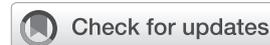


# Unhiding female characters in the parable of the sower: Reimagining fields and farms



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This article employs an unhiding reading methodology to explore the presence of women in Luke's agrarian parables, specifically focussing on the parable of the sower. By engaging with Van Eck's research on the realistic reading of the parables in their 1st-century socio-economic context and implementing Du Toit's unhiding reading, the authors argue that women, although not explicitly mentioned, would have been imagined as present, active and important participants in agricultural labour by the original hearers of these parables. Drawing on historical evidence of women's involvement in textile production, fieldwork and harvest activities, the article challenges traditional androcentric interpretations and highlights the integral role of women in the parable of the sower, and other agrarian parables.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** An unhiding reading will be suggested at the end of this article, an alternative reading aiming to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the parables, grounded in the lived realities of a 1st-century Mediterranean audience.

**Keywords:** unhiding reading; agrarian parables; women in the Bible; female labourers; 1st-century Palestine; Luke's parables; feminism; gender studies; realistic reading; parable of the sower.

## Introduction

The roles of women in the parables have often been overlooked or left unexamined, including parables that depict agrarian life. However, in 1st-century Mediterranean society, women were an important part of local communities. Specifically, and for the purposes of this study, women were vital contributors in agricultural spaces, contributing significantly to farming and harvest activities. This study applies an unhiding reading methodology to the parable of the sower (Lk 8:5–8) – to argue that the female characters in the parable, as well as other agrarian parables, although not explicitly mentioned, would have been imagined by a 1st-century audience as present in these agrarian settings. Building on previous research, especially Van Eck's emphasis on the importance of agrarian realism in interpreting these parables and Du Toit's application of 'unhiding' in the parables, it is proposed that an alternative reading that includes women in the narrative offers a more comprehensive and a more historically grounded interpretation of the texts.

An unhiding reading as an exegetical method is designed to uncover the implicit presence and agency of female characters in the parables, who, although not explicitly mentioned, would have been understood by 1st-century audiences as present because of their emic knowledge of societal roles. This reading challenges traditional androcentric interpretations by imagining women as integral participants in the socio-cultural realities of the time (Du Toit 2022a, 2025).

Unhiding reading as an exegetical method involves questioning the text's face-value interpretation or reading where female characters are often 'hidden' within the parable and insists on identifying their roles through a feminist, social-historical lens. It uses social-scientific criticism and realistic reading techniques to reveal how women might have contributed to essential tasks within the parable narratives such as preparing food, mediating disputes and working as labourers – even when these female characters are not named.<sup>1</sup> By considering the high-context society of the ancient audience,<sup>2</sup> where much was understood implicitly, an unhiding reading reconstructs the historical

1.This, of course, stands in contrast to the traditional interpretation of parables, which typically assumes that women are present in parables only when explicitly mentioned. Culpepper, in his most recent publication on the parables, notes that 'women are central characters in three canonical parables' and that the *Gospel of Thomas* includes 'a fourth parable featuring a woman in an everyday activity, carrying a jar of meal or flour' (Culpepper 2024:71). Despite this observation, Culpepper also asserts, somewhat paradoxically, that 'at the village level, women shared in "maintenance activities," bearing and raising children, preparing food (especially grinding and baking), spinning and weaving, religious observance in the home, and most other forms of work' (Culpepper 2024:73; emphasis added).

2.The New Testament ... consists of documents written in what anthropologists call a "high context" society where the communicators presume a broadly shared acquaintance with and knowledge of the social context of matters referred to in conversation or writing. Accordingly, it is presumed in such societies that contemporary readers will be able to "fill in the gaps" and "read between the lines" (Elliott 1993:11).

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scenarios in which women's roles, such as household labour, grain production and care roles, were important and contributed to the emic audience's understanding, but often overlooked by modern readers (Du Toit 2022b, 2024a).<sup>3</sup>

This method is significant because it reimagines the narratives, bringing visibility to female voices and bodies, thus supplying an alternative reading scenario. By insisting on reading women into the parables, an un hiding reading helps reveal a fuller, more accurate picture of ancient Mediterranean society, enriching theological and feminist understandings of these texts.

## The importance of agrarian parables

Agriculture was the backbone of 1st-century Palestinian life. As Van Eck (2021:1–21) highlights, the agrarian context in Jesus' parables reflects not only the daily realities of the peasants but also the socio-political and economic structures that governed their lives. The parables, when read realistically, provide a 'window' into the exploitative world that characterised the peasant life under Roman rule. Land meant life, and Jesus' parables often use the imagery of farms, seeds and harvests to address systemic oppression and invite his hearers to imagine an alternative reality – the kingdom of God (Van Eck 2014, 2021).<sup>4</sup>

Van Eck's research into the parables emphasises the importance of understanding them through the lens of their 1st-century hearers. Jesus' use of parables, particularly those set in agrarian environments, resonated deeply with the daily experiences of his audience, who lived under the burden of heavy taxation and debt (Van Eck 2021). In this light, the parables reveal much more than theological allegories; they reflect the lived realities of peasant farmers, who struggled to maintain subsistence in a world controlled by elites.

## Women as labourers in 1st-century agriculture

Female slaves, as well as female labourers, occupied and worked on the Roman Empire's large estates and farms. They played an important and critical role in gathering wheat and

3.The main problem for modern readers of the parables is 'that we do not know what we do not know' (Rohrbaugh 2006:567). Rohrbaugh continues: 'The current consensus view of parables is that they are something like open-ended, extended metaphors that force the reader to arrive at conclusions of his/her own. That may or may not be accurate, but of course the missing piece is knowledge of the context. If we knew all about the setting in which these stories were first told perhaps we would get the point in the fashion a high-context person would expect. But lacking it ... we arrive at conclusions that often bear no relation to an ancient context whatsoever' (Rohrbaugh 2006:567).

4.Van Eck's realistic reading of the parables is based on the work of Kloppenborg on the parables, especially his monograph on the parable of the tenants (see Kloppenborg 2006). Kloppenborg is renowned for his realistic and socio-historical approach to interpreting parables. His method emphasises understanding the economic, social and cultural contexts of the time in which the parables were told. He focusses on how parables reflect the everyday realities of 1st-century Palestinian life, such as issues of agriculture, labour, land ownership and social inequality. In addition, Kloppenborg argues that the Roman-Egyptian papyri provide valuable social comparanda for understanding Jesus' parables. These papyri, which include contracts, petitions and other documents, offer detailed insights into the daily lives, economic transactions and social interactions of people in the Roman Empire. By comparing these texts with the parables, Kloppenborg identifies parallels that shed light on the socio-economic scenarios depicted in Jesus' teachings. This comparative analysis enhances the realism of the parables, grounding them in the broader socio-economic realities of the ancient Mediterranean world. This approach underscores the parables' function as critiques of social and economic structures, moving beyond purely allegorical interpretations to explore their implications for historical and cultural realities (see, i.a., Kloppenborg 2014a:1–2, 490–491, 2014b:288).

producing wine and oil (Phang 2022:9). The presence of women working in the fields of the ancient Mediterranean region seems to be established.<sup>5</sup> Poor households often needed all the family members they could spare to help with work,<sup>6</sup> including the household's wives and children who were old enough to help (Sulzberger 1923:426). Most agricultural work in the time of Jesus was done by smallholders, and the work was relentless (Culpepper 2024:150). Exodus 1:14 refers to farming a smallholding as 'all kinds of work in the fields' (NIV), and the Mishnah, in *m. Šabbat* 7:2, details 'thirty-nine classes of work, including "sowing, ploughing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, cleansing cobs"... grinding, sifting, kneading, baking' (see Culpepper 2024:150).

As family members, women most probably took part in these activities. This does not mean that women ploughed the land, as there is little textual evidence to suggest this. Rather, they were active and participated in field-gathering and harvesting activities. This would also adhere, to some extent, to purity concerns and the ancient values at play (Scheidel 1996:1–10). However, in agricultural societies 'the division of labour between the home and field, principally during the harvest and fruit-picking seasons, is not so sharply defined. We even find a *baraita* saying, "whoever hires a worker, his son and wife will glean after him" (*bBM* 12a); in other words, even the wife of the hired labourer will work in the field with him' (Ilan 2006:186).

Women are described as working in the fields in many different roles. Pollux describes a female reaper [*γυναικα θερίστρια*] being mentioned by Aristophanes (*PCG* III. 2. 329) in one of his plays. Pollux (*Onom.* 1.222) recognises the word *αμηστρις* as a female mower.<sup>7</sup> Plutarch (*Mor.* 784a) uses the term *καλάμητρις* to describe female hired labourers who would help with the harvest of crops. These labourers were often tasked with following the male reapers and picking up the corn-ears. Theocritus (*Id.* 3.32) also refers to these labourers as being women. The book of Ruth perhaps provides the most well-known biblical account of women working in the fields:

So Boas said to Ruth, 'My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay with the women who work for me. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled. (Rt 2:8–9; NIV)

Boas instructs Ruth to stay with the other women working his fields but also warns her about the men harvesting, drawing attention to the dangerous nature of working in the fields as a woman.

5.Moreover, papyrological evidence also indicates female possession of significant amounts of property in the ancient Mediterranean world (see Hobson 1983:311–321).

6.These families probably worked for a land-owner and stayed on his property where they tended to his crops and fields (Sulzberger 1923:425).

7.Notably, women are also mentioned as gleaning, cutting stubble and removing the weeds from fields. These women (*προσαστρία*) are mentioned in two different Attic comedies. This provides an interesting consideration for the parable of the sower in Luke 8:1–15, as there are no women mentioned in the parable; however, the seed does fall on fertile ground which *ἀπροσαστρία* might have had a hand in preparing. Moreover, the parable evokes images of farming and the fields where women were active as labourers, slaves and wives (Scheidel 1996:1).

Columella (*Rust.* 12. 3. 6–7), in the same vein, notes the following of female labourers (transl. Forster & Heffner 1968):

But in order that she may have recourse to wool-work on rainy days or when, owing to cold or frost, a woman cannot be busy with field-work under the open sky, there should be wool prepared and combed out ready.... She will also have to be perpetually on the watch, when the slaves have left the villa, and seek out those who ought to be doing agricultural work outside. (p. 191)

For Scheidel (1996), this somewhat casual remark by Columella:

[G]ives the impression that to all appearances, Columella did not regard women's labour in the fields as something unusual. Since this impression would be in perfect keeping with, and receive ample confirmation from, comparative evidence on plantation farming from better-documented slave-societies, we have to conclude that agriculture labour played an essential role in the lives of many slave-women in the Romans. (p. 3)

Columella's remarks also point out that the division of labour was likely based on gender which made sense not only out of a safety point of view but also within the cultural value system of the time.

There were also many exceptional situations that warranted women's involvement in agricultural labour and practices. A basic amount of female involvement (which included planting, tending and harvesting) was necessary in the event a war was declared and the male members of the household needed to leave for the front lines. It would be financially disastrous if the male members returned to neglected crops and fields. Furthermore, environmental phenomena such as floods and droughts could call for more labourers to help sustain an adequate food supply or income, if the family worked for a land owner (Meyers 1983:575).

Rabbinic texts also portray women as working in a variety of wage-earning tasks in the agrarian sphere and are also described as essential contributors to the family economy. The activities of women as entertainers and labourers, posed potential benefits to rabbinic men and their pursuit of dedication to the Torah. Mishnah *Kiddushin* 4:14 (a tractate of the Mishnah and the Talmud, part of the order of Nashim) depicts the ideal state that a father would want for his son (transl. Danby 2011):

Rabbi Nehorai says, 'I would set aside all the crafts in the world, and teach my son naught but the Law, for a man enjoys the reward thereof in this world and its whole worth remains for the world to come. But with all other crafts it is not so; for when a man falls into sickness or old age or troubles and cannot engage in his work, lo, he dies of hunger'. (p. 239)

Women in the workplace were not seen as disrupting the rabbis; rather, they envisioned a world where the work of men and women would be separate and distinct from each other. Wives, daughters and slaves as labourers provided the Jewish man with more time to dedicate to the Torah and less

time working. However, this also excluded women from religious practices and devotions, especially the study of the Torah (Labovitz 2007:10–11).

Traditional rabbinic interpretations associate married women with a central role in the domestic sphere, with labour being an integral part of their expected duties:

These are the work tasks that a wife does for her husband: she grinds grain, she bakes, and she launders, she cooks and she nurses her child, she makes the bed for him, and she does wool work. If she brought in for him [*at the time of their marriage*] one female slave – she does not grind grain, and does not bake, and does not launder; two [*slaves*] – she does not cook and does not nurse her child; three – she does not make the bed for him and does not do wool work; four – she sits on a throne [*and need not work at all*]. Rabbi Eliezer says: even if she brought in for him a hundred female slaves, he compels her to do wool work, because idleness leads to lustfulness. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel says: Even one who has forbidden his wife to do work by means of a vow – he should divorce her and give her *ketubah* [*i.e. the financial settlement stipulated in her marriage contract*], for idleness leads to dull-mindedness (*m. Ketub.* 5:5; transl. Danby 2011:255).

A woman does not only labour for her husband in the domestic sphere; both the wife and female slaves in the household can also engage in waged labour. However, any profits and income generated are given to the husband of the household: 'A woman's finds and the work of her hands belong to her husband, and whatever she inherits, he "eats the fruits" during her lifetime' (*m. Ketub.* 6:1).

It should be noted that the phrase 'the work of her hands' [*ma'aseh yadeha*] serves as a catchall term in rabbinic writings for any economic value that results from women's labour, including items produced, payment for a product and wages. Highly gendered in its usage, the term is applied 'almost exclusively to female labor' (Labovitz 2007:20). This also extends to any female slaves in the household.

It would seem that women were active and important members and labourers in the agrarian sphere, yet they are absent from the narratives of the parables. The parable of the sower, for example, describes seeds being sown on different types of soil but fails to mention the labourers, including women, who would have been essential in preparing and maintaining the land. So too does the parable of the wicked tenants, referring to the planting of a vineyard in Luke 20:9 (ἄνθρωπος [τις] ἐφύτευσεν ἀμπελῶνα) in which women would most likely have worked.

As Van Eck (2021) argues, it is critical to read the parables with a realistic understanding of the social and economic world in which they were told. Women's involvement in fieldwork, as labourers and/or gleaners, would have been a common sight for Jesus' audience, and thus, although not mentioned, they would have been imagined as present in these stories.

## Women and travel in the context of the parable of the sower

The parable of the sower (Lk 8:4–15) portrays a farmer scattering seeds along various terrains. While often imagined with a male protagonist traversing public roads or private fields, considering the presence of women on these roads reshapes how the dynamics of this parable is understood. The 1st-century Mediterranean roads, particularly Roman roads, were well-travelled by men and women alike, despite prevailing cultural anxieties about women's mobility.

Roman roads in the early 1st century facilitated the movement of diverse travellers as part of the empire's promotion of *Pax Romana*. This increase in mobility served as a demonstration of Roman power but also challenged traditional gender norms. Women, whether as part of families, convoys or independently, became frequent travellers. They moved for various reasons, such as accompanying husbands on military or business endeavours, engaging in trade or as slaves serving households. Historical evidence shows women travelling even without male companions. The *Oxyrhynchus* papyri, containing everyday records from Roman Egypt, document women travelling alone for funerals (*P. Oxy* 9.1218), attending religious events (*P. Oxy* 1.112) or delivering letters (*P. Oxy* 63.4365) (see Blumell 2011:245). These records suggest that women were a visible presence on public roads, including the routes travelled by farmers depicted in the parable.

In the 1st century, it was increasingly common to see women travelling along Roman roads, reflecting a broader social shift that began during the civil wars of the late Republic. Initially, accounts of women on the move were limited to exceptional cases – wives following their husbands during exile or relocation. However, by the end of the century, elite women, such as Octavia with Antony (Plutarch *Ant.* 33) and Livia with Augustus (Tacitus *Ann.* 3.34.6; Seneca *Clem.* 1.9), were routinely accompanying their husbands on journeys across provinces. Their travels not only marked a visible trend on Roman roads but also sparked significant debate among male contemporaries, with figures like Tacitus (*Ann.* 3.33), Martial (*Epigrammata* 2.56) and Juvenal (*Sat.* 6.398–412) expressing concerns about the influence and behaviour of these travelling wives. This tension between everyday practice and public perception underscores how the presence of women on the move became a familiar aspect of Roman life, intertwining with the broader ideological discourses about female conduct in the provinces (see Foubert 2011:349–351).

## Travelling women and the parable's road

The roads central to the parable of the sower would have been frequented by various travellers, including women. Roman infrastructure, while facilitating travel for all classes, posed dangers for men and women alike. Bandits were a common threat, as attested by tombstone inscriptions

lamenting deaths during journeys [*interfecta/us a latronibus*]. For instance, the parents of one daughter killed by bandits raised a funerary inscription, while another noted a woman murdered for her jewellery (Carucci 2017:182). These examples highlight the perils of travel on roads like those leading to farms or towns in rural Palestine.

Although these risks applied to all, women travellers were often perceived as particularly vulnerable. The Talmud (*Pesachim* 111a) warns against encounters with women on roads, describing scenarios where such meetings could have fatal consequences, possibly stemming from superstitions and gendered fears of contamination. These texts underscore the widespread presence of women on roads and the societal anxieties it triggered.

## Women and the farmer's seed pouch

In first-century Greco-Roman society, women's lives and labor were closely linked to textile production, which was widely regarded as a symbol of femininity (Lovén 2020:125). It has been classically understood that women were responsible for 'ordinary' textile manufacture within households and men were responsible for specialised and higher quality items; however, recent research suggests that this understanding is rooted in mistranslations and misguided contextual understandings of ancient sources (see Foxhall 2023:253–269).

Not only would it seem that women self-identified as expert weavers (ὑφάντης) in their trade, both in households and in the market and public sphere, but the grammatical gender and literary context of this trade/occupation are indeed feminine. Various primary sources provide strong evidence to consider textiles, such as pouches/satchels, as being fabricated and repaired by women in households and within marketplaces. This might include female slaves, non-male slaves, mothers, daughters and grandmothers (Bundrick 2008:286–288).<sup>8</sup> Research carried out by Harris (2002:88–97) suggests that throughout a selection of primary sources, 27 feminine forms are given of occupations clearly performed by women, of which 11 clearly allude to textile production and repair.<sup>9</sup>

It seems likely that most pouches or satchels were made and repaired with slave labour, either inside the household by means of the homeowner's slaves, or in a market by the shop owner's slaves. Whatever the case may be, it was a feminine (woman or non-male) trait and was '...a woman forefronting her particular skill in making textiles as an occupation, whatever else she may also have done in the household where she lived and worked' (Foxhall 2023:83).

8. Arist. *Lys.* 586, Pl. *Grg.* 517C – 518C, Pl. *Resp.* 449A.

9. *Akestria* – Seamstress (IG II 1556.27-29), *Amorgantinos* – Specialist textile worker; *amorgis* is a plant fibre for making fine cloth (Aeschin. 1.97; Ar. *Lys.* 735), *Bapheus* – Dyer (Plut. *Per.* 12), *Erithos* – Wool worker (Dem. 57.45), *Himatiopolis* – Clothes seller (IG II 11254), *Hyphantes* – Weaver (Pl. *Grg.* 449D, 517C-518C; *Phd.* 87B-E; *Plt.* 279B-283B, 308D; *Resp.* 369D-370E, 445C; Arist. *Pol.* 1256a.6 (definitely female), 1325b-1326a), *Linourgos* – Linen/Flax worker (Alexis fr. 36 K-A), *Pluntria* – Clothes cleaner (IG 13 794), *Rhaptos* – Clothes mender (Ar. *Plut.* 513), *Stuppeiopolos* – Plant-fibre seller (Ar. *Eq.* 129), *Talasiourgos* – Textile worker (IG II 1553.35-37).

There seems to also be a link to a woman in the household having to learn weaving as a skill necessary to be a good virgin woman [παρθένος], eligible of being married and adhering to ancient feminine ideals. This evokes the possible scenario where the farmer of the parable's daughter made his seed pouch or satchel for him, perhaps having learned the skill from her mother or one of the female slaves in the household.

Whether the seed pouch or satchel was made for the farmer in a market or created in his own household by his family members or slaves, '... it is absolutely clear from a wide range of sources...that textiles and textile manufacture were conceptually and ideologically associated with women' (Foxhall 2023:86). This makes it highly likely that the audience of this parable would have imagined the farmer's seed pouch or satchel – a critical part of this parable (carrying the very seed, this parable revolves around) – as made by women.

## Women in the parable's audience

Luke 8:1–3 highlights a group of women who followed Jesus, supporting his ministry financially and being among the first to hear his teachings. These women would have been familiar with the risks and realities of travelling in the Roman Empire. Whether elite property owners or individuals of lower status, these female followers likely envisioned themselves within the context of the parable, imagining the farmer travelling along well-trodden paths.

Given their experiences, these women could have recognised the dangers implied in the parable's description of seeds falling along the road, susceptible to trampling or being snatched by birds. These images might have resonated with their own encounters with the unpredictability of travel, the fragility of life on the road and the spiritual implications of Jesus' teaching. Moreover, these women would most likely have had first-hand experience of making or repairing the satchel/pouch that the farmer uses in the parable and would have evoked images of their own households or childhoods, learning how to produce and repair textiles from their mothers or female slaves.

Intersectionality further enriches our understanding of women travellers in the parable's context. While elite women could afford greater autonomy in travel, female slaves and other marginalised groups would also have been present on the roads, accompanying households or labouring in agricultural settings. The idea that the farmer in the parable might traverse public roads, scattering seeds along the way (from a pouch made by women), aligns with the 1st-century reality of women occupying these spaces. Roman roads were not exclusively male domains; they were complex social environments where the presence of women was undeniable, whether as labourers, travellers or companions. This acknowledgement challenges modern readers to reconsider the narrative's audience and its original implications.

Women's presence on 1st-century roads not only contextualises the parable of the sower but also broadens its interpretive horizons. The dangers, resilience and visibility of women travellers reflect the complexities of ancient Mediterranean life. Recognising this historical reality allows us to appreciate how Jesus' parables might have resonated with both male and female listeners, affirming their shared vulnerabilities and spiritual capacities.

By un hiding the presence of women in this narrative context, we expand our understanding of the parable's setting. This reimagining invites readers to see the roads travelled by the sower as spaces occupied by diverse voices and experiences – voices that, like the scattered seeds, bear the potential for transformation, growth or resistance depending on their circumstances.

## Reimagining the parables through an un hiding lens

The parable of the sower (Lk 8:5–8) traditionally focusses on the types of soil that determine the success of the seed. However, as Van Eck (2021) emphasises, the parable is grounded in the socio-economic realities of the time. The mention of seed falling on 'good soil' could have evoked images of women labourers, who played a key role in preparing the fields and ensuring the fertility of the land. Pollux's reference to women reapers (γυναικα θερίστρια) and Aristophanes' depiction of women as mowers (Άμηστρις) further support the idea that women were active participants in agricultural work, even if they are hidden in the narrative.

Similarly, the parable of the mustard seed (Lk 13:18–19) evokes images of growth and cultivation, processes in which women were deeply involved. Although the parable does not name women explicitly, it is reasonable to assume that 1st-century audiences would have imagined women tending the mustard plants, just as they would have been involved in the care and harvesting of other crops. Women, who were responsible for maintaining household gardens, would have been seen as integral to this imagery of nurturing and growth.

In the parable of the wicked tenants (Lk 20:9–18), the focus is on the relationship between landowners and tenants, reflecting the harsh realities of land exploitation that Van Eck (2021) points out as characteristic of the time. This exploitation would have likely extended to female land owners, along with women's presence as labourers in vineyards, responsible for gathering grapes and maintaining vines, which would have been understood by the original hearers. Plutarch's reference to female labourers (καλάμητρις) and Theocritus' mention of women as gleaners reinforce the historical reality that women were present in vineyard labour.

## Unhiding women in parables: Building on previous work

The methodology of ‘unhiding’ female characters builds on prior research, particularly in Du Toit’s other publications on the parables of the good Samaritan, the prodigal son and friend at midnight (see Du Toit 2022b, 2024a, 2024b). In these parables, Du Toit convincingly argues that, although women are not explicitly mentioned, their presence would have been assumed based on the cultural context. Women’s roles in caregiving, hospitality and household management were integral to the functioning of society, and thus, their presence would have been implied, even when hidden in the narrative. This approach also reveals the broader androcentric nature of the biblical text, which often obscures women’s contributions in favour of male-centred narratives.

In the same vein, the agrarian parables, when read realistically, unhide the hidden presence of female labourers. Women’s work in the fields, vineyards and household gardens would have been a daily sight for the 1st-century audience, informing their imagination when hearing these parables. Van Eck’s focus on the realism of the parables encourages us to rethink the narratives as reflective of the economic and social realities of the time. By recognising the active roles women played in agriculture, we uncover a fuller, more inclusive understanding of the parables.

## Hidden female characters in the parable of the sower

As a helpful guide, Table 1 aims to identify the hidden women that this article will attempt to ‘unhide’, where in the parable narrative they are present but hidden, and how they

**TABLE 1:** Importance and presence of women within agricultural spaces in the 1st-century Mediterranean region.

Parable verse (Luke 8)	Framework for an unhiding reading		
	Hidden female character	Hidden female character’s location	Hidden female character’s importance and effect on the narrative
<sup>5</sup> A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on and the birds ate it up	Female household slaves, mothers, daughters, labourers and workers	The house from where the farmer ‘went out’, the road the farmer walks on, and the fields where he sowed	It is very likely that women made the pouch or satchel that the farmer used to sow his seed, making the entire premise of the parable hinge on the labour of women. Women would have been present and important in the household that the farmer came from, attending to his needs for his journey and working in his fields. Moreover, the feet that trampled the seeds would have also belonged to women.
<sup>8</sup> Still other seeds fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown	Female slaves, wives, daughters and hired workers	The fields where the crops came up	With such a large crop female slaves, gleaners and labourers would have been used to reap the crop and tend to the land.

directly affect the narrative outcome. This table is based on this article’s investigation of the importance and presence of women within agricultural spaces in the 1st-century Mediterranean region, and builds upon Du Toit’s PhD and current body of work on the unhiding of female characters in the parables (Du Toit 2025).

## An unhiding reading and conclusion

Drawing from the cultural information and emic social scripts presented in this article, it can be alternatively imagined that the farmer leaves his farm, a place where his wife, daughter, female slaves and labourers would have assisted him in everyday agrarian life. These female characters might have aided him in getting ready for his journey and would have helped to maintain his house and farmstead – even weaving and making the very satchel he uses to sow the seed with. Moreover, when the farmer scatters the seed, some of the seed is trampled on the ground and under the feet of travellers, most likely including female travellers. Finally, when the crop is yielded, female slaves and labourers (wives, widows, daughters and day labourers) would have helped to glean and assisted in the reaping of the large crop.

These important female characters would have likely been imagined by the audience of the parable, especially the female audience to which Luke 8:1–3 refers, who would have possessed an emic understanding of the presence and importance of these women. The parable narrative would also have been impossible without their presence as the farmer, his instruments, the fields and the seeds are all touched and influenced by the participation and industry of women.

Through an unhiding reading, we can reimagine the parable of the sower as inclusive of women’s labour, particularly in the agrarian spaces that form the backdrop of these stories. As Van Eck’s research emphasises, the parables are deeply rooted in the social and economic realities of 1st-century Palestine. By acknowledging the historical presence of women in agriculture, we not only challenge the androcentric biases of traditional interpretations but also offer a more authentic reading that reflects the experiences of the original audience. Thanks to Du Toit’s contribution to parable research, ‘unhiding’ the presence of women in the parable allows us to see women as active, present and integral to the parable narratives, even when they are not explicitly named (Du Toit 2025).

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C.D.d.T. and E.v.E. contributed towards the conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation and writing of the article.

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## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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