* to serve the gods of Rome.

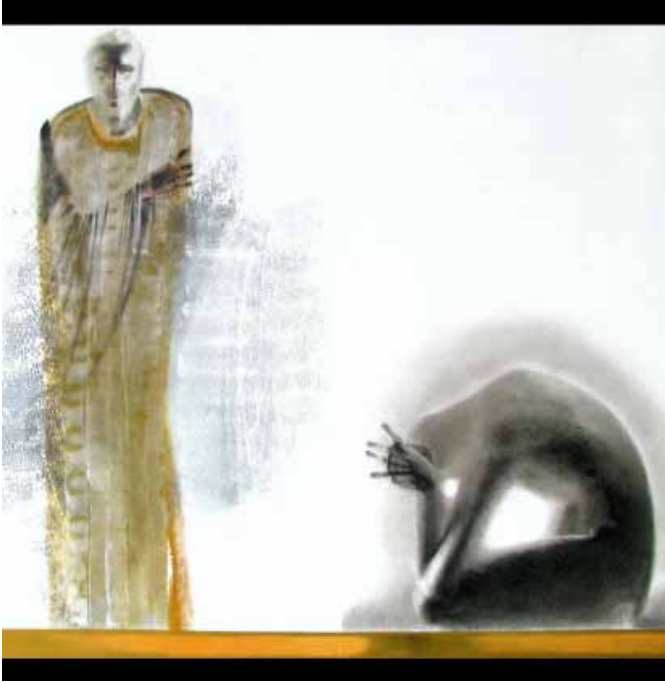
Entering Jericho, what does Jesus do? He goes straight up to the ruling tribute collector, Zacchaeus, the last person we want to be noticed by or seen with, and invites himself—and us!—to

We've followed Jesus long enough to expect him to challenge purity codes. But breaking bread with a ruling tribute collector?

his house. We've followed Jesus long enough to expect him to challenge purity codes. But breaking bread with a ruling tribute collector? Unthinkable! Ruling tribute collectors inspire fear, resentment, and hatred for good reason. We all know families evicted from ancestral plots, children sold into bonded labour, wives and daughters forced into prostitution, fathers incarcerated because of tax/tribute/toll debts they cannot pay. To dine with Zacchaeus would be to eat the fruit of exploitation and oppression. My stomach

revolts at the thought! Besides, hasn't Jesus just said that he'll be handed over to the Romans? Who better to do that than Zacchaeus, a Jew grown sleek on Jewish blood? If Jesus goes there, I will not follow. With all who see it, I mutter: 'He's gone in to stay with a sinful man.'

I remember stories Jesus told when the Pharisees and scribes objected to the company he kept: stories about a man who lost a sheep, a woman who lost a coin, a father who lost two sons; stories that focus on the finding, not the circumstances of being lost; stories that end



Prayer of the Publican and the Pharisee,
Ivanka Demchuk (b. 1990).

with rejoicing. Now, as Zacchaeus welcomes Jesus, rejoicing, I wonder: what might Zacchaeus have lost and found? Is Jesus enacting the parable of the prodigal father? That story asked the scribes and Pharisees whether they, like the elder brother, resented the indiscriminate grace of God. But Zacchaeus did not squander his own inheritance; he seized *our* inheritance, squandering *our* lives and those of our children.

Zacchaeus tells Jesus, 'See, half my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anything I give back fourfold.' *His* possessions? *If* he has defrauded? That's rich! In practice and in consequence, the entire Roman-Herodian tributary system contravenes our God-given Scriptures at every step. According to Rome, its ruling tribute collectors are entitled—expected—to accumulate possessions. The system, by design, gives more to those who already have and takes from those who have not what little they might otherwise retain. According to Moses and the prophets, the entire system is one that defrauds and plunders, murders and steals.

Jesus declares, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For

the Son of Humanity came to seek and to save that which is lost.' What! If it was difficult for a ruler who thought he'd kept the commandments to enter the reign of God, how much more so for a ruling tribute collector? Zacchaeus may have been born a son of Abraham but he sold that birthright years ago. As for seeking and saving the lost, the prophet envisioned thin, weak, hunted sheep being saved, not predatory sheep who ravaged the flock, trampled the pasture, muddied the waters, and pushed others aside. For thus said the LORD:

I myself will search for my sheep, and I will seek them out ... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice (Ezek 34:11, 16).

I want the ruling tribute collector fed justice, to be destroyed by justice of a relentless retributive kind. I want him to beg for mercy and have mercy denied.

My reading identity shifts and I become a resident of Jericho watching the exchange. The audacity of it! Jesus unilaterally welcomes Zacchaeus into *our* community. Doesn't he know what Zacchaeus has done? He must know, everyone does. Zacchaeus promised to change... Even if he's sincere, don't expect us to welcome him rejoicing. He cannot restore land lost to tribute, years lost to prison, or children lost to hunger, disease, and bonded labour.

My reading identity shifts again: I am Zacchaeus. I shrink into the shadows when Jesus looks up, but his face and voice are friendly, unafraid. The crowd shifts restlessly as I scramble down. They don't understand. How could they? I don't understand myself. Everything changed the instant Jesus welcomed me and trusted me to welcome him. Without pausing to think, I say, 'See, half my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anything I give back fourfold.' I've never known such freedom, such space!

I look around at the crowd. Their faces do not reflect my joy. I cannot change the past and they will not forget it. A flash of metal catches my eye. The Romans! I couldn't have staged a more public spectacle had I tried. I responded to Jesus neither calculating potential profits and losses nor

weighing the consequences which, I'm beginning to realise, are not all good... I cannot regret what I've done. Yet, if both people and rulers reject me, what will become of me and mine?

Shocked out of the gospel world by Zacchaeus's vulnerability, I remember Jesus' story about a Pharisee and a tribute collector at prayer. The Pharisee's 'righteousness' drives him away from others and drives them away from God. Leaving no room for grace and no space for redemption, he blocks the path to repentance. How *can* collaborators repent if their people reject them? My violence, like that of the Pharisee, perpetuates the violence of others.

Grace affronts us. Blind to structural injustice, some blame the poor for their poverty. My inner Pharisee manifests differently. I shrink from diplomats who sell weapons to dictators; politicians who command slaughter in Iran, Ukraine, Gaza, Afghanistan; investors who profit from misery, the rape of forests, the manufacture of war; others who amass wealth unaware or indifferent to devastation wrought elsewhere. If God's reign welcomes tycoons, tyrants, terrorists, and their retainers, I'm not sure I want to belong.

Even as I shrink from the company at God's table, I recognise myself in those I revile. I cannot pray, 'I thank you God that I am not like...' because deep down I know that I am. Like the elder brother, the Pharisee and the rich ruler, I thought I'd observed the commandments, kept the covenant, and served God since my youth. But, like the younger brother, I squandered an inheritance. Like Zacchaeus, I squandered an inheritance not my own, betraying my brethren, the hungry, thirsty, sick, naked, indebted peoples of the world. Like the Pharisee, I indicted others of sin while blind to my own.

Sorrow overwhelms me as it did the rich ruler. What, I wonder, the cause of his sadness? Did he realise, perhaps for the first time, that he and his ancestors had *not* kept the covenant commandments? I hear the LORD's promise-command spoken through Moses when renewing the covenant with people newly released from slavery in Egypt:

There will be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the LORD your God by diligently observing the entire commandment that I command you today (Deut 15:4-5).

Had the ruler and his ancestors—had I and my ancestors—observed the entire commandment, we would not be rich while so many are poor. We have too much, have kept too much, have taken too much. Neither keeping Sabbath nor celebrating Jubilee, we 'added house to house and joined field to field': Our 'hands are full of blood' (Isa 1:15; 5:8). No wonder Jesus spoke of camels and needles: 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the reign of God'.

How can collaborators repent if their people reject them? My violence, like that of the Pharisee, perpetuates the violence of others.

I re-enter the world of the text as if a resident of Jericho listening to Jesus' declaration (19:1-10). My mood swings from outrage to sober reflection to exhilaration. Jesus channels the words and vision of Ezekiel to evoke all the longings the

Scriptures inspire. We are filled with expectation! Will the LORD now restore the realm to Israel? A rich ruler promised to change. Surely that's a sign of God's reign!

We step out of the story as Jesus begins to tell a story to the watching, listening crowd.

Reflecting on the experience

Did you feel out-of-step with my reading of Zacchaeus? When? Why? Return to Luke 19 and imagine yourself into the story *as if* the character(s) with whom you most naturally identify. How do *you* experience the story?

Rather than stopping halfway through the scene, continue reading to hear Jesus tell the story *as if* listening among the crowd. What do you make of it when listening as that character in that context?

Deborah Storie completed her doctoral thesis, An Adventure with Zacchaeus, in 2016. She lectures in New Testament at Whitley College, is Honorary Research Associate with the University of Divinity, and an accredited minister with the Baptist Union of Victoria.

LIVING FROM MYSTERY

ANTHROPOLOGY, ECOLOGY, AND TECHNOLOGY IN JOB, PT. I

by Jacob Garrett

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *On Human Nature*, eminent biologist E.O. Wilson asks us to recall 'how God lashed Job with concepts meant to overwhelm the human mind' in Job chapters 38-41, with questions like:

Have you descended to the springs of the sea or walked in the unfathomable deep?
Have the gates of death been revealed to you?
Have you ever seen the door-keepers of the place of darkness?
Have you comprehended the vast expanse of the world?
Come, tell me all this, if you know.

Taking our lead from Job, we will explore the human place in and relationship to the rest of God's creation, as well as our chief means of influence over it: technology.

While poor Job can only stammer out a confession of his ignorance, Wilson says we are today in a very different position. Our answer, by contrast, is:

yes, we *do* know and we have told. Jehovah's challenges have been met and scientists have pressed on to uncover and to solve even greater puzzles. The physical basis of life is known; we understand approximately how and when it started on earth ... Molecular biologists have most of the knowledge needed to create elementary forms of life. Our machines, settled on Mars, have transmitted panoramic views and the results of chemical soil analysis. Could the Old Testament writers have conceived of such activity? And still the process of great scientific discovery gathers momentum.

He wrote that in 1978. The nearly fifty years since have witnessed further techno-scientific marvels like the human genome project, the construction of the international space station, the eradication of smallpox, and the rise of personal computers,

the internet, smartphones, and artificial intelligence.

Leaving aside the Old Testament writers, I wonder if even E.O. Wilson conceived he would see such things in his lifetime.

But it would also be fair to say there are things Wilson's list neglects to mention: our

age is not just one of bionic ears and black hole photography, but climate instability, social media addiction, and drone warfare, too.

In the case of our ecological crisis, we might make a further tragic observation: while our modern technologies are apparently powerful enough to *create* problems like microplastic and PFC pollution, species extinction, desertification, and global warming, they have so far shown themselves much less successful at *resolving* them.

Whether we blame the technology or merely our use of it, this wound in humanity's relationship to the wider world suggests that we are either incapable or unwilling to wield our technological powers consistently for the good of creation, including ourselves.

This three-article series will argue that E. O. Wilson correctly intuits a connection with the book of Job when considering our techno-



Job Rebuked by His Friends, William Blake (1757-1827). Biblical scholars disagree on whether or not Job was totally ripped...

scientific accomplishments. Indeed, Job has much to say about both nature and human nature as well as—perhaps surprisingly—technology and the motive for control it represents.

Taking our lead from Job, we will explore the human place in and relationship to the rest of God's creation, as well as our chief means of influence over it: technology. The rest of this article will briefly outline some of the key anthropological and ecological insights from Job which will lay the foundation for our later discussion. But first, just a few words on Job as a text before we dive in.

What kind of text?

Among artistic literary works in the Bible, Job is arguably the pinnacle: ranked by Milton alongside the epics of Homer and Virgil, Job has been rightly regarded for millennia as a jewel of Hebrew philosophical poetry. It's not an easy

text to get a handle on, though, and interpreters both ancient and modern are divided, arguing over its meaning on fundamental points. This is understandable, perhaps, for the main body of the text is itself an argument, and it is somewhat difficult to tell who—if anyone—is right. Job's Friends certainly say much which is true and sounds appropriately pious, while Job's own bitter complaint against God at times borders on blasphemy. Yet in the end God vindicates Job and denounces the speeches of his companions... why?

For most of us, of course, the problems begin far earlier than that, for in chapters one and two we witness God giving Job's angelic adversary (the *sātān*) permission to ruin his life. Without getting too deep into it, let me suggest that this is supposed to rankle: this is how the story first gets a hold on us. Without being stirred up and a bit bewildered we will not read it aright.



But did it really happen? The text seems deliberately evasive: in 42 chapters we are given almost no hard details to locate it. I don't think the Job poet was interested in answering this question, not to mention the theological issues raised if it were historically true. Rather, just as mythic tales contain truth at a deeper level than plain facts, I agree with Christian storyteller and mythographer Martin Shaw when he reads 'In the land of Uz there lived a man' as an ancient Hebrew way of saying 'Once upon a time...'

'What is humankind, that you make so much of them?'

Moral creatures

The first thing the text affirms about us is that we are moral beings: Job is introduced as someone of unimpeachable character, and it is this fact—and the debate over it between both heavenly and human characters—which gets the whole drama moving in the first place. With only the possible (but unclear) exception of angels, humans are uniquely spoken of as moral

creatures, able to use their freedom for wilful good or evil. God's interest in us includes interest in this dimension, for he even singles Job out for the Adversary's attention as a point of apparent satisfaction, even pride: 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him...' (1:8).

When God finally speaks to Job ... humans are noteworthy chiefly by their absence.

We are not the centre

Yet despite this special attention, when God finally speaks to Job in chapters 38-41 humans are noteworthy chiefly by their absence. Instead, while God waxes ever more lyrically about the cosmos and the many other inhabitants of Earth, the existence of humans is acknowledged only indirectly and in passing. Job scholar Norman Whybray summarises the impression of both casual readers and scholars when he concludes that the general omission of humans here 'with their obsession with their own problems and their demands ... cannot but be intentional'. Apparently, God is trying to pull Job's perspective wider than merely human concerns, to consider also the stars, the depths of the sea, and Behemoth 'whom I made along with you' (40:15). Despite his care for us, we are not the definitive centre or measure of his creation.

Left: An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump (1768),
Joseph Wright of Derby.

Right: Human Fragility (1656), Salvator Rosa.

“

Mortals, born of woman,
are of few days and full of trouble.

They spring up like flowers and wither away;
like fleeting shadows, they do not endure.
(Job 14:1-2)

”



Limited and dependent

Upon first reading, this can sound like the same point Job's companions have been rebuking him with all along. God's mysteries are higher than heaven and deeper than the depths, says Zophar to Job, so 'what can you know?' (11:8). Or 'How great is God—beyond our understanding!' (Elihu, 36:26). To be fair to Job, he never denies these claims: he has no doubt of humanity's ultimate incomprehension of God or his matchless power, except for him these facts are a source of despair and dread rather than consolation:

You snatch me up and drive me before
the wind;
you toss me about in the storm.
I know you will bring me down to death,
to the place appointed for all the living.
(30:22-23)

Indeed, death is affirmed by all as proof of human limitation before God. Our lives are like a breath, our days on earth are 'like a fleeting shadow' (14:2) and we would perish the instant God ever chose to withdraw his Spirit. In God's hand is 'the life of every creature, and the breath of all humankind' (12:10). Even the mightiest rulers and nations are powerless before him.

Deepening into mystery

If this is all true and agreed among Job and his Friends, then what do God's speeches add to the dialogue? This is a much-debated question, but I submit that the answer cannot be merely to demonstrate the futility and presumption of human speech about the deep things of God and his world, as this is never in contention. Besides, if God fully approved of the responses of Job's Friends then why is he so angry with them, requiring Job to make intercession on their behalf (42:7-8)?

There is more going on here, but what? Firstly, while there is real rebuke in his words, it's not at all clear that God is bullying Job into silence. If that was the goal, it comes after only two chapters, why go on? Additionally, while God's tone is hard to discern here, it's clear enough that—though awash with irony—his favoured mode of responding to Job is the question: *where were you... can you... do you know?* This suggests that God is not simply trying to close Job down, as the Friends were, whose few, short questions tend to be only different ways of saying, *what do you know? Shut up.* God's questions, while superficially similar, come laden with exquisite poetic detail and extended imagery: he's trying



Left: A modern day mining operation in Oyu Tolgoi, Mongolia.

Credit: Munkh-Erdene Eenee.

Right: The Storm Over La Bajada (1946), Laura Gilpin.

“

Mortals put an end to the darkness;
they search out the farthest recesses
for ore in the blackest darkness.

(Job 28:3)

”

to open Job up—to see or appreciate something anew, to engage his imagination toward some sort of reorientation. When God speaks, the whole cosmos comes rushing in with all its immensity, particularity, and personality.

To what end? I cannot improve on the opinion of Rudolf Otto, who argues that God's aim here is to *convince* Job, not only to *convict* him: 'to utterly still every inward doubt that assailed his soul.' This is not achieved by simply overpowering him, or even by supplying the rationally acceptable formula *my ways are higher than your ways*. Rather, God's response turns ultimately on

something quite different than anything that can be exhaustively rendered in rational concepts, namely, on the sheer wondrousness that transcends thought, on the *mysterium* presented in its pure, non-rational form ... it mocks at all conceiving but can yet stir the mind to its depths, fascinate and overbrim the heart.

Or, in the words of another scholar, instead of further argument, God seeks to captivate Job—to draw him into a “spiritual Copernican revolution” of wonder—to settle him in mystery which is greater and other than simple ignorance.

Job 28: *Homo sapiens*?

The final strand of Joban anthropology worth mentioning here comes to us in the semi-independent poem of chapter 28 which marks a sort of reflection point in the discourse. The poem centres on the seeming inaccessibility of wisdom to human beings, or indeed to any creature. However, many scholars have noted something of a tension here due to the poet's extended description of a quintessentially human technological activity: mining. They observe how the language in verses 1-11 is curiously elevated, seeming 'more appropriate for divine activity'. That is, mortal accomplishments—putting an end to the darkness, searching its farthest bounds, overturning the mountains—are somewhat blurred here with those of God to an unnecessary—and therefore apparently deliberate—extent (cf. 38:4-12; 26:10). Certainly, our technical skill seems to set humankind apart from eagle and the wild beasts; we even call ourselves *sapiens*—wise ones—and Job 28 indeed hints that we alone mimic God in this way. In the wider poem, of course, this section serves primarily to underline the main point: though humans undertake such marvellous activities, venturing deep and far to uncover the earth's secrets, *even they* cannot discover wisdom. Still, it is a curious inclusion, the significance of which we will return to in the next article.



The place and value of the non-human in Job

Interest in the ecological implications of Job has risen notably in the last half-century, with much work being done in this area. Let me summarise just three key insights.

Likeness among created things

Read Job and you might be struck just how many times the speakers reference plants, animals, and other natural phenomena. By my count, across chapters 3-30 all but chapter 23 contains at least one such reference, with most chapters making use of direct analogies with the non-human world. This is telling, for the language we use—particularly the images we employ—is significantly shaped by the things we are familiar with and engaged by: our world and our words are intimately related. Moreover, the persistence of natural analogies in the central chapters of Job is suggestive not only of familiarity but also of a sense of affinity with other created things. That is, to speak of one thing in terms of another—even to express how they are unlike—one must

first feel that they are in some way akin: that they may be spoken of in the same terms. The very possibility of analogy assumes a common core to creation. To take just one example, observe where Job’s mind reaches to express his anguish that his friends have proved faithless:

my brothers are as undependable as
intermittent streams,
as the streams that overflow
when darkened by thawing ice
and swollen with melting snow,
but that stop flowing in the dry season,
and in the heat vanish from their channels.
(6:15-17)

**When God speaks, the whole
cosmos comes rushing in with
all its immensity, particularity,
and personality.**

The creation communicates the Creator

If there is a connection between humans and other beings in creation, there is also something similar to be said of God. Throughout the book, his attributes are often listed with reference to his works, and the forces of the Earth are spoken of as instruments of his action. Job represents God’s immense power and wisdom by recourse to his creation and

sustainment of the world, while the Friends—without disagreeing—further claim in various ways that people’s virtue or wickedness directly affects the disposition of the created world toward them, resulting in either blessing or disaster (cf. Lev 26). While this sense of clear and reliable retribution is by no means something endorsed by the book as a whole—we are not to understand Eliphaz, Zophar, or Bildad as sure theological guides—what is worth observing here is the (true) conviction they share with Job that it is ultimately God who determines what happens in his world. As Elihu relates:

God’s voice thunders in marvellous ways;
he does great things beyond
our understanding.
He says to the snow, ‘Fall on the earth,’
and to the rain shower, ‘Be a
mighty downpour.’
So that everyone he has made may know
his work,
he stops all people from their labour.
(37:5-7)

Thus, even if what we observe in the regularities and marvels of the world are only ‘the outer fringe of his works’ (26:14), they remain real, if incomplete, reflections of the mind behind them.

Creation’s value beyond human use

We have already seen that God’s speeches move Job away from considering the world in purely human terms. More than this, though, in chapters 38-41 we experience God’s immense delight in his creation *on its own terms*. Unlike Elihu, who speaks exclusively of the world as perceived by people, God’s speeches take us far beyond the reach of human awareness in both space and time. With Job we are called to contemplate the springs of the sea and the recesses of the deep, the abode of light, the gates of death, the foundations of the earth, and the making of the world. With Elihu we considered the fall of snow—which we may observe—but God calls us to imagine the storehouses where he keeps it, somewhere beyond sight. Again and again, God shows himself interested in the vast territories of his world unknown and untraveled by humans: regions which serve no human purpose. The reasonable conclusion is that his joy in these works of his is because they are good and valuable to him for their own sake.

Similarly, about animals Elihu has precious little to say, while God cannot seem to spend enough time in intimate attention with each one. Notably,



most of the animals detailed are both wild and unclean according to Israel's purity laws, yet God's joy and interest are undiminished. Some animals, like the ostrich, are not just completely useless to humans, they are a total enigma:

She lays her eggs on the ground
and lets them warm in the sand,
unmindful that a foot may crush them,
that some wild animal may trample them.
She treats her young harshly, as if they were
not hers;

she cares not that her
labour was in vain,
for God did not endow her
with wisdom
or give her a share of
good sense.

Yet when she spreads her
feathers to run,
she laughs at horse and
rider. (39:14-18)

Why on earth did God create such a ridiculous creature? What could it possibly be *good for*? We might ask something similar of Behemoth, or Leviathan. The latter is, if anything, a danger and a terror to humans, yet God seems to revel all the more in his power which only he can hope

to control. As Job expert, Kathryn Schifferdecker, remarks, the divine speeches bring us to the unavoidable conclusion that 'the world exists for the sake of its Creator' apart from any human knowledge, interest, or use.

Next time...

This article has outlined the very basics of the anthropological and ecological perspective of the book of Job. The next articles in this series will

begin to apply these insights to our unfolding eco-crisis which has been made possible by modern technology.

How can we cultivate the same delight, interest, and loving attention God shows toward his world? What are our proper boundaries as technological creatures in an age of ever-

receding technical limits? Can 'mystery' today mean anything other than blank spaces on our map? Can we keep our tools from remaking both nature and human nature in their own image? These are the kinds of questions to which we will turn.

Again and again, God shows himself interested in the vast territories of his world unknown and untraveled by humans: regions which serve no human purpose.

A Spotted-tail Quoll, the second largest carnivorous marsupial extant in Australia.

*Photo credit: Caleb McElrea
(Instagram: @calebmac_media).*

Continued from p. 2.

In July we will re-start our Evening Conversations in Melbourne, opening up some diverse and interesting speakers and topics, and later that month I will also be holding a Manna Gum Afternoon Conversation in Brisbane. Stay tuned for more information.

Speaking of responsible budgets, I am writing this the day after the latest Federal Budget. Although boring, budgets are important. All budgets, including our household budgets, are moral documents: they are literally rankings of what we value.

This Federal Budget had a couple of positives: removing the capital gains tax discount and narrowing the application of negative gearing, both of which have played a large role in driving our housing crisis; and also a tax on trust funds will help remove one of the many tax loopholes available to the wealthy. These things should have been done twenty years ago, but better late than never.

However, the Albanese Government is still refusing to tax gas exports—they are saying it would be irresponsible and harmful to do so, which is exactly what they said a couple of years ago about removing the capital gains tax discount. And they are persisting with their

AUKUS madness: spending hundreds of billions on nuclear submarines that make us less secure and may never be delivered. Meanwhile, we are struggling to fund crumbling health and education systems which are the foundation of Australian social democracy.

Jonathan Cornford



Coming up...

- Manna Gum Evening Conversations will restart in Melbourne in July.
- A Manna Gum Afternoon Conversation in Brisbane, late July.
- The final episodes in our 'Legacies of Colonisation' podcast series will be uploaded in the coming month.
- Future *MannaCast* episodes will tackle topics like 'What is money?'; AI, transhumanism and living with technology; and 'How to live in a darkening world'.

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Manna Matters is produced on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples, both members of the Kulin nation. The 'wurun' of the Wurundjeri refers to Eucalyptus viminalis, a sacred tree whose leaves are required for a 'Welcome to Country'. The early Europeans colloquially named this tree the Manna Gum for the sweet white gum (lerp) it sometimes produces, which reminded them of the biblical story of the manna in the wilderness. In doing so, they unknowingly associated a locally sacred tree with one of the foundational lessons in God's economics: collect what you need; none shall have too little; none shall have too much; don't store it up; there is enough for all!