

# Reading the Bible

## WITH GREEN EYES

BY KENDRA HALOVIK VALENTINE



*Windswept Morning*, Eddleston, Scotland (Graphite Drawing by Wanda Thompson)

Every Spring Quarter I teach an upper division class on biblical interpretation that considers the gospel of Mark from a variety of perspectives. We try to intentionally notice the new insights we see in the gospel when we bring a particular perspective—like cultural or literary or postcolonial—to its stories and teachings. For example, the first verse of Mark’s gospel reads in English: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God” (Mark 1:1). A cultural perspective on this verse might explore the meaning of the word “gospel” in Mark’s day and emphasize that the word had the military connotations of a battle being won and a runner from the front lines shouting in nearby villages:

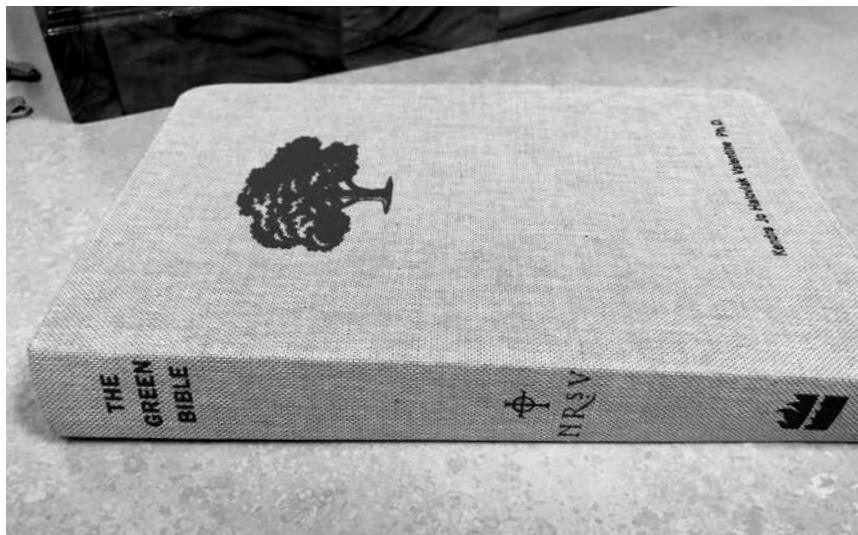
“Gospel! Gospel!” The villagers would hear: “Good news! The battle is going our way!” Given this cultural context, is Mark declaring at the start of his account of Jesus’ life: “Good news! The battle is going our way!”? A literary perspective on the first verse of Mark’s gospel might notice the literary echo between Mark’s “The beginning...” and the Torah’s first words: “In the beginning...” (Genesis 1:1). This perspective emphasizes the new creation occurring through the life of Jesus Christ. A postcolonial perspective would be aware that Mark wrote this gospel in the context of Roman rule in what had been Jewish territory. Such a reading might ask if Mark is intentionally contrasting Caesar’s “good news”

of military victory with the good news that comes with Jesus Christ. These are just three of the many perspectives students are challenged to consider as they seek to enrich their understanding of the gospel of Mark in particular, as well as the other works of Scripture.

Several years ago I became acquainted with another perspective that can be brought to the reading of our sacred texts. It happened when I read an article written by a colleague, Dr. Lora Geriguis, doing an ecocritical reading of a work by British novelist Daniel Defoe. An ecocritical reading seeks to foreground the environmental elements present in texts.<sup>1</sup> Upon reading her article, I immediately wondered: what might happen if my students read Scripture from an ecocritical perspective? I invited Dr. Geriguis to give a guest lecture on reading with an environmental lens. As she introduced students to ecocriticism and began reading Mark's gospel from that perspective, she helped us see new aspects of the stories. Since then, I have worked on several ecocritical readings of passages in Mark's gospel that I find particularly difficult. These are passages that raise questions inadequately addressed by other reading perspectives. These studies have brought a richness to the gospel for which I am very grateful.

### Noticing Nature

Reading Mark's gospel with an eye to the environment causes one to pay special notice to places and locations in the narrative. For example, one quickly identifies the wilderness motif, including the four-fold repetition of the phrase "in the wilderness" in the first thirteen verses of the gospel (1:3, 4, 12, 13). The "wilderness" seems to be contrasted with the "country of Judea" and "Jerusalem" as people leave those areas to join John the Baptizer "in the wilderness." Bodies of water are given particular importance throughout this gospel, including the Jordan River, where people "in the wilderness" experience baptism (1:5–11) and physical nourishment (6:35–44; 8:4–8). The geographic



Kendra's Green Bible (Photo: Kendra Haloviak Valentine)

region known as "Galilee," located near the Sea of Galilee (actually a large lake), becomes a central focus when Jesus is first introduced as coming from "Nazareth of Galilee" (1:9). It is the region that becomes the headquarters of Jesus' ministry (2:1) as he shares the "good news" of "God's reign" (1:15) with the people in villages located around the Sea of Galilee. This Sea will feature as a kind of network hub around which Jesus moves and connects to other towns and people. But it will also present challenges to be overcome when storms arise (4:35–41; 6:45–52) and attempts to cross over to other towns must be postponed. In this gospel's final scene disciples are invited to meet Jesus again in Galilee (16:7), so that readers return full circle to this key location even as the story ends.

Other aspects of nature in Mark include food (2:18–20) and wine (2:22), grain fields and activities associated with an agrarian economy (2:23; 4:3–9, 13–20; 26–29; 30–32; 10:29–30; 12:1–12). The careful ecocritical reader will notice water and wind (6:47–52), fire and water (9:22), a fig tree (11:13–14, 20–25; 13:28–31), earthquakes and famines (13:8), the sun, moon and stars (13:24–25), the mention of clouds at key moments in the narrative (9:7; 13:26; 14:62), darkness on the land (15:33), the setting and rising of the sun (1:32; 16:2), a very large stone (16:3–4), and that important events take place on mountains (3:13; 9:2, 9; 11:23; 13:14)—especially the Mount of Olives (11:1; 13:3f; 14:26f).

In Mark's gospel unclean spirits (the demonic world) frequently enter into the narrative (1:21–28, 34; 3:11; 5:1–20;

*Noticing nature can also aid us in making more thoughtful and theologically coherent interpretations of these fascinating stories.*



7:24–30; 9:14–29). Scholars have suggested that for those living in a first-century cultural context, spirits merge the supernatural and the natural order of things. People in Mark’s day understood that a very thin line separated the demonic world from their own. Unclean spirits caused illness and deformity, public outbursts, and other unexplained and dishonorable behavior.

To notice aspects of nature in Mark’s gospel not only helps contemporary readers gain a better sense of the cultural assumptions of the agrarian world that provided the setting of Jesus’ life and ministry, but noticing nature can also aid us in making more thoughtful and theologically coherent interpretations of these fascinating stories.

### Noticing Non-Human Creatures

Mark’s gospel also contains many references or allusions to non-human creatures. These references occur frequently enough that they warrant separate special

consideration. Reading Mark’s gospel with an environmental lens highlights the appearance of these creatures in the narratives. For example, very early in Mark’s description of Jesus he is with wild beasts (1:13). It is no surprise that fish would be referenced often, given the occupation of some of Jesus’

first followers (1:17; 6:38, 41, 43; 8:7). But references to non-human creatures also include pigs (5:1–20), sheep (6:34; 14:27), dogs (7:27–28), a camel (10:25), a colt (11:2, 4, 5, 7), doves (11:15), a lamb (14:12), and a rooster (14:30, 68, 72).

The presence of a story about pig farming in the gospel (5:1–20) raises particular questions for readers who are concerned about caring for God’s creatures because it seems to make Jesus responsible for the destruction of an entire sounder of 2,000 swine.<sup>2</sup> The story centers on Legion, a demon possessed man who is the first to greet Jesus during his first excursion into Gentile territory—the land of the Gerasenes. Often interpretations focus on the “uncleanness” of

*Jesus casts the demonic power out of the man and out of the land; a land not ethnically his own, but clearly of concern to Jesus of Nazareth.*



*Blà Bheinn and Loch Slapin, Isle of Skye, Scotland (Graphite Drawing by Wanda Thompson)*

the man (living among the dead) and the land (Gentile territory), being used to farm unclean animals. Legion's spiritual healing is underscored by Jesus cleansing the land of unclean animals. But is this interpretation adequate? Does it too easily dismiss the ethical questions about Jesus' destruction of nonhuman life? A careful study of this passage using an ecocritical perspective suggests several observations that address these concerns.

First, the "land" described in Mark 5:1–20 would be considered "unclean" not merely because it was Gentile land (a Jewish conclusion), but all peasants, Jewish and Gentile, would conclude that something was seriously wrong with this scene due to its ecological unsustainability. Reading this story with an eye to the descriptions of the environment led me to explore further about first-century farming practices. I learned that husbanding two thousand pigs would require huge amounts of water and a large grazing area, pointers to an exploitative economy. Villagers and farmers would not normally choose such use of environmental resources unless perhaps forced to do so. What has happened in this land of the Gerasenes? This led to a second insight from an ecocritical perspective: at the time of Mark's writing, this region was occupied by Roman soldiers who had murdered many of the villagers and exploited the land to raise pork for their own consumption, meat for the elite rather than local herds (sheep, cows) whose wool and milk would better serve the majority of the population. There are even textual clues to suggest that much of the local population may have had to move away in order to survive the environmental oppression of imperial Rome. This imperial power that oppresses the local population is presented in Mark's gospel as demonic.

Jesus casts the demonic power out of the man and out of the land; a land not ethnically his own, but clearly of concern to Jesus of Nazareth, in the region of the Galilee. From an ecocritical perspective, Mark 5:1–20 can be read as reimagining the land of Gerasa without pigs and without invading armies controlling the local economy and ecology.

## Conclusion

On the occasion of my wedding, close relatives gave me *The Green Bible* with my name engraved on the cover. I guess they hoped our new household would be environmentally friendly. In this edition of the New Revised Standard Version, passages of Scripture that reference creation are placed in green type (much like the words of Jesus are

in red type in some Bibles). As we would expect, much of Genesis 1–2 is in green. But the surprising thing is how many sections of other books of Scripture are also highlighted as concerning creation and our environment. Reading Scripture with an environmental lens causes us to ask new questions and to make new connections, enriching the wonder of God's Word.

## Further Readings

Brotton, Melissa, ed. *Ecotheology and Nonhuman Ethics in Society: A Community of Compassion*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017.

*The Green Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.

Kiel, Micah D. *Apocalyptic Ecology: The Book of Revelation, the Earth, and the Future*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017.

Tonstad, Sigve K. *The Letter to the Romans: Paul among the Ecologists*. England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2016.

## End Notes

1. Robert Kern, "Ecocriticism: What Is It Good For?" in *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993–2003*, Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic, eds. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 260, says that ecocriticism "aims to recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere." Notice this observation from Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 197: "if land is indeed a prism through which biblical faith can be understood, not only will specific texts take on different nuances and tones, but we shall find that the Bible in its entirety is about another agenda that calls into question our conventional presuppositions and our settled conclusions."

2. I explore this in a book chapter, "Liberating Legion: An Ecocritical, Postcolonial reading of Mark 5:1–20," in Melissa Brotton, ed., *Ecotheology and Nonhuman Ethics in Society* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), 199–215.



KENDRA HALOVIK VALENTINE is professor of New Testament Studies in the H. M. S. Richards Divinity School at La Sierra University (California, USA). She has served as a pastor and taught at Adventist colleges and universities in the United States and Australia.

WANDA THOMPSON's artwork can be found in her book, *Reflections on Scripture, Dandelions, and Sparrows*, Energion Publications: Gonzalez, Florida (2018). She and her husband Alden are longtime residents of the Walla Walla community.