

Green parables, biodiversity, and ecological understanding of *Sperma* in Matthew 13:3–9

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Abstract

Reading Matthew's Gospel ecologically, scholars have investigated several dimensions of Matthean ecological conversations and have provided interesting insights into the ecological agenda of the gospel. Despite the contributions, studies have paid little attention to Matthean theology of biodiversity, the green nature of the parables, and the central importance of *sperma* (seed) as embodying the entirety of divine ecological revelation of God's words and the ecological theology of Matthew. Exploring how Matthean ecological discourses call for new perspectives on our ecological crises, this article engages the parable of the *sower* from the perspective of the green nature of the parable, biodiversity, and the use of *sperma* as the centrality of God's ecological/spiritual revelation. Its aim is to present new creative discourses for the ecological study of the Gospel of Matthew and offer an understanding of the parable from an ecological approach that can help us engage with our present environmental crises.

Keywords

Ecology; seed; green parables; biodiversity; sower; sperma; creation; Matthew 13:3–9, 18–23

1. Introduction

In recent times, scholars have engaged the Gospels from the point of their ecological agenda.¹ Some have reflected on how agricultural or ecological elements in the Gospels have wisdom value that underpin and enforce

1 Thanks to Matthew Michael for his ideas that greatly contributed to the writing of this article.

care and respect for the cosmos.² The contributions of feminist scholars on the Gospel and ecology have centred on how discussions on ecology, such as creation, reproduction and new life amplify and echo patriarchal hegemony, paternalism, and imperialism as “natural” and God-ordained hierarchies.³ Thus, eco-feminists are on the path of rediscovery and re-mapping mission to show how ecological thoughts in the gospels side-tracked women because of the patriarchal orientation and anthropocentric nature of many biblical texts.⁴ The third voice are those that reject eco-theological readings of the gospel claiming that ecological thoughts on the scripture are associated with contemporary debates.⁵ The fourth position is the contribution of African voices engaged in an ecological hermeneutics to redress African ecological and social-cultural and religious problems, while being mindful of the peculiar nature of the African society, its people, as well as the impact of colonial structures on the African soil.⁶

Despite these different approaches, very little has been done in terms of an ecological reading of the parable of the sower.⁷ Scholars have not

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- 2 V. J. John, “Ecology in the Fourth Gospel: The Use of Creation Images in John,” *IJT* 46 no. 1&2 (2004): 13–25; J. Painter, “The Light Shines in the Darkness’ Creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection in John,” in *Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John*, eds. C. Koester & R. Bieringer, (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament, 222. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 21–46.
 - 3 See the works of Celia E. Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London, Saint Mary’s Press, 2008). See also A. M. Abdulai, “Could Eco-Feminists or Female Environmentalists Boost the Fight Against Climate Change?” *AJCCRS*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2022), pp. 107–114; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996); Karen Warren, “Ecological Feminist Philosophies: An Overview of the Issues,” *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* (1996), 108–116. <http://www.vedegylet.hu/okopolitika/Warren - Ecofeminism Overview.pdf>.
 - 4 M. S. Ibita, “Ecology, Economics and Gender,” in *Gender Agenda Matters: Papers of the “Feminist Section” of the International Meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature*, ed. I. Fischer (United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 160–183.
 - 5 Confer M. Harris, “Synoptic Gospels,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and Ecology*, eds. H. Marlow & M. Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 211–227, 211.
 - 6 See A. G. Van Aarde, “A Silver Coin in The Mouth Of A Fish (Matthew 17: 24–27): A Miracle Of Nature, Ecology, Economy and the Politics of Holiness,” *Neotestamentica* 27/1 (1993): 1–25.
 - 7 A major ecological reading of the sower is that of Elaine Wainwright, “An Ecological Reading of Matthew’s Gospel – 13:1–9” *Tui Motu Magazine*, Issue 216 (June 2017): 22–23, [Online]. Available: <https://hail.to/tui-motu-interislands-magazine/publication/430InQe/article/MUYOD7> [Accessed: 30 January 2023. According

fully engaged the diverse contours of ecological agenda of the Gospels, particularly in the spectrum of the parables. As parables, the Gospel text speaks not only about the word of God, but also of the word of God as our existential existence and realities. Ecological conversations with the Gospels, particularly with the parables are revelatory since they move beyond the peripherals of Jesus' speeches on agricultural activities, or the distracting modern polemics on ecology which generally considered the early church as incompetent to formulate an ecological agenda. The fact that an agricultural text is used as a parable, it normatively opens discussion about our environment and how humanity relates to it. Since the gospel is rooted in a Jewish ecological universe, with sensitivity to creation and human ecological stewardship, it is apparently clear that the gospel itself has a substratum of ecological consciousness which moves beyond the modern quest and academic obsession to ecologically baptize the gospel in ecological debates.

Seen from this perspective, this study undertakes an ecological reading of the parable of the sower by paying keen attention to the use of the word *sperma* and its cognates, especially in its ecological dimension. It shows how *sperma* and its cognates are deeply rooted in the ecological wisdom traditions of both Old and New testaments, and particularly the creation tradition in Genesis 1. The study begins by analysing the creation of the seed in Genesis 1:11–12 as mapping the ecological and theological background for understanding the green parables in Matthew, and with special reference to the parable of the sower.

This article addresses the parable of the sower (Mt 13:3–9), the mustard seed (Mt 13:31–32), the fig tree (24:32–35), and the seed and the tares (13:24–30), as green parables that share the main contours of Matthew's ecological interest. Using the results of these analyses, this work then examines the use of *sperma* in Mt 13:3–9, 18–23 to determine more precisely the nature

to Wainwright, the parable emphasises the act of listening to the earth, to attend to and learn from the Earth's processes, and take a clue to understand our place within the cosmos. Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* is a science fiction novel of how human activities have brought about environmental breakdown. Although Butler gives her work the title "*Parable of the Sower*", it was an ecological scientific reading that takes little consideration of the reading, interpretation, and understanding of the context of the biblical texts.

of Matthew’s ecological teaching in the parable of the sower. Employing eco-hermeneutical approach, this article charts new directions for reading agricultural parables as it challenges the pitfalls in the assumptions that the gospels are not concerned with nature, while offering practical advice on how to care for our present environment.

2. Ecological background of the seed and the creation account

With respect to creation in Genesis 1, the word *zera* (seed, sowing, offspring) holds a central place in its theology.⁸ In the creation narrative in Gen 1:11–12, *zera* is found in two blocks of narratives revealing several points about ecology and creation. The first segment describes the creative activity of God wherein God commanded the earth to “put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it” (Gen 1:11). The second segment confirms that God’s creative demand actualized and kicked off. And after the great act of creation God declared *zera’ ... kiy-tov* (Gen 1:12).⁹

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- 8 There are 217 and 52 occurrences of *zera’/zāra* in the Hebrew Bible respectively. The word is used primarily as plant seed or human semen. As plant seed, *zera’* refers to (a) the reproductive body of the seed of a plant, (b) the ripened reproductive body of the seed of a plant, (c) collective name for all types of grain, or (d) individual identification of the fruit of a particular plant (here specific reference is made to the name of the plant, e.g., barley seed or mustard seed). See B. Demarest – C. Brown, “Seed, Plant, Grass, Flower, Harvest”, *NIDNTTE* III, 521–525; Victor P. Hamilton, “זרע”, *NIDOTTE* 1: 1151–1152; J. P. Louw and E.A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 115. As human seed, the translators of the sacred scripture did not only express *zera’* on the literal level of human semen but extended its meaning to the end result of a reproductive human semen. This is called the transference meaning, and it includes the sense of, “posterity”, “descendants”, “race” (common ancestors), “offspring”, “stock”, “survivors”, “children”, “family”, “line”, or “people”. This figurative sense plays a major role in the representation of *zera’* in sacred texts, especially in the Book of Genesis. See B. T. Arnold, *Genesis*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 166–174; T. D. Alexander, “Genealogies, Seed and the Compositional Unity of Genesis” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44, no. 10 (1993): 255–270; G. Wenham, *Genesis* 16–50 (WBC 2. Dallas: Word books, 1994), 13–32.
- 9 The word טוב (tov) can be translated as “pleasant”, “agreeable”, “good” or “fair to behold”, “beautiful in appearance”, etc. F. Brown – S. Driver – C. Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977), 373. A lot has been said about the use of the expression “good” in the creation narrative. Amongst many, Musa Dube did an earthly reading of Genesis 1, suggesting the word highlights the splendour of God’s creation in its perfection as against today’s lamentable state of the Earth. M. W. Dube, “And God Saw that it was Very Good”: An earth-friendly

Genesis 1:11–12 is the spoken divine words of God at creation. In the divine speech, the vision of God for creation was initiated with the words, “then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed ... and it was so” (1:11). This statement inaugurates the beginnings of the wide variety of vegetation in their different modes and function, and the seed pattern of all that came to be. The divine statement also sets the stage for the would-be continuous creation and regeneration of all seed patterns.¹⁰ Furthermore, the variation of species of seeds – fruit trees of every kind (1:11), plants yielding seed of every kind, (1:12), trees of every kind (1:12), swarms of living creatures (1:20, 24, 25), the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind (1:21), male and female (1:27) emphasise the high biodiversity in nature, the unique nature of every organism (including the non-living organisms), but also the function of every seed.

In the creation of the seed was the creation of life. The divine seed was not only a form of life among many others, but a source of life. It is a living reality, the dynamic engine that drives, nourishes, sustains, and provides resources for the survival of the ecosystem and its inhabitants. The cosmos through the seed received the divine mandate of fertility, to multiply and bring to fruition what was already set in motion through the act of creation. This life-giving mission highlights the divine presence of God in creation, a reality that calls to mind ecology as the word of God and the seed as a living body in a living relationship with both living and non-living realities. It is in view of this life-giving mission that scripture writers would naturally use agrarian terms to symbolically describe the qualities of God/Christ and to speak of God’s relationship with Israel. Beyond this, the invaluable mission of the seed has a strong link with ecology since ecology is its natural background. Thus said, any interpretation of seed theology that does not embrace the ecological dimension as one of its primary trajectories subverts the ultimate purpose of God’s word for the world.

Theatrical Reading of Genesis 1,” *Black Theology: An International Journal* 13 (2015): 230–246; 232.

10 R.W.L. Moberly, *The Theology Of The Book Of Genesis* (Old Testament Theology, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009) 46. G. Von Rad, *Das erste Buch Mose, Genesis* (Traduzione italiana di Giovanni Moretto) (Brescia: Paideia Editrice Brescia, 1978).

As already said above, the seed was created good or beautiful (Gen 1:12 – “and God saw that it was good.”). This is another important factor in defining the contours of “the seed” as the word of God, namely, the beauty of the seed. As with every other art of creation, the goodness of the seed strongly affirms the harmonious design of creation. According to Paul Niskanen, the idea expressed in the statement describes not only the aesthetic beauty of creation, or the image of God in all of creation, but also harmony.¹¹

The beauty in the creation of the seed helps highlight yet another perspective about the seed as the word of God, namely, the symbiotic encounter of all seeds in the ecological space. The symbiotic interaction is not exclusive of the seeds, but also between human and non-human entities, including the presence of rain, sun, etc. The large myriad of seeds, even the tiniest of the seeds has a place and function in the ecological space. Despite the number and variety of species and habitats created, there is a certain amount of equilibrium of equal interrelatedness and cooperation. Beauty consists of balance in terms of the mutual relations that can be maintained amid very many seeds and creatures of different kinds, mutual share of ecological space, mutual respect, mutual appreciation for the value of diversity and the mutual support. Without the above, the beauty of creation is far-fetched.

Lastly, the ecological act of creating the seed is played out on the earth or land. The earth is the circumlocution for the life and mission of the seed, and not only the seed but also of other biotic and abiotic entities in the ecosystem. The earth gives every terrestrial seed the opportunity, dynamic space, and support mechanisms to grow, be fruitful and multiply. The earth is an indispensable space in determining the ecological borders for the seeds. It maps the boundaries for its beauty, symbiotic relationship, and growth. Beyond that, the terrestrial environment is designed and put in place by God, intricately woven by the presence of living and non-entities that interact with each other in a coordinated manner.¹² This perspective

11 P. Niskanen, “The Poetics of Adam: The Creation of אָדָם in the Image of אֱלֹהִים” *JBL* 128, no. 3 (2009): 417–436; 433.

12 T.E. Fretheim, “The Earth Story in Jeremiah 12”, in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, ed. N. C. Habel, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000) 96–110, 98. God “made the earth” (Jer. 33.2; cf. 10.12–13–51.15–16; 27.5; 32.17) and continues to uphold the “fixed orders” of creation (31.35–36; 33.20, 25”).

regarding the earth opens up discussion about the earth as more than simply a terrain, but a kingdom. It is an existing kingdom that bears the word of God – “the seed” and reflects the presence of God.

Thus said, Matthew’s purposes for using *sperma* theology will be analysed in relation to the story of God’s creation of the seed. The reading of the seed as the ecological word of God will not simply be because the agrarian economy of first century Palestine influenced Matthew’s ideology about the agrarian issues factored into the parables but because ecology has a place in God’s “Word” and the seed is the ecological word of God.

3. Dominant ecological motifs in Matthew

Significant part of Matthew’s Gospel has to do with nature, agriculture, and the environment. The overwhelming use of horticultural language in Matthew’s Gospel (7:17–20; 9:37–38; 12:33; 13:3–9, 18–23, 24–30, 31–32, 36–43; 15:13–14; 20:1–16; 21:18–19, 33–41; 24:32–33; 25:14–40) highlight not only the agrarian context of the stories (i.e., the Mediterranean agricultural economy), but also the green character of the Gospel.¹³ Particularly interesting for our discussion are the agrarian parables in Matthew 13; the sower (13:3–9), the wheat and the tares (13:24–30), and the mustard seed (13:31–32). These parables have recurring themes and words that are mostly associated with farming activities and can be used to generate agroecological debates about care of our environment.

There are references to farming trajectories that cut across all three parables. We have the mentioning of agricultural terms such as seed, sower (or farm owner), soil, the act of growing, taking care of the seed, and the harvest. All these agroeconomic words point to various aspects of green farming (i.e., farming that could yield good harvest). However, in the parable of the sower and of the weeds and the tares, this green pattern of farming is challenged by the introduction of external forces or interferences that

13 Green is a colour designation associated with vegetation and nature and extends beyond to include any human and non-human interventions that can add value to nature, and can generate healthy climate, growth, harmony, freshness, safety, fertility, and environment. It is against this background that we use the word “green” parable, putting forward the parable of the sower (13:3–9), and the seed and the tares (13:24–30), the mustard seed (Matt 13:31–32), and the fig tree (24:32–35) as Matthew’s green parables.

likely brought about the failure or the success of the growth of the seed (13:4–8, 13:25).¹⁴

Furthermore, several words and phrases in the parables belong to environmental language and ethics. The parables can evoke discussions on how our ecosystem is made up of natural environment of land, earth, or landscapes, and of living and non-living organisms such as bird, the rock, the thorns, the sun, the good soil, the tree, and the weeds. An eco-hermeneutical reading of Matthew’s mentioning of these biotic and abiotic elements calls to mind the creation narrative – including the general episode of God’s creative activities, eco-biodiversity, the myriads of physical and non-physical elements in the cosmos, the symbiotic interactions between them and all the discussions raised above concerning creation as the word of God.

Matthew 13:3–9 deals with the problem of the seed (*sperma*) that is sown. The dominant reference to *sperma* in Matthew’s Gospel opens up discussion on nature and the environment, which is important for our ecological reading and understanding the text. Of the twenty-four instances of *sperma* and its cognates in Matthew, the word occurs alone twenty times in Matthew 13 (13:33, 42, 18, 192, 20, 22, 23, 242, 25, 272, 312, 372, 39) and all references are related to agriculture, seed plants, nature, and the environment.¹⁵ The term is mentioned nine times in connection to the sower, and eleven times to that which is sown. The narrative character of the sower reflects the character of *the Son of Man* which can be a way of referring to God (13:37) and to man by association (13:3, 24, 31). Both characters can be used to provide explanations for God’s creative work of the “seed” at creation and of man’s continuing mission of creation of the

14 In the parable of the wheat and the tares there is explicit reference to the enemy that came and sow tares (13:25), while in the parable of the sower, discussion on external forces can be attributed to either the sower or the biotic and abiotic elements mentioned (the bird, the rock, the thorns, vss. 4, 5, 7). This argument will be taken up later.

15 There are fifty-four occurrences of *sperma* (κόκκος, σπόρος) and its cognates in the Gospels, fifty percent of their usages are found in Matthew. Matthew uses the verb σπείρω (to sow) eleven times, and nine times alone in Matthew 13. Of the 17 uses of the noun *sperma* (seed) in the Gospels, Matthew uses the word seven times (as compared to five times in Mark, two times in Luke, and three times in John). The noun κόκκος (seed) referring to the mustard seed appears only in Matthew 13:31 and 17:20. And the verb διασκορπίζω (to scatter, to disperse) used in its distributive sense is found only in Matthew 25:24, 26.

seed. The use of *sperma* either as seed or that which is sown can provide the ideological terrain and ecological space for an in-depth discussion on the world of agrobiodiversity.¹⁶

One final element about the ecological motif of Matthew 13 is that each of the green parables ends with a reversal of the original creation image of the seed as the ecological word of God. The parable of the sower (13:3–9) and of the wheat and the tares (13:24–30) introduced devastating stories about the distortion or destruction of the seeds owing to the terrain on which the seeds fell and the destructive human interventions respectively. But these were not the last words about the seed. Matthew continues with the theme of seed reversal, for beyond the destruction of the seed is its return to God’s original purpose. All three green parables include statements which recall the divine mandate to grow, multiply and *bring forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it* (cf., Gen 1:12; Mt 13:9; 32). The parable of the mustard seed included not only the extraordinary growth of the seed to become a big shrub, but the inherent value of biodiversity. The uses of green parables in Matthew 13 were not only to appropriate the message of salvation, but also to include care of ecology in the whole process of salvation.

4. *Sperma*, ecology and Matthew 13:3–9, 18–23

The seed, as already noted, occupies an important place in the theology, rhetoric, and structure of Matthew. The centrality of the seed is seen in the opening genealogy of Matthew which largely represents Jesus as the promised seed in the context of Old Testament messianic expectation (cf. 1:1–17). The second important use is the seed-creation motif drawn from the Jewish conception of the seed as divine creation of God, and which in its present state is undergoing destruction, with the hope of sharing in the final restoration. A survey of the parable of the sower reveals these three

16 Note that the Greek version of the parable of the weeds and the tares does not specify the name of the seed planted. The lack of reference to any specific seed in the parable of the sower (3–9) and in the parable of the weeds and the “wheat” (24–30) or the mentioning of “mustard seed” in 13:31 are not accidental here. It serves more as a relational concept to open up a general survey about the community of seed plants that exist and how they function in different dimensions within the ecosystem.

striking aspects: the themes of creation, destruction, and reversal of the seed as the ecological word of God.

4.1. The sower and the creating power of sperma

The story of the sower is compared to the creative activity of God in the creation of vegetation in Genesis 1:11–12. Like the creator in Genesis 1:11–12, the sower’s creative activity represents God’s creative power since it brings to action and fulfilment God’s command to the earth (Gen 1:11) and God’s command to man (1:29). As a participation in God’s creative command, the creative power of the sower evokes the regenerative characteristics of the seed and man’s involvement in creative regeneration of life and sustenance of the environment. As humans are charged to continue creation, the sower stands to fulfil God’s command in the continuing act of creation. The sower through sowing of the seed was meant to bring forth flourishing vegetation and the hope of a good vegetation is based on responsible sowing. According to the narrative, not all sowing enhanced good vegetation.¹⁷

In the first three episodes of sowing, some seeds that fell on the path (3:4) on rocky ground (3:5), and among thorns (3:7) and did not yield fruit owing to the terrain that received the seed. Perhaps it may have been difficult to ensure that all seeds fell on the good soil, because of the unsuitability of the ground and its rocky hill nature or a result of ancient Palestine pattern of sowing before ploughing.¹⁸ Be that as it may, the seeds that fell on the path

17 Few commentators have tried to relate the identity of the sower to God, presupposing that the story is about God’s word being planted in human heart. See B. L. Mack, “Teaching in Parables: Elaboration in Mark 4:1–34,” in *Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels*, eds., B. L. Mack & V. K. Robbins (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1989), 143–60, 155–56. Others think it is the preaching of God’s words. See J. Liebenberg, *The Language of the Kingdom: Parable, Aphorism, and Metaphor in the Sayings Material Common to the Synoptic Tradition and the Gospel of Thomas* (BZNW 102. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 362–376. While others suggest it is God sowing (or planting) people. See G. Lohfink, “Die Metaphorik des Aussaat im Gleichnis vom Sämann (Mk 4,3–9)”, in *À Cause de L’Évangile. Études sur les Synoptiques et les Actes*, ed. J. Dupont (Lectio Divina 123. Paris, Cerf, 1985) 211–28. The real issue here is not whether the sower is a metaphoric representation of God, but how the activities of the sower represent God’s activities, especially in determining the sense of the assumed “carelessness of the sower,” “the impression of a bad sower” or the fruitlessness of some of the seed.

18 E. Van Eck, “The Harvest and The Kingdom: An Interpretation of The Sower (Mk 4:3b–8) As A Parable of Jesus The Galilean”, *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014), Art. #2715, 10 pages. [http:// dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2715](http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2715), 5 of 10.

(3:4) on rocky ground (3:5), and among thorns (3:7) were essentially for a purpose.¹⁹

The creative activity of the sower draws attention to the existence of other created things, including biotic and abiotic elements. In the different episodes of sowing, there are references to the wide range of God's creative activity, and the complex eco-interactions of life on earth. It is particularly interesting that in discussing the parable references are made to the seed, the path, the birds, the rocky ground, the sun, the thorns, and good soil and these are representations of the elements mentioned in the creation narrative.

In the creation narrative, *the seed* was the beginning of every life, and all came to be through the word of God. Thus, the seed is the word of God, and everything in creation came through the divine word of God. From the seed comes forth procreation and regeneration. The seed is the source of living and livelihood as it sustains life and alleviates hunger. The seed is the entirety of God's word for creation. The existence of both the biotic (living organisms) and the abiotic elements in creation came through the activity of the creator.

4.2. Ecological spaces and sperma

References to physical landmarks (path, land, farmlands, rocky ground) and abiotic elements (soil, sun, rocks) in the parable call to mind the ecological maps and geo-ecological aspects of creation. The mentioning of physical landmarks helps us understand the delineation of our terrestrial ecological spaces as vastly diverse, and all together have different purposes. The presence of soil or cropland, for instance, provided the necessary ecological and agricultural space for the growth and conservation of the seed that gave rise to the plentiful harvest evidenced in the narrative. The

19 The challenge here is that the parable has been built on structures of oppositions where the first three episodes of sowing (the seeds that fell on the path, on rocky ground, and among thorns) are set up against the last episode of sowing (the seed that fell on the good soil). As such, scholarship has interpreted the first three episodes as unsuccessful in revealing the message of God. The sense of interpreting the first three episodes of sowing as negative or bad sowing may not entirely convey the sense intended by Jesus, irrespective of the explanation given for the parable in 13:18-23.

existence of rocky ground or pathway, though projected as ecologically non-productive, can be entirely productive for a different ecological purpose.

The creation story of Genesis 1 makes clear that the ecosystem is pervaded with eco-spatial and territorial boundaries; the heavens is mapped and separated from the earth, the light from the darkness, the sun from the moon, etc., and each of these ecological elements have their specific functions. In the parable of the sower, the seed that fell on the rocky ground, on the path or on the thorns were unproductive because they fell on the wrong ecological space. Note however, that the seed that fell on the rocky ground and among the thorns had a temporary growth but ceased existence because of the ecological location of the seed. The ill fate of these seeds raises question regarding the purpose and effect of breaking or interfering with ecological boundaries.

Another eco-spatial message that comes to mind in the parable is that *sperma* exists in space and time. *Sperma* as used in the parable of the sower describes the life existence of a seed here on earth. In the creation narrative, the creation of vegetation does indicate the origin of the life and existence of many seeds in our ecosystem. In context, the bringing to birth and the continuity of creation does justify the statement that the seed is the word of God in our time.

4.3. Biodiversity and sperma

Taking our insights from the creation story, three points are highlighted in the parable of the sower. First, every created thing was good and allowed to co-habit and thrive in nature. Second, every seed was created in accordance with their nature/kind. Third, the interrelationship and interdependence of all creatures (animate and inanimate) served to maintain a sustainable and productive earth community.

Aside the mentioning of the ecological space (the path in Mt 13:4), the interaction of the bird and the seed highlight the aspect of nature taking care of itself. Although the episode of sowing in 13:4 speaks the language of destruction (i.e., the seed did not bear fruit because the birds ate it), by and large, the action of the bird describes the diverse ways nature takes care of itself. Every component of nature is allowed to thrive in a network of interrelationship and interdependence of organisms within the ecosystem.

Ecological symbiosis provides benefits, such as, nourishment, regeneration, sustenance and the breaking down of both biotic and abiotic components for energy and material resources. This is what we find in the sowing episodes where the seed provided nourishment for the bird and the soil gave nourishment to the seed that yielded abundant grain. This interaction could also be harmful as evidenced in the contact of the seed with the sun, or the seed with the thorns. The rocky ground (13:5), the sun (13:6) or the thorns (13:7) are not harmful in themselves. They have numerous benefits for the ecosystem. The ecological dynamics here is that the seeds that fell on the path (13:4), the rocky ground (v.5) and the thorns (v.7) did not yield harvest because they were not planted in their natural environment.

A related point to the ongoing argument is the problem of endangerment of species. As already mentioned, the seeds that fell on the path, the rocky ground or the thorns suffered destruction because they were not placed in an environment they would naturally thrive. To a large extent, this seed crisis was caused by the activity of the sower. The verb choice in vs. 4,5,7,8 somewhat shed light on the ecological problem raised here. The verb ἔπεσεν from πίπτω (to fall, vs. 4,5,7,8) used to describe the action of the sower is not a positive verb. It is used in the sense of “to fall” as to “descend,” “to suffer ruin,” “lose a state,” or “to be destroyed”.²⁰

Interestingly, the verb is here nuanced as it is used both positively and negatively to underscore the planting of the seed that bore fruit and those that did not. Although planting involves regeneration, growth can only be assured when the seed planted is given all the necessary dynamics. On the other hand, the seeds that fell on the path (13:4), the rocky ground (v.5) and the thorns (v.7) went into extinction because their life cycles and growth were thwarted.

4.4. Eco-theological reflections on 13:3–9, 18–23: Lessons for today’s society

So far, we have established the argument that the parable of the sower can be interpreted in terms of ecology. It should also be clear from what we discussed that when Jesus asked the disciples to hear then the interpretation

20 R. Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Lexham Research Lexicons Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2020).

of the parable (13:18), its interpretation is not only restricted to a theological reflection about God and the kingdom of God, but also the ecological word of God. And the different episodes of sowing could refer to the different human attitude and responses to ecological knowledge. Moving away from stereotyped traditional theological reflections on the parable of the sower, it can also be said that an ecological reading of the parable of the sower can be used as a dialogue partner in addressing our current environmental crises.

One of the views arising from reading the parable of the sower ecologically is the demand for care of the earth. The different episodes of sowing in Matthew 13:3–9, as well as the explanation continued in 18–23 offer some insights on ecological care and human actions that can promote, degrade, or engender the seed – the spark of every new beginning. Beginning with the character of the sower, one of the things to pick up from the parable is the sower's creative safe-space choice for the seeds. The assumption that the seed planted on the good soil was the saved seed and the three others wasted have raised the concern about whether the sower can be called a careless sower. We cannot condemn the sower as being unconcerned with the seeds that fell outside of the good soil. There are ecological lessons to be drawn even from the “supposed misfortune” of the seeds that fell on the path, the rocky ground or on the thorns.

As regards the seeds that fell on the path, it is illuminating to explore the episode in relation to preservation of life and biodiversity. The act of eating the seed by the birds reflects an interesting ecological discussion about the process of food chain. Food chain can be beneficial and necessary for preservation of life. But situations are there where certain human activities or interventions in nature can thwart the food chain cycle, causing the unavailability of essential food or resources for some organisms. In some cases, these harmful interventions have caused the extinction of varieties of seeds that exist, or rather the planet's biodiversity.

Furthermore, the episode of the bird and the seed serves as symbol of how we distort the functioning of the eco-system. In recent decades, discussions about the high rate of hybridization, displacement of organisms, habitat destruction, mutation of species, introduction of invasive species, destruction of natural ways of living and the depletion of human and non-

human population have taken a heavy toll on our ecosystem. Although one may argue that increasing population growth and human activity may have necessitated habitat shifting and destruction, the dangers cannot be overestimated and there is no escaping from its wrath.

The seeds that fell on the rocky ground and on the thorns serve the purpose of evoking discussions about ecological charring, ecological harmony, relationships, responsibility, and care. There is the problem of ecological disbalance and disequilibrium, as well as unhealthy competition among organisms in our ecosystem, a situation that Deane-Drummond identifies as lack of cooperation and symbiosis.²¹ It could also be called ‘the survival of the fittest syndrome where “those species that are the most influential in setting the environmental state become the most dominant.”²² According to Deane-Drummond, “unstable equilibrium, openness to external influences, disturbance from internal and external forces, including humanity” have choked the seed life of fragile organisms.²³ The harmony at creation and the original ecological relationship have been distorted.

The episode of the seed that fell on the rocky ground and got scorched by the sun can be compared to the effect of global warming on our ecosystem. Numerous scientific studies have shown that our ecosystem is undergoing global warming due to the high concentration of gases with greenhouse effect (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, and others), the intensive use of fossil fuels, the high rate of burning of trees and other materials, the number of illegal refineries with no management control, lack of knowledge on waste recycling. All these have rendered the ecosystem highly vulnerable and polluted.²⁴ And like the seed that fell on the rocky ground, the effect of global warming has destroyed many seeds of life.

21 C. Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London: Saint Mary’s Press, 2008), 12.

22 C. Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*, 11.

23 C. Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*, 11

24 C. Obiora, “A Cosmic Kinship: Towards the Sacramentality of The Ecosystem,” in *African Eco-Theology: Meaning, Forms and Expressions*, ed., I. A. Kanu, (Maryland: The Association for the Promotion of African Studies, 2021): 91–108, 93; J. E. Diniz Alves, “The Encyclical Laudato Si’: Integral Ecology, Gender and Deep Ecology / The Encyclical Laudato Si’: Full Ecology, Gender and Deep Ecology,” *Horizonte* 13:39 (2015): 1315–1344.

The last episode of sowing, that is the seed that fell on the good soil (and yield a hundred, a sixty and a thirty-fold), can be seen as a positive turnaround in our reflections on ecology. One who has a well-informed knowledge of ecology is like one who planted on the good soil. He or she understands the dynamics of interrelationships and symbiosis, the need for preservation of life, the essence of biodiversity and the integrity of every biological seed. The person understands that the ecological mandate in Genesis 1:28 is not an aggressive or oppressive domination but loving care for the earth.²⁵ One who adopts these ecological pathways is like one who lives the ecological dream of Pope Francis “I dream of an Amazon region that can jealously preserve its overwhelming natural beauty and the superabundant life teeming in its rivers and forests.”²⁶

Conclusion

Our proceeding study of the parable of the sower places a sustained emphasis on its ecological importance. It does not only review preview theological approaches to the message of the parable of the sower, but also enriches us with new themes that can challenge our ecology and ecological crises. The overall point is that the parable of the sower evokes discussion on the *sperma* as God’s word and world and the seed as God’s ecological/spiritual revelation to human race. A survey of the different episodes of sowing reveals two striking issues about the seed and creation, the mourning seed and the seed that awaits restoration. This eco-theological reading offers new perspectives on our present ecological issues and a future built on ecological reversal.

25 In many respects, discussions about the role given to man at creation have overwhelmingly dominated scholarship in Genesis and even beyond. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the debate. We simply move with the simple assumption that the meaning and significance of *radā* in Gen 1:28 is also to take care of.

26 Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for the Pan-Amazonian Region, “The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology – Final Document,” Vatican (26 October 2019), no. 7, [Online]. Available: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html [Accessed: 12.07.2022].

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