

SHORT STUDY

Spermatic and Uterine Dimensions in Mark and Luke's Parable of the Sower

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Abstract

This article examines the language of seed reception within the Parable of the Sower in Mark and Luke. The paper argues that Mark's diction introduces reproductive terms into the seed figure and that Luke edits Mark to include even more distinctively gynaecological and reproductive terminology. The result is a parable in Luke that turns the audience into uterine receptacles of the seed/logos.

Keywords: Mark; Luke; Parable of the Sower; seed; uterus; conception

Neglected in discussions on the Parable of the Sower are terms, in both Mark and Luke, that are more at home in reproductive rather than planting contexts.¹ These are easy to miss since the diction and metaphors of insemination and sowing or conception and germination have overlapped for a long, long time (e.g., 'do not sow progeny' μηδ'...|σπερμαίνειν γενεήν Hes. *Op.* 735–6).² Even in 2022, English speakers can readily – if perhaps uncomfortably – shift from 'seed' meaning 'kernel' to 'seed' indicating 'semen.' Similarly, 'ploughing' remains current in agricultural and sexual contexts. Comparable valences obtained in ancient Greek as well. Oedipus, for example, invokes both semantic ranges when he says of Jocasta that he 'plowed the one who bore him, whence he was once sown' (τὴν τεκοῦσαν ἤροσεν|ῶθεν περ αὐτὸς ἐσπάρη Soph. *OT* 1497–8; cf. Soph. *Ant.* 569; Thgn. 582).³ However, these shared linguistic contours across time and language

¹ Although the secondary literature on this parable in Mark and Luke is extensive, I have not found any substantive treatment of reproductive language or imagery. For broad reviews of scholarship on the Markan parable and examples of agricultural focus, see K. D. White, 'The Parable of the Sower', *JTS* 15 (1964) 300–7; J. D. Crossan, 'The Seed Parables of Jesus', *JBL* 92 (1973) 244–66; D. Wenham 'The Interpretation of the Parable of the Sower', *NTS* 20 (1974) 299–319; J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 288–313; A. Y. Collins, *Mark* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 239–52; and J. Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (2 vols.; EKKNT; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Patmos, 2015²) 1.155–78; for scholarship on the Lukan version and examples of agricultural focus, see W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (THKNT; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1971) 175–8; I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 317–27; F. Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1: 1–9:50* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 303–12; and M. Wolter, *Das Lukasevangelium* (HNT 5; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 302–10.

² See P. duBois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 39–85. Collins, *Mark*, 244 gestures toward the reproductive sense of sowing in the Markan parable ('In Greek literature, the image of sowing was also used for the generation of human beings.') but does not pursue this line of inquiry. This and all subsequent translations are mine.

³ See duBois, *Sowing the Body*, 76–8.

can dull us to subtle incongruences in such discourses. In this paper, I demonstrate how Mark and, to a greater degree, Luke utilise terms natural to the framework of planting, fertility and harvesting, even while employing others that subtly reorder the famous parable to encompass both the botanical and the sexually procreative.⁴ The focus of our inquiry will fall primarily on the reception of seed in both versions, with additional attention paid to Luke's use of other gynaecological language not found in Mark's parable. Since standard biblical commentaries and word studies like the *TDNT* have not previously entertained this approach, we must build the argument on new philological surveys.⁵ We begin with Mark's language of sowing and receptivity.

The Language of Seed Apprehension

When Mark has Jesus explain his parable, the seed is identified as the word (ὁ λόγος) which is sown (σπείρεται) by the sower (ὁ σπείρων 4.14–15). A few verses later, we learn that those amenable to the word (τὸν λόγον) are said to receive it (παραδέχονται; Mark 4.20). Even as Jesus clarifies the significance of the parable's various metaphorical details, he still employs agricultural imagery at the end of the scene, depicting the successful recipients of the word/seed as those who 'bear fruit' (καρποφοροῦσιν Mark 4.20). The 'seediness' of the saying thus operates right through the closing of Jesus' explanation, and so when we encounter those who receive the word, we simultaneously understand their reception of the seed as well. This is all well and good so far as the figure goes, but if the word is sown like seed, something is a bit off with the language of its successful disposition in good earth. Simply put, παραδέχεσθαι τὸ σπέρμα (or similar words for seed) is not a common agricultural locution for land receiving seed, nor is it found among authors we might suspect, like Hesiod and Theocritus or Aristotle and Theophrastus. We do find an example in Strabo ('this plain...is receptive to copious sowing' τὸ πεδῖον τοῦτο...σπόρον δὲ πλεῖστον δέχεται 12.3.15) and another in Zenobius ('the earth having received the seed' ἡ γῆ...τὸν σπόρον δεχομένη 4.38), though in both cases the παρα- prefix is lacking. These two instances appear rather exceptional.

The phrase with the simplex δέχεσθαι or in compound with various prefixes appears to have held considerably more currency, however, in discussions on reproductive organs and seminal receptivity. Thus, when Aristotle addresses the movement and egress of semen in various types of male animals, he speaks of testes that 'receive spermatic excess' (δέχονται τὴν σπερματικὴν περίττωσιν *Gen. an.* 717b). Artemidorus depicts miscarriage in the womb occurring due to unnatural reception of semen (φθερεῖ γὰρ τὸ κατὰ γαστρὸς διὰ τὸ παρὰ φύσιν δέχεσθαι τὰ σπέρματα 1.79.112–13). Soranus mentions different uterine conditions and how they more easily accept the adhesion of semen (δέχεσθαι ῥαδίως τὴν πρόσφυσιν τοῦ σπέρματος *Gynaecia* 1.34.2). Traditional identification of the sky as father, pseudo-Plutarch explains, is due to 'the heavens' outpouring of water having the disposition of semen' (διὰ τὸ τὰς τῶν ὑδάτων ἐκχύσεις σπερμάτων ἔχειν ἀξίν); Earth, on the other hand, is understood to be mother since she receives this semen and gives birth (ἡ δὲ γῆ μήτηρ διὰ τὸ δέχεσθαι ταῦτα καὶ τίκτειν *Placita philosophorum*

⁴ For the agricultural and reproductive valences of seed and corresponding discourses in early Christian literature, see, for example, J. A. Cavallo, 'Agricultural Imagery in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Truth', *Religion and Literature* 24 (1992) 29–30; B. Leyerle, 'Blood is Seed', *JR* 81 (2001) 26–48; M. D. Litwa, *Jesus Deus: The Early Christian Depiction of Jesus as a Mediterranean God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014) 37–67; for Luke specifically, see M. Pope, 'Luke's Seminal Annunciation: An Embryological Reading of Mary's Conception', *JBL* 138 (2019) 791–807 and M. Pope, 'Extraction and Emission Language in Luke 8:45', *NovT* 63 (2021) 198–206.

⁵ Unhelpful also in this regard is A. Denaux and R. Corstjens, *The Vocabulary of Luke: An Alphabetical Presentation and a Survey of Characteristic and Noteworthy Words and Word Groups in Luke's Gospel* (Biblical Tools and Studies; Leuven: Peeters, 2009) and W. K. Hobart, *The Medical Language of St. Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954).

880b). When Galen discusses the feasibility of crossbreeding horses with donkeys in contrast to the impossibility of hybridising horses with humans, we encounter females of the species receiving semen (δέξασθαι τὸ σπέρμα), uptake of semen into the recesses of wombs (ἄν ὑποδέξαιτο τοῖς κόλποις τῆς ὑστέρας τὸ σπέρμα), and the intrauterine grasping of semen (καταδέξαιτο 3.170). Similarly, Galen elsewhere considers human uteruses and refers to their reception of semen (δέξασθαι...σπέρμα 4.163). Clement asserts that frequency of sex does not lead to conception, but rather the womb's reception of semen (ἀλλ' ἡ τῆς μήτρας παραδοχή *Strom.* 3.12.83.2). Later, the physician Oribasius will state that when a woman conceives, 'the side of her womb that receives the semen will close' (ἡ μὲν δεξαμένη τὸ σπέρμα μύσει 10.19).

Seminal Grasping in Philo

Philo offers still more examples of this language featuring metaphors analogous to Mark's parable of seed receptivity. We find our Markan compound *παραδέχεσθαι* in a brief aside about the genesis of the cosmos. Philo figuratively calls God the creator and father (πατέρα) of the universe and God's knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) the mother (μητέρα *De ebrietate* 30). Philo then briefly mixes sexual with agricultural imagery, depicting God engaging in congress with the mother and sowing creation (ἡ συνὼν ὁ θεὸς...ἔσπειρε γένεσιν *De ebrietate* 30). Reverting fully to parturition language, Philo then portrays the mother receiving God's semen and, with due labour pains, giving birth to his only beloved and perceptible son, the world (ἡ δὲ παραδεξαμένη τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ σπέρματα τελεσφόροις ὠδίσι τὸν μόνον καὶ ἀγαπητὸν αἰσθητὸν υἱὸν ἀπεκύησε, τόνδε τὸν κόσμον *De ebrietate* 30). We see the semantic proximity of the botanical and procreative, but also Philo's distinct employment of *παραδέχεσθαι τὸ σπέρμα* for the latter. Further exempla confirm this particular use in Philo. When Philo rejects myths or explanations of people being conceived and born in any other way than sex and parturition, he says that humans sprout, when a man sows into a uterus as though into a field (βλαστώνουσιν ἄνθρωποι, σπείροντος μὲν εἰς μήτραν ἄνδρὸς ὡς εἰς ἄρουραν *De aeternitate mundi* 69). For her part, 'the woman receives the semen' (γυναικὸς δ' ὑποδεχομένης τὰ σπέρματα *De aeternitate mundi* 69). The agricultural and sexual figures in this passage nearly eclipse, though again, Philo specifically reserves (ὑπο)δέχεσθαι τὰ σπέρματα to refer to the spermatocentric receptivity of females. The female procreative valence of δέχεσθαι is secured in a negative doublet where a man's ejaculation is the direct counter to a woman's reception of semen (οὔτε προέσθαι οὔθ' ὑποδέξασθαι σποράν *Philo De somniis* 1.184).

In an allegorical reading of Leah's inferior physical attractiveness in comparison to her younger sister Rachel, Philo depicts God favouring the older Leah through an act of insemination. Leah, 'receiving from God the semen of prudence, feels the pangs of labour and gives birth to good notions, worthy of the father who sired them' (παρ' οὗ τὰ φρονήσεως παραδεξαμένη σπέρματα ὠδίνει καὶ ἀποτίκτει καλὰς καὶ ἀξίας ἐννοίας τοῦ γεννήσαντος πατρός *De posteritate Caini* 135). Here we encounter our Markan compound *παραδέχεσθαι* as well as semen, parturition, and, lest we miss the source of the ejaculate, a begetting father, but with this embryological figure we have a depiction of abstract mental receptivity as well: God's semen of prudence finds Leah's mind responsive and sufficiently fertile to bring forth admirable thoughts. Philo concludes his interpretation by addressing his soul, promising that should it imitate Leah, God 'will shower upon you all his fountains of good' (ὅλας ἐπομβρήσει σοι τὰς τοῦ καλοῦ πηγὰς *De posteritate Caini* 135). There is no subtlety here: by swapping out maternal Leah, Philo makes his soul a uterus to receive the sky father's outpouring of generative fluid. In a general sense, we are not far off from both the diction and theme of the high-yield seed reception in Mark's parable.

This is not the only instance of Philo subversively tinkering with gender and the fluids of biological sex for his own allegorical ends. When comparing the sexual congress of male and female bodies in marriage to the marital union of reasoning faculty and perfect virtue (λογισμῶν...καὶ τελείων ἀρετῶν), Philo assesses the two combinations as radically opposite (ἐναντιώτατοι δὲ ἀλλήλοις *De Abrahamo* 100). ‘For in the marriage of bodies’, Philo states, ‘the male sows and the female receives the semen, but, just the opposite, with a merging in souls, virtue, though it appears to take the role of the woman, is disposed to sow good intents and earnest speech and expositions of most beneficial teachings, while reasoning, though it is thought to be placed in the position of the man, receives the holy and divine semen’ (κατὰ μὲν γὰρ τὸν τῶν σωμάτων σπείρει μὲν τὸ ἄρρεν, γονὴν δ’ ὑποδέχεται τὸ θήλυ, κατὰ δὲ τὴν ἐν ψυχαῖς σύνοδον ἔμπαλιν ἢ μὲν ἀρετὴ τάξιν γυναικὸς ἔχειν δοκοῦσα σπείρειν πέφυκε βουλὰς ἀγαθὰς καὶ λόγους σπουδαίους καὶ βιωφελεστάτων εἰσηγήσεις δογμάτων, ὁ δὲ λογισμὸς εἰς τὴν ἀνδρὸς χώραν τάττεσθαι νομισθεὶς τὰς ἱεροπρεπεῖς καὶ θείας ὑποδέχεται σποράς *De Abrahamo* 101). In other words, grammatically feminine ἀρετή, as the divine source of the good, ejaculates into grammatically masculine λογισμὸς, like a woman inseminating a man’s uterus.⁶ The offspring of this upended sexual congress is an idealised religious devotion: high moral aims, sober dialogue, and exegesis of doctrine. Philo is not alone in employing this sort of insemination language to figure intellectual progress.⁷ In a distastefully patronising tone, Plutarch states that just as women need to have sex with men to conceive viable fetuses, so also women need to learn from men since they will give birth to many strange and trivial intents and passions (ἄτοπα πολλὰ καὶ φαῦλα βουλευματα καὶ πάθη κυοῦσι) if they do not receive the semen of beneficial reason (ὅν γὰρ λόγων χρηστῶν σπέρματα μὴ δέχωνται *Mor.* 145d–e). In this discourse, women, or men figured as women, improve in their souls and minds with the reception of spermatic logic.

Given Mark’s use of παραδέχεσθαι to convey the reception of word/seed and the two agricultural exempla noted above (Strabo and Zenobius), and given the close connection between husbandry and procreation language obtained from many of our passages, it seems to me that Mark’s use of the term simultaneously coheres with seed sowing imagery and introduces a spermatic and uterine valence to the parable. The weight of the evidence is too much to ignore. Moreover, it takes no special pleading to imagine that an audience encountering a sowing and seed receptivity figure would be prone to intuit an ejaculation and conception simile as well. The audience of this paper will do likewise when, for example, they encounter the saying ‘He sowed his wild oats.’

Luke’s Technical Precision

Buttressing this analysis of Mark’s παραδέχεσθαι is Luke’s revision. When Luke opts to employ κατέχειν instead of his source’s term for the reception of the word/seed, the updated parable veers more sharply toward the spermatic and uterine (8.15).⁸ Even more than (παρα)δέχεσθαι, κατέχειν appears to be a specialised term in ancient gynaecology. Thus, Galen employs the locution to refer specifically to female sex organs and conception. ‘The nature of wombs’, he says, ‘is to accept and hold semen’ (ἡ τῶν ὑστερῶν φύσις...δέξασθαι καὶ κατασχεῖν σπέρμα *Galen* 4.163; cf. *Galen* 4.515, 8.424).

⁶ For similar biological sex- and grammatical gender-bending in Latin literature, see A. Corbeill, *Sexing the World: Grammatical Gender and Biological Sex in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015) 72–103.

⁷ This survey of Philo is not exhaustive and additional examples of δέχεσθαι τὸ σπέρμα and various permutations of the phrase could be adduced (e.g., Philo *De mutatione nominum* 144; *De praemiis et poenis* 160).

⁸ M. Goodacre, *Thomas and the Gospels: The Case for Thomas’ Familiarity with the Synoptics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) 103: ‘Of all the evangelists, Luke is the most inclined to use [gynecological] imagery.’ My brackets.

Note the general sense of Galen's δέξασθαι in contradistinction with the technical precision of his κατασχεῖν: a uterus can admit semen (δέξασθαι), but conception does not occur unless the womb grasps (κατασχεῖν) onto the ejaculate. Pseudo-Galen likewise asserts that conception in the womb occurs when post-menses conditions are right for holding semen (κατέσχε τὸ σπέρμα 19.454). In fact, παραδέχεσθαι, Mark's term for seed reception, is not a technical term Galen uses for any sort of seminal delivery, floral or faunal.

Soranus, in his treatise on female reproductive health, directly compares human conception to sowing seeds into the earth (κατὰ τῆς γῆς αὐτὰ βληθέντα 1.36.1) and employs the same locution as Galen, asserting that 'the deposited semen is securely held when the menses are subsiding' (τὸ σπέρμα βεβαίως κατέχεται παρατεθέν, ὅτε παρακμάζουσιν αἱ καθάρσεις 1.36.8–9). Luke's exact contemporary, the physician Dioscorides, similarly utilises κατέχειν in the technical sense of active conception ('If the woman's womb does not grasp the semen' εἰ δὲ γυναικὸς μήτρα μὴ κατέχη τὸ σπέρμα CCAG vol. 11.2, page 166, line 25=Zuretti).⁹ And well before these writers, the authors of the Hippocratic literature had established κατέχειν as medical terminology for intrauterine apprehension of semen (e.g., 'If the womb does not grasp the semen' ἦν αἱ μήτραι μὴ κατέχωσι τὴν γονὴν Hippoc. *Mul.* 243; cf. Hippoc. *Mul.* 11, 12, 241). Significantly, the locution 'to seize seed' (κατέχειν σπέρμα) appears to be used only for intrauterine reproductive contexts and *not* in agricultural or botanical settings. This is significant. Unless he is breaking with established usage, Luke opts for language that removes the slight ambiguity between procreative and agricultural introduced by Mark's diction.

Let us now consider another expression appearing identically in both versions of the parable. Adjacent and running parallel to Mark's term for seed/word reception is a compound verb meaning 'fruit-bearing' (καὶ παραδέχονται καὶ καρποφοροῦσιν 4.20). In light of our investigation into the uterine valences of παραδέχεσθαι and more especially κατέχειν, Luke's alteration of the first term and retention of the second in Mark's doublet is notable (κατέχουσιν καὶ καρποφοροῦσιν Luke 8.15). While the primary sense of καρποφορεῖν is undoubtedly agricultural, the language of produce or fruit (καρπός) also appears in embryological contexts. Aristotle reports of natural philosophers comparing egg-bearing and non-egg-bearing fish to plants that bear fruit and those that do not (τὸ μὲν καρποφορεῖ τὸ δ' ἄκαρπὸν ἐστὶν *Gen. an.* 755b). In a similar analogy, Galen asserts that 'just as fruit is not a part of trees, neither are embryos parts of those who are pregnant' (καθάπερ οὐδὲ τῶν δένδρων ὁ καρπός, οὐδὲ τῶν κυουσῶν τὰ ἔμβρυα 12.349). A few lines later Galen states that 'fetuses have a correspondent in fruit' (τὰ δὲ κυούμενα τοῖς καρποῖς ἀνάλογον ἔχει 12.350), a comparison Galen makes in another treatise as well (17b.652). More directly, Aelian refers to the pregnant womb of a hare as 'fruitful' (τὴν γαστέρα ἅτε ἔγκαρπον *NA* 13.12). In Theophrastus, we also find a reproduction figure with language nearly identical to Luke's spermatocentric reception and fruit-bearing diction. Theophrastus compares a certain plant's irregular mode of propagation to animals which 'lay eggs in themselves but give live birth' (ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ὠοτοκήσαντα ζωογονεῖ *Hist. pl.* 7.14.3). Continuing the embryonic and parturition imagery, Theophrastus says that such plants 'birth fruit, grasping and brooding over their blossom internally' (αὕτη τὸ ἄνθος ἐν ἑαυτῇ κατέχουσα καὶ πέττουσα καρποτοκεῖ Theophr. *Hist. pl.* 7.14.3). Underscoring Luke's use of κατέχειν is the fact that Theophrastus' employment of this embryogenesis term only works because of the repeated uterine terminology. Similarly, in Luke, the spermatocentric conception specified by κατέχειν is made legible in the parable by the profusion of agricultural imagery and language. In the botanist's image, the

⁹ C. O. Zuretti, ed., *Codices Hispanienses* (Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum 11.2; Brussels: Lamertin, 1934).

fertilised plant gives birth to fruit faunally; in Luke's figure, the sowed humans produce a crop of fruit florally.

In this vein, we should also take note of Luke's nearby use of *τελεσφορεῖν*, 'carry to completion' in 8.14 (appearing only here in the NT). Commentators regularly note the term's agricultural sense¹⁰ but do not give much attention to its common occurrence in medical literature as well.¹¹ Galen, for example, uses the term in both senses: fig trees bear figs (1.547) and hybrid animals exist because one species can retain (*διασωσαι*) the semen (*τὸ σπέρμα*) of another and carry the pregnancy to completion (*τελεσφορησαι* 3.170). Elsewhere Galen discusses females (*τὸ θῆλυ*) and insemination (*σπερμαῖνον*) and 'carrying the fetus to completion' (*τελεσφορεῖν τὸ κῆμα* 4.166). Similarly, when Galen discusses fertile pairings of semen and wombs, he refers to uteruses (*ύστέρων*) that successfully carry pregnancies (*τελεσφορεῖσθαι* 17b.867). Soranus also uses the term, noting that 'we observe that conceptions occur and come to fruition in every season' (*ἐν παντὶ γὰρ χρόνῳ καὶ γινομένης καὶ τελεσφορουμένης τὰς συλλήψεις θεωροῦμεν Gyn.* 1.41.3). In Dioscorides, we encounter the contrast between women who carry fetuses to term (*τελεσφορεῖν*) and those who miscarry (*ἀποβάλλειν τὸ ἔμβρυον Eur.* 2.97).

Biblical Conception

Fruit and human fertility have a strong connection in biblical literature as well. Jacob derides Rachel's childlessness, blaming God for depriving her of fruit from her womb (*ἐστέρησέν σε καρπὸν κοιλίας Gen* 30.2). In the Psalms, we encounter progeny in general referred to as fruit (*τὸν καρπὸν αὐτῶν* 20.11) and children specifically as the fruit of the womb (*τοῦ καρποῦ τῆς γαστρὸς* 126.3). With male physiology as referent, we also find in the Psalms the expression 'from the fruit of your viscera' (*ἐκ καρποῦ τῆς κοιλίας σου* 131.11). Similarly, in Lamentations and Micah, we see offspring portrayed as 'fruit of the belly' (*καρπὸν κοιλίας Lam* 2.20; *Mic* 6.7). Significantly, the only NT author to employ this biblical figure is Luke. We find a close approximation to Psalms 131.11 (*ἐκ καρποῦ τῆς κοιλίας*) in Acts 2.30: 'from the fruit of his loins' (*ἐκ καρποῦ τῆς ὀσφύος*), with a small subset of the textual tradition preserving the Septuagintal *κοιλίας*. Most famously, however, in a passage with dual pregnancies and uteruses (Luke 1.39–45), Luke has Elizabeth proclaim to Mary the biblical sounding locution: 'Blessed is the fruit of your womb' (*εὐλογημένος ὁ καρπὸς τῆς κοιλίας σου* 1.42). Given Luke's replacement of the reproductively suggestive *παραδέχεσθαι* for the exclusively gynaecological and non-agricultural *κατέχειν*, it seems to me difficult *not* to hear the parturition sense of *τελεσφορεῖν* in 8.14 and *καρποφορεῖν* in 8.15.

But if we pan out just slightly to include Luke's participle *ἀκούσαντες* (cf. *ἀκούουσιν* Mark 4.20), working together with his term for spermatic apprehension ('having heard, they grasp the word' *ἀκούσαντες τὸν λόγον κατέχουσιν* 8.15), this auditory component to the reception of seed/word again reinforces the uterine orientation of Luke's revision. As we just noted above, Elizabeth blesses the fruit of Mary's womb. Elizabeth's benediction is prompted by Mary's salutation: 'When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the fetus in her womb jolted' (*ὡς ἤκουσεν τὸν ἄσπασμόν τῆς Μαρίας ἡ Ἐλισάβετ, ἐσκίρτησεν τὸ βρέφος ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ αὐτῆς Luke* 1.41). After blessing Mary's embryo (Luke 1.42), Elizabeth then explains that 'When the sound of your greeting came into my ears, the fetus in my womb jolted with delight' (*ὡς ἐγένετο ἡ φωνὴ τοῦ ἄσπασμοῦ σου εἰς τὰ*

¹⁰ E.g., Marshall, *Luke* 326 and J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; Garden City: Double Day, 1981) 714.

¹¹ Though see Wolter, *Lukasevangelium*, 309.

ὄψα μου, ἐσκίρτησεν ἐν ἀγαλλιᾷσει τὸ βρέφος ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ μου Luke 1.44). Luke draws a clear and direct connection between hearing (ἤκουσεν/εἰς τὰ ὄψα) and the interior of wombs (ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ). Indeed, the aural/uterine exchange between the two pregnant women is already the second instance of this nexus. If we backtrack a few verses to 1.29, we find Mary wondering about the nature of Gabriel's greeting (διελογίζετο ποταπὸς εἶη ὁ ἄσπασμὸς οὗτος). Following this, the angel tells Mary she will conceive in her womb and give birth to a son (συλλήμψη ἐν γαστρὶ καὶ τέξῃ υἰόν Luke 1.31).¹² Twice over, Luke has prepared his audience to entertain the notion that female reproductive organs can be sites responsive to hearing spoken words, a dynamic at work in his revised seed/word parable with its use of the intrauterine term κατέχειν in conjunction with the participle ἀκούσαντες.

We have one more puzzle piece to consider. In the explanation of the parable, Luke declines to retain Mark's details about the various levels of crop production (Mark 4.20). Instead, in 8.15, Luke replaces the unwieldy string of numbers with the shorter phrase καρποφοροῦσιν ἐν ὑπομονῇ ('they bear fruit with endurance'). As a matter of course, commentators remark that ἐν ὑπομονῇ has reference to maintaining faith through adversity with steadfastness.¹³ While I agree with this interpretation on one level, it seems to me that an interpretive biblical allusion is missed if we only understand the phrase in this sense. In Genesis 25.21, we learn that Isaac and Rebekah were initially unable to conceive due to Rebekah's infertility (ὅτι στεῖρα ἦν). In answer to Isaac petitioning the Lord, however, Rebekah conceived in her womb (ἔλαβεν ἐν γαστρὶ; Gen 25.21) and became pregnant with twins (Gen 25.24). But it was a difficult pregnancy because 'the two children jolted around in her' (ἐσκίρτων δὲ τὰ παιδιά ἐν αὐτῇ Gen 25.22). In the face of this hardship, Rebekah went to inquire from the Lord (ἔπορεύθη δὲ πυθέσθαι παρὰ κυρίου Gen 25.22). Philo, interpreting these same verses about Rebekah's handling of the troubled pregnancy, attributes an 'enduring soul' to Rebekah (ὑπομονητικὴ ψυχὴ *Legum allegoriarum* 3.88), a notion he repeats elsewhere in his writings (e.g., *De sacrificiis Abelis et Caini* 4; *Quod deterius potiori insidiari soleat* 30, 45).¹⁴ In fact, at *De plantatione* 169, Philo offers ὑπομονή as a translation for the Greek transliteration of הקבר.¹⁵ For Philo, the endurance of Rebekah, and Rebekah as endurance, ὑπομονή, is inseparable from what occurs in her womb (κοιλία and γαστήρ appear twice each in the Genesis narrative). Rebekah as ὑπομονή gained some currency among later Christian writers like Clement (*Strom.* 1.5.31.3) and Origen (*Sel. Gen.* 12.117=Migne vol 12, page 117). In Luke's gospel, Rebekah's infertility is certainly one of the biblical allusions in the depiction of Elizabeth's childlessness (καθότι ἦν ἡ...στεῖρα 1.7). It is also evident that Luke was in pointed contact with the Genesis material on Rebekah's pregnancy, given his use of the verb σκίρτᾶν from that narrative – only used this one time in the LXX to refer to intra-uterine movement – in the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth noted above. It also bears noting that Rebekah's single, named appearance in the NT concerns her sexual congress with Isaac and resulting pregnancy (Ῥεβέκκα ἐξ ἐνὸς κοίτην ἔχουσα Rom 9.10). At any rate, if we take Luke's parable of the seeds to encompass fertility, both agricultural and embryological, then the interpretive allusion to Rebekah's initial inability to conceive and then

¹² Though the greeting is followed by the announcement of impending pregnancy, we need not assume some sort of aural conception functioning within Luke's narrative since the agents of impregnation are provided in 1.35 ('holy spirit' πνεῦμα ἅγιον, 'power of the most high' δύναμις ὑψίστου) and neither are auditory in nature.

¹³ E.g., J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 328–9. For later Christian theories about Mary's pregnancy and aural conception, see J. A. Glancy, 'Mary in Childbirth', *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (ed. J. Glancy; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 81–136 and G. Adamson, 'Christ Incarnate: How Ancient Minds Conceived the Son of God' (PhD diss., Rice University, 2014).

¹⁴ See also TDNT sc. ὑπομένω (Hauck).

¹⁵ Cf. Philo, *Quaestiones in Genesim* 4.fr. 97.

her endurance (ὑπομονή) through a difficult pregnancy aligns with the parable's progression through various failed seedings before the final crop bears fruit in long-suffering.

Conclusion

When we take Luke's alterations in concert, we find that productive acceptance of the kingdom of God (ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ Luke 8.1, 10) is reconfigured as a *distinctively* maternal process.¹⁶ And perhaps this is not surprising since the kingdom (τῆς βασιλείας) which the Lord God (κύριος ὁ θεός) gives Jesus to rule (βασιλεύσει Luke 1.32–3), first appears in Luke's gospel when Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive in her womb and bear a son (συλλήμψη ἐν γαστρὶ καὶ τέξῃ υἱόν Luke 1.31). Allowing συλλαμβάνειν its literal sense, what do we suppose Mary 'clasps' in her womb before parturition? If we follow the Hippocratic corpus, Aristotle, and Galen, for example, conception occurs when the female or her uterus grabs onto semen (ξυλλάβῃ τὴν γονὴν Hippoc. *Nat. mul.* 35, 60; συλλάβῃ ἢ ὑστέρᾳ τὸ σπέρμα Arist. *Hist. an.* 583b; Gal. *De loc. aff.* 8.446; cf. 'wombs grab onto semen' συλλαμβάνουσιν αἱ μήτραι τὴν γονὴν; Gal. *De sem.* 4.516).¹⁷ As Luke figures them, the birth of Jesus and the acceptance of λόγος infer an act of spermatic apprehension and maternity.¹⁸ Whatever the biological sex of the parable's audience, Luke's adaptation of Mark requires 'him with ears to hear' (ὁ ἔχων ὦτα ἀκούειν; 8.8), not unlike Elizabeth, to imagine himself as a receptacle capable of insemination and embryogenesis. In other words, within the confines of the sower parable, the flourishing of the kingdom of God among humans is sexed female and, by sociological contamination, gendered feminine. Luke perhaps signals this by adding into the front end of the parable's narrative framework the all-male twelve (οἱ δώδεκα) in contradistinction to Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many other women (καὶ ἕτεροι πολλαί) whose gendered weakness had been tended by Jesus (τεθεραπευμένα ἀπὸ πνευμάτων... ἁσθενειῶν 8.1–3). When the male disciples (οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ) next intervene in Luke's modified story, they appear to sense the effeminising tension within the sowing metaphor and repeatedly ask (ἐπηρώτων) Jesus what the parable meant (τίς αὐτὴ εἶη ἢ παραβολή 8.9). Perhaps they were not confused but shocked.

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¹⁶ For similar gendered/sexed reversals in Luke, especially in the context of maternity and human fertility, see B. Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 82–9, 113–49.

¹⁷ See Pope, 'Luke's Seminal Annunciation' for semen and Luke's depiction of Mary's conception.

¹⁸ Incidentally, Grundmann, *Lukas*, 177 connects the receptive καρδιά in Luke 8.15 to the heart of Mary, who just gave birth to the infant Jesus (τὸ βρέφος), in Luke 2.16–19: 'Ein solches Herz besitzt Maria'.

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