

St. Paul, σπερμολόγος, *Seminiverbius*, Word Sower

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Et nos licet tantilli et nequaquam illius excellentiae comparandi, in agro dei, quod est cor uestrum, uerba dei seminamus, et uberem messem de uestris moribus exspectamus.

We too, in spite of our great smallness and by no means worthy of comparison with his excellence, sow the words of God in the field of God, which is your heart, and we look out for an abundant harvest from your good works.

—St. Augustine, Sermon 150

The word σπερμολόγος, which occurs only once in the Bible, has yielded perhaps the largest, surely the strangest crop of translations of any word in Scripture. Beginning with Latin, one finds: *spermologus*, *seminator verborum*, *seminiverbius*, *verbisator*, *seminilegus*, *locutuleius*, *blatero*, *loquax homo*, *verbosus nugator*, *mendicus*, *parasitus*, and *scurra*; in German, *Lotterbube*, *Schwätzer*, and *dieser sonderbare Vogel mit seinen aufgeklickten Weisheiten*; in French, *discoureur* and *pie bavarde*; and in English, *babbler*, *parasite*, *gutter-sparrow of a man*, *vagabond*, *ignorant show-off*, *phrase merchant*, *seed-pecking ditherer*, and exceptionally, *word sower*.¹

¹ The sources of the Latin translations will emerge gradually throughout this essay. *Lotterbube* is from the Luther Bible of 1545; *Schwätzer* is from the Schlachter-Bibel, first published in 1908; *dieser sonderbare Vogel mit seinen aufgeklickten Weisheiten* is from the New Geneva Bible (2000). *Discoureur* comes from the translation of Louis Segond (1880); *pie bavarde* from *Le Bible du Semeur* (2000). “Babbler” can be found

The word occurs in chapter 17 of the Acts of the Apostles. St. Paul, now in Athens, awaits the arrival of Silas and Timothy. His spirit provoked to wrath by the sight of Athens' idolatry, he begins to converse with Jews and other worshipers in the synagogue and in the agora every day with whom-ever he happens to meet. These include Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, some of whom remark at Paul's preaching: Τι ἂν θέλοι ὁ σπερμολόγος οὗτος λέγειν; "What could this *spermologos* wish to say?" (17:18). I do not translate the word σπερμολόγος (*spermologos*) because the curious story of its interpretation is the substance of this essay—"interpretation" in the sense of Latin *interpretatio*, both "explanation" and "translation."²

The story will begin with the account of the word's meaning found in today's standard classical and biblical lexica, the gist of which is that *spermologos* is a biting insult reserved for those regarded of the lowest social or intellectual class. But this modern definition is based upon attestations of the word that first came to light, in the West, in the age of the humanists. Erasmus of Rotterdam was the first to make extensive use of these attestations in his own New Testament scholarship, which he understood as a kind of sacred philology in service of the Church and fellow Christian readers of the Bible. But, if we trace the interpretation of *spermologos* only as far back as Erasmus, we shall leave out a thousand years and more of Christian consideration and explanation of this rare word, not to mention the word's—and its interpretation's—influence upon Christian culture and practice more generally. The traditional interpretation of *spermologos* was in fact a strong influence upon the scholarship of Erasmus, but that tradition itself has all but vanished from the modern interpretation of the verse.³

in a great number of translations, e.g., NIV, RSV, and KJV. "Parasite" is proposed by W. E. Vine in his *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1984), 85 (s.v. "babblers, babblings"). "Gutter-sparrow, etc." is offered by William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 130. Richmond Lattimore gives "vagabond" in *Acts and Letters of the Apostles* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 47, and Johannes Munck proposes "phrase merchant" in *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible 31. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 168. "Seed-pecking ditherer" is found in David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 259. "Word sower" is the translation of Douay-Rheims, based on the Latin Vulgate. I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer for suggestions to improve this essay.

² See Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short. *A Latin Dictionary: Founded On Andrews' Edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879), s.v. *interpretatio*.

³ On Erasmus's New Testament scholarship, see Robert D. Sider's editor introduction to his *The New Testament Scholarship of Erasmus: An Introduction with Erasmus' Prefaces*

Before turning to Erasmus, therefore, we shall consider the late antique and medieval interpretation of *spermologos*, which was given its definitive form by St. Augustine in Sermon 150 and then remained authoritative in the West till the time of Erasmus. Specifically, we shall see how Augustine's exegesis of *spermologos* (*seminator verborum* in his Latin translation) forms the basis of a more nuanced and subtle reading of the entire passage than the fairly flat interpretation drawn from modern philological research alone. Modern research, drawing upon a host of attestations unknown to Augustine, demonstrates the authentic etymology of *spermologos* as a metaphor drawn from the literal description of birds as "seed collectors." St. Paul, just like birds that scavenge scattered seeds, picks up whatever scraps of learning fall his way and vulgarly retails them to enhance his standing before his intellectual betters. So at least imagine the Athenian philosophers. This is the basis for the most widely accepted modern translation, "babbler." The problem with "babbler" and similar translations, however, is that they obscure the original agricultural texture of *σπερμολόγος*. They silence its resonance with other agricultural words and conceits in the New Testament. The great advantage of Augustine's interpretation, on the other hand, is that it allows that resonance to ring loud. Augustine explicitly connects *spermologos* (*seminator verborum*) with the Parable of the Sower. He thus finds in St. Paul's ministry to Athens a concrete realization and exemplar of the parable's sowing of the Word. Nor is Augustine unaware of the original pejorative force of *spermologos*. Indeed, he embraces that aspect of its application to St. Paul. Paul does indeed appear to the wise and prideful as a vulgar "seed collector" or "ignorant babbler." Only to the eyes of faith does he emerge as the exemplary sower of God's Word. And so it is, Augustine indicates, with anyone who endeavors to proclaim God's Word. Every word sower, Augustine himself very much included, risks inviting the scorn of the wise. Only those who persist in their generous sowing will find, as Paul himself finally did, good soil.

Latin tradition—from Cassiodorus and Bede to the Ordinary Gloss, and even an obscure Christian poet named Arator the Subdeacon—followed the same line of interpretation as Augustine. Only with Erasmus, who first marshaled the host of attestations still found in today's standard lexica, does this line begin to disappear from the commentary on Acts 17:18. But a closer look at Erasmus's own commentary and paraphrase will

and *Ancillary Writings*, vol. 41 in *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 1–388; and Erika Rummel, *Erasmus' Annotations on the New Testament* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986).

lead us to a final argument for the vindication of long-established Latin tradition. Or rather for its integration with the discoveries of modern scholarship. For my argument is not for a preference of tradition over modern scholarship, but rather for an integration of these complementary perspectives. Only when we employ Augustine's exegesis of Acts 17:18, further illuminated by the insights of modern scholarship, will we begin to see the manifold meaning of the Word of God.

σπερμολόγος in Classical Greek

According to standard lexica of classical Greek, σπερμολόγος belongs to a cluster of words all generated from the *picking up of seeds by birds*.⁴ The first half of the compound comes from σπέρμα, which means “seed” but also “germ” or “origin,” as well as “seed-time” and “sowing,” among other extended meanings. σπέρμα itself is a *nomen acti* of the verb σπείρω, which means both “to sow seed” and “to scatter like seed” or “strew.” Sometimes the root σπερμο- of σπερμολόγος has the sense of “seed” that has already been “sown”; other times, it refers to the act of “sowing” or “scattering.” Its two primary literal senses are thus “seed (sown)” and “sowing, scattering.” As we shall see, this dual sense of σπερμο- is important for the development of the extended meanings of the word.⁵

The second half of the compound comes from the verb λέγω in the sense of “pick up,” and so σπερμολόγος is, first, an adjective meaning “picking up seeds.” Both Liddell, Scott, and Jones (LSJ) and Franco Montanari cite several passages where the adjective is used in this sense of various birds. Under σπερμολόγος both LSJ and Montanari cite: Plutarch, *Demetrius* 28.5; Alexander of Myndos as quoted in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistes* 9.388a; Aristophanes, *Aves* 232 and 579; and Aristotle's *Historia animalium* 592b 28. For the last citation, LSJ give the translation “rook”; Montanari “crow.” Under σπερμολόγος, the third edition of Bauer's *Greek–English Lexicon* (BDAG), notes the word's literal meaning, “picking up seeds,” and cites the same sources as the other lexica, adding only Lynceus from

⁴ The other words are σπερμολογέω, σπερμολογία, σπερμολογικός, σπερματολογέω, and σπερματολόγος. Throughout this section, I rely upon the following standard lexica: Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek–English Lexicon* [LSJ] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Franco Montanari et al., *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); and William Bauer et al., *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd Edition [BDAG], ed. Fredrich Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁵ LSJ and Montanari, s.v. σπερμολόγος, σπέρμα, σπείρω, λέγω.

Samos as quoted in Athenaeus *Deipnosophistes* 8.344c. But the collection of these passages to illustrate the word's meaning goes back much further. Henri Estienne (in Latin, Henricus Stephanus), for example, cites all of these passages in his seminal *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae* (TGL), originally published in 1572,⁶ but the collection of the attestations goes back still further: at least as far as Erasmus, as we shall see below.

Both LSJ and Montanari also define the related verb σπερμολογέω, as “to pick up seeds” (LSJ) and “to gather seeds” (Montanari).⁷ Thus, in the word's original literal sense, the σπερμo- of σπερμολόγος is a “seed” (σπέρμα), but we should note an important difference between Greek σπέρμα and English “seed”: Much clearer in Greek is the word's derivation from the verb for “sowing” or “scattering” (σπείρω). Thus, in Greek, a “seed” is, by its very linguistic shape, a thing “sown.” This is a reason for preferring the Latin definition of Estienne over its more-recent counterparts. Estienne defines σπερμολόγος, first, as “one who gathers seeds, just as certain little birds, which *in fields sown with seeds* [*in agris seminatis*] among furrows poorly pressed by the harrow, gather seeds.”⁸ What Estienne's definition makes clear is that the seed gathered by the birds—“the seed gatherers” or “seed pickers”—is first “sown” or “scattered” by a farmer. This connection, between seed gathered and the prior act of sowing or scattering, helps make sense of the extended, derogatory meanings of σπερμολόγος.

Metaphorically, the word was used in the sense of “picking up scraps, gossiping”; as a substantive it meant, “one who picks up and retails scraps of knowledge, an idle babbler, gossip.”⁹ Apart from Estienne, BDAG give the fullest definition of the word, noting that it was used “in pejorative imagery of persons whose communication lacks sophistication and seems to pick up scraps of information here and there *scrapmonger, scavenger*.” They cite and translate a passage from Eustathius's (twelfth century AD) commentary on Homer's *Odyssey* (5.490): “σπερμολόγοι are people who spend their time around stores and markets to pick up scraps from the produce and live off them.”¹⁰ The connection between the birds called

⁶ Henricus Stephanus, *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae ab Henrico Stephano Constructus*, 9 vols., ed. Carolus Benedictus Hase et al. (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1848–1854), 7:583–84 (s.v. σπερμολόγος).

⁷ LSJ and Montanari, s.v. σπερμολογέω.

⁸ TGL, 2:583: “Qui semina legit, ut aviculae quaedam, quae in agris seminatis inter sulcos non bene occa depressos, semina legunt.”

⁹ LSJ s.v.; so Montanari, who gives “chatterbox, gossip.”

¹⁰ “σπερμολόγοι· οἱ περὶ τὰ ἐμπόρια καὶ ἀγοράς διατρίβοντες διὰ τὸ ἀναλέγεσθαι τὰ ἐκ τῶν φορτίων ἀπορρέοντα καὶ διὰ ζῆν ἐκ τούτων” (TGL; LSJ).

spermologoi and the like-named persons is that both behave in the manner of parasites. Where avian *spermologoi* depend on the farmer's industry for their livelihood, their human counterparts pick up scraps of food produced by others rather than toil honestly to produce food themselves. Applied by another degree of extension to scraps of learning—scraps of the produce that sustains intellectual life—*spermologos* finally acquires the sense in which the Stoics and Epicureans apply the word to St. Paul. In their eyes, Paul does not labor generously for his own intellectual livelihood, as they themselves presumably have; he rather picks up scraps of learning wherever he happens to find them.

But now we reach a point where this furthest extended sense of *spermologos* diverges from both the original literal meaning ("seed-picking bird") and the primary metaphorical sense ("scrapmonger"). For the last thing a scavenging bird, or person, would do with the scraps it picks up and lives upon is scatter them again. Indeed, "seed picking" in these senses implies a jealous hoarding of the gathered seeds, whether literal or metaphorical. The intellectual *spermologos*, on the other hand, has picked up his "seeds" or "scraps" precisely in order to scatter them, thereby to gain for himself a reputation for learning not rightly his own. His "seed picking" is undertaken wholly for the sake of later scattering the "seeds" as far and wide as possible. Indeed, it is his wildly profligate scattering of these "word seeds" that leads to the most commonly accepted modern translation, "babbler." But modern commentators have neglected this radical divergence from the more seminal meanings of the word.

Once again, Estienne's entry is the most illuminating, as he explains the etymological foundation for the different meanings "seed picker" and "idle babbler." "Likewise," Estienne explains in the second half of his entry, "σπερμολόγος is used with the meaning ὁ σπείρων λόγους ['one who scatters words'], he who (to use an expression of Plautus) freely pours forth words, *Blatero* ['babbler, prater'], *Locutuleius* ['talker, prater, babbler'], that is, a *Loquax homo* ['a human chatterbox'], a *Verbosus nugator* ['a verbose jester']."¹¹ The second half of the last phrase is what Estienne uses to translate Acts 17:18, *Quid vult nugator iste dicere?* Estienne also offers a helpful list of Greek synonyms: φλύαρος ("tattler, babbler"), ἀκριτόμυθος ("confusedly babbling"), εὐρυλόγος (literally, "wide-talker"), and ἀναλέκτης ("a slave who picked up broken meats").

What emerges from a careful reading of Estienne's entry—which not

¹¹ "Item σπερμολόγος dicitur ὁ σπείρων λόγους, Qui (ut Plautina phrasi utar) libens verba funditat, *Blatero*, *Locutuleius* s[ive] *Loquax homo*, *Verbosus nugator*" (TGL).

only quotes at greater length the same sources cited in more-recent lexica and includes other sources not cited by them, but also provides long lists of Greek and Latin synonyms—is that the word *spermologos* combines, in a way not easily reproduced by any one translation, the ideas of (1) sowing/scattering, (2) picking up, and (3) pouring forth freely, (4) in a way that makes one appear deeply reprehensible to those who see themselves as more learned and respectable.

The great strength of Estienne's entry over more-recent lexica is his explanation of the meaning "babbler" in the sense of "one who scatters words" (ὁ σπείρων λόγους). So, while such a "babbler" may have begun as a "seed picker," snatching up scraps of knowledge wherever he finds them scattered, he ends up as a "word scatterer," wildly pouring forth the word-scraps he has collected. But, as noted above, the Greek verb σπείρω—the σπερμ- of σπερμολόγος—means not only "to scatter" but also, and more specifically, "to sow." As we shall see, this dual significance of σπείρω, also felt in its derivatives, is the key to understanding the Latin *interpretatio* of σπερμολόγος. Indeed, it seems as if St. Paul "the seed-picking word scatterer" was destined to become St. Paul "the word sower."

St. Augustine and the Latin *Interpretatio* of Acts 17:18

The word *spermologos* evidently presented a problem to the first Latin translators of the Bible. The first translation to receive extensive comment—at least as far as the Latin tradition is visible to us—is *seminator verborum*, the translation found in the Bible from which St. Augustine of Hippo preached Sermon 150, most likely in AD 413 or 414.¹² But before *seminator verborum*—or alongside it—there circulated other translations of *spermologos*. In the different manuscripts that preserve what is known as the Old Latin Version of the Bible, one also finds: the word *seminator* ("sower") by itself or the phrase *disseminator verborum*; the mere transliteration of the Greek *spermologus*; and *seminiverbius*, a calque—or at least an attempt at a calque—of the Greek word.¹³ The transliteration *spermologus*

¹² Jacques Elfassi, "Le sermon 150 de saint Augustin: Édition critique et tentative de datation," *Revue d'Études Augustiniennes* 45 (1999): 21–50, at 31 for date of the sermon. I cite Elfassi's edition of Sermon 150 throughout this essay. It can also be found in *Patrologia Latina* [PL], 38:605–11. Translations are my own.

¹³ See the collation files of different Old Latin Version manuscripts available at nttf.klassphil.uni-mainz.de/handschriftenkollationen-online-pdf/. The collation file for Acts 17:18 can be viewed at download.uni-mainz.de/fb07-klassphil-nttf/Apostelgeschichte/Act17/Act17_18.pdf.

and the awkward calque *seminiverbius* indicate the translators' perplexity over the rare Greek word—rare at least in early Christian Greek.¹⁴

With *seminator verborum*, however, a definite interpretation of the Greek word emerges. As already indicated, the Greek word was an insult, and clearly the Stoic and Epicureans did not mean to flatter Paul by using it. Augustine is well aware of this:

Your charity noticed with us that, when the book of the Acts of the Apostles was read, Paul spoke to the Athenians, and by those who mocked his preaching of the truth he was called a “sower of words” [*uerborum seminatore*]. Indeed [the name] was spoken by mockers, but it is not to be rejected by believers: for he was in truth a sower of words [*seminator uerborum*], but also a reaper of good works. (nos. 1.5–9)¹⁵

The philosophers who called St. Paul *spermologos* intended thereby to mock him; yet the translation of the insult in Augustine's Bible sends his mind running in another direction; for Augustine, too, just like Paul, is engaged in the act of “word sowing”: “We too, in spite of our great smallness and by no means worthy of comparison with his excellence, sow the words of God in the field of God, which is your heart, and we look out for an abundant harvest from your good works” (nos. 1.9–11).¹⁶ The derisive name that was intended to insult St. Paul, turns out to be a fitting title for a Christian preacher.

Spermologos, or *seminator verborum*, is a fitting title primarily because of its resonance with Jesus's Parable of the Sower, recorded at Matt 13:1–9, Mark 4:1–9, and Luke 8:4–8 (with explanations of the parable at Matt 13:18–23, Mark 4:13–20, and Luke 8:11–15). Indeed, that very parable, combined with the Latin translation *seminator verborum*, becomes the interpretive key for Augustine's entire exegesis of Acts 17. It is not only St. Paul who imitates the original evangelical sowing of the word, but also St. Augustine himself at the very moment of his preaching. The parable, in

¹⁴ BDAG cite Acts 17:18 as the only occurrence of *σπερμολόγος* in the New Testament and the other early Christian literature their lexicon covers.

¹⁵ “Aduertit nobiscum caritas uestra, cum legeretur liber Actuum apostolorum, Paulum locutum fuisse Atheniensibus, et ab eis qui praedicationem ueritatis irridebant dictum fuisse uerborum seminatore. Dictum est quidem ab irridentibus, sed non respueundum est a credentibus: erat enim reuera ille seminator uerborum, sed messor morum.”

¹⁶ “Et nos, licet tantilli et nequaquam illius excellentiae comparandi, in agro Dei, quod est cor uestrum, uerba Dei seminamus et uberem messem de uestris moribus expectamus.”

fact, is re-enacted wherever anyone preaches, without fear of mockery and disdain, the Word of God, and thereby sows it in the field of God—human hearts. Just as “that sower in the Gospel” (*seminator ille evangelicus*) would never have reached the “best soil” (*terra optima*) had he feared wasting seed along the roadside, among thorns, or on rocky ground, so St. Paul would never have reached the few Athenian believers (*credentes*) had he dreaded the more numerous Athenian mockers (*irridentes*; nos. 2.34–38). Augustine thus applies the lesson of Scripture to himself and his audience: “Et nos seminemus, spargamus. Corda praeparate, fructum date” — “Let us also sow, let us scatter. Make ready your hearts, bring forth fruit!” (no. 2.39).

As is evident from another of his sermons, the image of a *seminator verborum* was important for Augustine’s thinking more generally about the work of Christian evangelism. In Sermon 101, he preaches on the verse “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Matt 9:37–38).¹⁷ Augustine bids his audience to consider what was this harvest of which the Lord speaks. He first notes that the harvest was already prepared (*ad paratam messem*), and so was not a harvest “among the nations where there had been no sowing” (*in his gentibus . . . ubi nihil erat seminatum*). Therefore the harvest of which Jesus speaks was among the Jewish people. It was to this harvest that Jesus sent “reapers” (*messores*): “To the nations, however, [he sent] not reapers, but sowers” (*ad gentes autem non messores, sed seminatores*). The harvest among Jews was “ripe” (*maturus*) because the prophets already “sowed the seed” (*seminaverunt*). But the nations, or the gentiles, first required their own *sowing* before there could be a consequent *reaping*. The office of *sower* was thus specially associated with the work of St. Paul, the Apostle to the nations. Referring to Paul’s initial conference with the other Apostles, Augustine comments, “it was decided between [Paul and the other Apostles] that he himself should go to the nations, and they among the Circumcision: he as a sower, they as reapers [*ille seminator, illi messores*].” Augustine then concludes, now speaking of Acts 17:18: “The Athenians also rightly, although unawares, declared [Paul’s] name; for as they hear from him the Word, they remark: ‘Who is this sower of words?’”¹⁸

To sum up Augustine’s contribution to the Latin interpretation of Acts 17:18, we should note the following: First, Augustine associates the name

¹⁷ The translation in Augustine’s Bible used in Sermon 150 (no. 1) is “messis multa, operarii autem pauci. rogate dominum messis ut mittat operarios in messem suam.”

¹⁸ “Merito etiam Athenienses, quamvis nescientes, nomen eius edixerunt; audientes enim ab eo uerbum: ‘quis est hic,’ inquit, ‘seminator verborum?’”

seminator verborum with a broader nexus of agricultural imagery extending throughout the New Testament, including especially Jesus's Parable of the Sower. Secondly, Augustine refers the office of word sowing not only to St. Paul's original apostolic mission, but also to his own continued office of evangelical proclamation and those of his fellow Christian preachers. Finally, Augustine is fully aware of, and indeed embraces, the original pejorative force of the title *spermologos* or *seminator verborum*. In perhaps the most memorable passage of Sermon 150, Augustine imagines himself, in the place of St. Paul, directly disputing the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. To the Stoic, who believes that the virtue he possesses is due to his own efforts, Augustine replies:

It is not the virtue of your own soul that makes you blessed, but He who gave you virtue, who breathed into you the will and gifted the ability. I know that perhaps you will mock me, and will be among those of whom it was written, "they were mocking Paul." And if you are *the road*, I am *the sower*: for I am a *sower of words* in the small measure of my ability. What you spoke in derogation, is my own solemn obligation. I sow the seed; what I sow falls upon you, as upon hard soil. I am not sluggish; and I find good soil. (nos. 9.181–87)¹⁹

Through St. Augustine's exegesis of Acts 17:18—perhaps especially because of his personal appropriation of the philosophers' insult as a name for his vocation—the phrase "word sower" took firm root within the good soil of the Latin exegetical tradition. The image of St. Paul the word sower continued to appear not only in subsequent commentaries, but also in Latin Christian culture more broadly.

Later Latin Commentaries

Let us first consider what later commentaries have to say on Acts 17:18. In comparison with the four Gospels, there are relatively few commentaries on the Book of Acts from the earlier ages of the Church. Jaroslav Pelikan counts only four "that definitely date from the first half of the history of

¹⁹ "Non uirtus animi tui te facit beatum, sed qui tibi uirtutem dedit, qui tibi uelle inspirauit et posse donauit. Scio quia fortasse irrisurus es me, et eris in eis de quibus scriptum est quia Paulum irridebant. Et si tu uia es, ego semino: seminator enim sum uerborum pro modulo meo. Quod fuit conuicium tuum, officium est meum. Ego semino; cadit in te quod semino, tanquam in terram duram. Ego non piger; et inuenio terram bonam."

the church”: the fifty-five homilies delivered by St. John Chrysostom as archbishop of Constantinople in AD 400; the commentary of Cassiodorus (ca. AD 485–585); the *Exposition* and the *Retraction* of the Venerable Bede (ca. AD 673–735); and the commentary of Archbishop Theophylact of Bulgaria (written just after the end of the first millennium and heavily dependent on Chrysostom).²⁰

Only the commentaries of Cassiodorus and Bede are relevant to our purpose. The influence, whether of Augustine himself directly or of an intermediate source, is evident in both cases, but more clearly and explicitly in the case of Bede.

Cassiodorus comments as follows on Acts 17:

And Paul, arriving at Athens, engaged in very vigorous debate through several places, seeing the city given over to idolatry: when rumor of this spread abroad, some of the citizens seized him, and led him to the Areopagus, where an assemblage of philosophers had been convened: some [of the philosophers] said he was a **word sower**, others a proclaimer of new divinities. Then the sensible ones, after standing Paul in their midst, longed to hear **the teaching which he was sowing far and wide**.²¹

While Cassiodorus’s comment does not indicate a direct influence from Augustine’s Sermon 150, it does show that the interpretation of St. Paul as “word sower” had become firmly established in the tradition. The translation *seminator verborum* has now been replaced by *seminiverbius*—apparently in order to reproduce the exact form of *spermologos* in Greek.²² Cassiodorus’s commentary also conflates details that are distinct in the narrative of Acts 17—in Acts, Paul is called “word sower” *before* being ushered to the Areopagus—and does not distinguish the various groups who listen to Paul, whereas Augustine distinctly divides them.²³

²⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005), 26–27.

²¹ “Paulus autem veniens Athenas, per loca singula vehementius disputabat, videns idololatriae deditam civitatem: qua opinione vulgata, comprehenderunt eum quidam civium, et duxerunt ad Ariopagum, ubi erat philosophorum adunata collectio: quem alii **seminiverbium**, alii novorum dæmoniorum prædicatorem esse dicebant. Tunc prudentes, Paulo in medio constituto, desiderabant audire **doctrinam quam longe lateque seminabat**” (PL, 70: 1395).

²² *Seminiverbius* is a single word, whose parts consist of “seed” and “word” (*semen* and *verbum*, matching *sperma* and *logos*), and which resembles an adjective but is here used, like σπερμολόγος, as a substantive.

²³ See Sermon 150, no. 1.

But Cassiodorus's final comment that Paul was "sowing his teaching far and wide" clearly glosses the most relevant sense of the word *seminiverbius*. Indeed, the verb *seminare* is the root, or seed, of the original translation *seminator*. Cassiodorus's comment does not, however, indicate an awareness of the original pejorative force of the Greek word. A certain nuance has been lost from the more-complete interpretation of St. Augustine.

St. Bede comments on Acts 17 first in his *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* and then later in his *Retraction* of the earlier work.²⁴ In his *Exposition*, he writes:

And some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. The Epicureans, following the sluggishness of their master, placed man's happiness in bodily pleasure alone, but the Stoics placed it in the power of the soul alone. These [philosophers], though disagreeing with each other, yet share one mind in their attack on the Apostle because he taught that man, as he consists of soul and body, so ought to be blessed in each, but that this must be completed neither at the present time, nor by human power, but by the grace of God through Jesus Christ in the glory of the resurrection.

What does this word sower wish to say? Rightly he is called "word sower," that is, σπερμολόγος, because the seed is the word of God. And the Apostle Paul himself says: "If we have sown spiritual things in you, etc." (1 Cor 9).²⁵

Bede here repeats, without attribution, Augustine's summary of the contrary doctrines of the Epicureans and Stoics: The Epicureans locate human happiness in the mere pleasure of the body; the Stoics place it in the virtue of the soul alone.²⁶ In noticeable contrast with Cassiodorus, and

²⁴ Kevin M. Lynch dates the *Exposition* to sometime between 708 and 716 and the *Retraction* to the late 720s. See his "The Venerable Bede's Knowledge of Greek," *Traditio* 39 (1983): 432–39, at 433n8 for the dates of the works.

²⁵ "Quidam autem Epicurei et Stoici philosophi, disserebant cum eo. Epicurei praeceptoris sui tarditatem secuti, felicitatem hominis in sola corporis voluptate, Stoici vero in sola animi virtute posuerunt. Qui inter se quidem dissidentes Apostolum tamen unanimiter impugnant, eo quod hominem sicut ex anima et corpore subsistere, ita in utroque doceret beatum esse debere; sed hoc nec tempore praesenti, nec virtute humana, sed gratia Dei per Jesum Christum in resurrectionis gloria perficiendum."

Quid vult seminiverbius hic dicere? Recte seminiverbius, id est, σπερμολόγος vocatur, quia semen est verbum Dei. Et ipse Paulus Apostolus dicit: Si nos vobis spiritalia seminavimus, etc. (1 Cor. ix)" (*PL*, 92:979).

²⁶ See Augustine's Sermon 150, no. 5.

in agreement with Augustine, Bede also remarks upon the philosophers' "attack" upon St. Paul for his teaching that blessedness consists in perfection of both body and soul, which is accomplished only by the grace of God through Christ in the resurrection. But most importantly for our purpose, Bede comments that Paul is rightly called *seminiverbius*, "because the seed is the word of God"—a quotation from the explanation of the Parable of the Sower in Luke's Gospel (8:11). Bede further supports this interpretation with a quotation from Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians (9:11): "If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits?" Or, in the Vulgate version: "Si nos vobis spiritualia seminavimus, magnum est si nos carnalia vestra metamus?" As it did for Augustine, the Latin translation, whether *seminator verborum* or *seminiverbius*, activates in Bede's mind associations with other agricultural imagery in Scripture.²⁷

Bede's other comment upon Acts 17 comes from his *Retraction on the Acts of the Apostles*. "Retraction" here means "re-consideration" or "re-examination"—literally a "taking in hand again." Bede explains in his preface to this "brief little book of re-consideration" (*brevis Retractationis libellus*) that he follows the example of Augustine himself, who, in old age, composed his own books of *Reconsiderations* (*Retractationes*). Bede's intention in his own *Reconsideration* is twofold: "to add things not said [in the earlier work] and to correct the things which seemed spoken less than satisfactorily."²⁸ On Acts 17, Bede writes in his *Retractatio*:

And some said: "What does this word sower wish to say?" Concerning this name, St. Augustine says: We read that the Apostle Paul was

²⁷ Lynch uses Bede's explanation of the meaning of *seminiverbius* / *σπερμολόγος* to argue that Bede's knowledge of Greek ("Bede's Knowledge of Greek" 434–35), at least when he wrote the *Exposition*, was "passive," i.e. wholly dependent on the edition of Acts he was using: "A Latin-Greek interlinear with no more than four or five words to a line and with the Latin translation generally directly under the Greek in parallel lines" (434). Lynch interprets Bede's acceptance of *seminiverbius* as a translation of *σπερμολόγος* as evidence of Bede's merely passive knowledge of Greek. For, Lynch remarks, *σπερμολόγος* means "babbler" not "word sower." But Lynch neglects the evident influence of Augustine's interpretation. Lynch's thesis is that, by the time of the *Retraction*, Bede was able to deal independently with biblical Greek. But in the *Retraction*, as appears in my discussion below, Bede does not adopt a new interpretation of *σπερμολόγος*. Greater fluency in Greek does not lead Bede to a different interpretation.

²⁸ "Studio maxime vel addendi quae minus dicta, vel emendandi quae secus quam placuit dicta videbantur" (*PL*, 92:995–96).

called a “sower of words” [*uerborum seminatore*]. Indeed [the name] was spoken by mockers, but it is not to be rejected by believers. For he was in truth a sower of words [*seminator verborum*], but also a reaper of good works. We too, in spite of our great smallness and by no means worthy of comparison with his excellence, sow the word of God in the field of God, which is your heart, and we look out for an abundant harvest from your good works.²⁹

Bede now explicitly attributes this interpretation to St. Augustine, and quotes the relevant passage of Sermon 150. Exactly why Bede did not attribute his earlier remarks to Augustine is unclear. The explanation may be that Bede relied on an intermediate source for the interpretation and then later discovered Augustine’s sermon itself. The present passage would then be an example of a “correction” (*emendatio*) of “something that seemed spoken less than satisfactorily” in the previous work. But, again, most important for our purpose, is that Augustine’s interpretation of the phrase “word sower” still remains definitive some three centuries and more after he preached his sermon on the text.

Bede’s comments on the Book of Acts are not the only time he draws upon Augustine’s interpretation of Acts 17. Elsewhere, in his commentary on the Book of Ezra, Bede refers to Paul’s nickname *seminiverbius* (or *spermologos*) in his discussion of the “enemies of Judah and Benjamin” in chapter 4. Bede here compares the affected piety of these enemies to that of heretics in the Christian Church. In like manner, “heretics strive to have authority for preaching granted equally to themselves among the orthodox, by promising that they hold and esteem with them one and the same purity of right faith and action, so that, having received authority to teach in the midst of the good seed [*in medio boni seminis*]³⁰—from which the Apostle Paul received his nickname, and so was called *spermologos*,

²⁹ “Et quidam dicebant: Quid vult seminiverbius hic dicere. De hoc nomine sanctus Augustinus: “Legimus, inquit, apostolum Paulum dictum fuisse verborum seminatore. Dictum est quidem ab irridentibus, sed non respuendum est a credentibus. Erat enim ille revera seminator verborum, sed messor morum. Et nos licet tantilli, et nequaquam illius excellentiae comparandi, in agro Dei, quod est cor vestrum, verbum Dei seminamus, et uberem messem de vestris moribus expectamus” (*PL*, 92:995–96). Note the subtle difference between *verbum* in Bede’s quotation and *verba* in Augustine’s sermon, which is the reading of the principal manuscripts (see Elfassi, “Le sermon 150,” 39). Bede seems to have allowed Luke’s explanation of the Parable of the Sower (“the seed is the Word of God”) in his Gospel (8:11) to influence his quotation, or perhaps he himself is simply following a source that quotes Augustine’s sermon as containing *verbum*.

that is, ‘word sower’ [*seminiverbius*]³⁰—they may sow among [the wheat] the tares of their secret teaching.”³⁰

Bede thus combines Acts 17:18 with the Parable of the Wheat and Tares from Matt 13:24–30, which begins, “the kingdom of heaven is like to a man who sowed good seed in his field.”³¹ For Bede, St. Paul—as well as orthodox Christian preachers who follow Paul’s example—is the man “who sowed good seed in his field,” while heretics within the Church are that man’s enemy who “came and sowed tares among the wheat” (13:25).³² Moreover, Bede continues to draw out the analogy with a reference to Pelagius’s dissimulation of his heresy among the orthodox: “Pelagius anathematized his own heresy, with insincere professions and writings, lest he himself, anathematized by catholic priests, should forfeit his position of teaching in the Church, and opportunity of *sowing his own error* [*suum errorem seminandi facultatem*].” Bede directly contrasts Pelagius’s covert sowing of heretical teaching with St. Paul’s public sowing of the good seed. Bede’s testimony is thus further evidence both of the firm hold of “word sower” within the Latin exegetical tradition and of the image’s fertility in generating further associations and applications of the biblical image.

Finally, before setting aside works of formal commentary on Scripture to consider “word sower” in Latin Christian culture more broadly, we should note the comments on Acts 17:18 recorded in the *Glossa Ordinaria*. The *Glossa Ordinaria*, or the Ordinary Gloss, was the most widely used edition of the Bible in the later Middle Ages. Theologians as diverse as Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, John Wycliff, and Martin Luther make regular reference to it. Its foundation is the Latin Vulgate Bible, but to the text of the Vulgate is added an extensive array of both interlinear and marginal glosses culled from earlier commentaries and compiled by a community of scholars around Anselm of Laon near AD 1100. The text of the Gloss was established by 1140, and by 1200 it had become “the most

³⁰ “Affectant haeretici auctoritatem sibi praedicandi aequae inter catholicos tribui, promittentes se unam eandemque cum eis rectae fidei et operationis tenere ac diligere castitatem, quatenus accepta potestate docendi in medio boni seminis, a quo apostolus Paulus cognomen accepit, ut spermologos, id est, seminiverbius diceretur, zizania doctrinae occultae interserant” (*PL*, 91:839–40).

³¹ In the Latin Vulgate: “Simile factum est regnum caelorum homini qui seminavit bonum semen in agro suo.”

³² Bede thus comments: “Cum autem dormirent homines venit inimicus eius et superseminavit zizania in medio tritici et abiit”—“but while people were sleeping, the man’s enemy came, sowed tares in the midst of the wheat, and departed.”

commonly available type of late-twelfth-century text,” with parts of it in practically every European Scholastic library and in many monasteries.³³

On the lemma for Acts 17:18, “*Quid vult seminiuerbius hic dicere?*,” the Gloss begins: “*Seminiuerbius est, qui verbum seminat. Vel seminiuerbius, id est, spermologus, quia semen est verbum dei unde. Si vobis seminavimus spi. etc.*”³⁴ Without attribution to Bede, the Gloss simply reproduces the comment of Bede’s *Exposition*, including his reference to 1 Cor 9. The Gloss then continues by quoting Augustine’s Sermon 150 (the Gloss does not indicate the exact source, but only cites Augustine’s name): “*Legimus Paulum apostolum dictum fuisse seminatore verborum, quod dictum est ab iridentibus, sed non respuendum a credentibus, erat quippe seminator verborum sed messor morum. Et nos licet parvuli, nec illi comparandi in agro dei, (quod est cor vestrum) seminamus verbum*³⁵ *dei expectantes uberem frugem, vel fructum de moribus vestris.*”³⁶ Here the Gloss seems to reproduce Bede’s comment on Acts 17:18 in his *Retraction*, where Bede likewise quotes the same passage of Augustine’s sermon. The form of the quotation, however, differs slightly both from the text of the sermon itself and from Bede’s quotation: Apart from a transposition or two and slight alterations of the syntax, the Gloss also omits some words and substitutes others. But the substance of Augustine’s statement remains intact. Paul still is, as he has been since Augustine’s day, a “sower of words” who works in “the field of God”—human hearts.

Also worthy of our notice is the comment on Acts 17:18 by Nicholas of Lyra (ca. 1270–1349), whose commentary was included in later editions of the *Glossa Ordinaria* at the foot of each page. In Nicholas’s comment, we can observe the beginnings of a departure from the late antique and medieval interpretation of the word *spermologos*—one that anticipates the discussion of Erasmus which we will consider below. Nicholas notes

³³ Lesley Smith, *The Glossa Ordinaria: The Making of a Medieval Bible Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 180. I have also followed the account given by Ryan McDermott in “The Ordinary Gloss on Jonah,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 128, no. 2 (2013): 424–25.

³⁴ “*Seminiuerbius* is he who sows the Word. Or rather, *seminiverbius*, that is, *spermologus*, because the seed is the Word of God; hence ‘If we have sown in you spi[ritual] . . .’”

³⁵ As noted above (footnote 29), the *verbum* (singular) here differs from Augustine’s *verba* (plural) preserved by the principal manuscripts.

³⁶ “We read that Paul the Apostle was called a sower of words, which was spoken by mockers, but it is not to be rejected by believers, for he was indeed a sower of words but also a reaper of good works. We too, in spite of our smallness and unworthy of comparison with him, sow the word of God in the field of God (which is your heart) as we look out for an abundant harvest, or the fruit, of your good works.”

that *seminiverbius* is as a synonym for *seminator verborum* (“sower of words”), but then adds, “which is nothing other than a multiplier of frivolous words” (“quod non est, nisi multiplicator verborum friuolorum”). Nicholas’s comment appears to be the first instance when St. Paul begins to lose his long-established title “word sower” only to become, through subsequent generations of modern commentary, a mere “babbler” or “multiplier of frivolous words.”³⁷

“Word Sower” in Latin Christian Culture

Before considering the pivotal role of Erasmus of Rotterdam in the history of commentary on Acts 17:18, we should pause to take account of the widespread use of “word sower” within broader Christian culture throughout late antiquity into the Middle Ages. One particularly illuminating witness to the general acceptance and widespread influence of the traditional Latin interpretation is the poem of a man known as Arator the Subdeacon (Arator Subdiaconus), who flourished in 514–544. Employing the same dactylic hexameter verse as the epic poets Homer and Virgil, Arator composed a poem known as either *Historia Apostolica* (“History of the Apostles”) or *De Actibus Apostolorum* (“On the Acts of the Apostles”)—a poetic re-telling of the Book of Acts.³⁸

Apart from the work’s value as evidence of the currency of St. Paul the “word sower” in broader Christian culture, the poem was also an important influence upon the commentaries of St. Bede. Richard Hillier writes: “The Venerable Bede’s *Expositio Actuum Apostolorum et Retractatio* is permeated with knowledge of and affection for Arator’s *Historia Apostolica*. The eleven direct citations are but part of the story: Bede’s commentary is influenced on practically every page by Arator’s mystical interpretations. ‘Hoc pulchre et breviter exponit Arator’: the shadowy subdeacon was evidently favoured reading in the monastic foundations of Anglo-Saxon England.”³⁹ Hillier also describes the pomp and ceremony that greeted Arator’s publication of the poem in April of 544. The assemblage included bishops, presbyters,

³⁷ On the nature, goals, and method of Nicholas of Lyra’s biblical scholarship, see Jerry H. Bentley’s *Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 20–31.

³⁸ For information about Arator and his poem, I rely upon Richard Hillier’s *Arator on the Acts of the Apostles: A Baptismal Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) and Arthur Patch McKinlay’s *De Actibus Apostolorum* in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* [CSEL] 72. I cite the Latin of McKinlay’s edition. Translations are my own.

³⁹ Hillier, *Arator*, preface.

deacons, indeed the majority of Rome's clergy and even Pope Vigilius himself. "The author was called upon to recite some lines of his new poem before presenting the work to the pontiff, who then ceremoniously handed over the manuscript to his chief secretary (*primicerius notariorum*) with orders to place it in the papal library." The event launched Arator into wide celebrity, as he was "forced" to give public readings "on no fewer than four occasions over the next eight weeks." Hillier relates these details from a preface which is found in a good number of the manuscripts which contain the poem. According the preface, the throngs who came to hear Arator read included not only clergy and lay people, but also noblemen, even those "unconnected with the religious world."⁴⁰

In Arator's poem, even more so than in the commentaries of Cassiodorus and Bede, Paul's status as word sower, as well as the title's power to generate an abundance of agricultural associations and imagery, is manifest. In the section of book II that immediately precedes the account of Paul's visit to Athens, Arator writes the following of Paul's vision in which a Macedonian man appeared to him (see Acts 16:9):

Unable meanwhile to enjoy a relaxation from his cares, Paul teaches throughout the world, and carefully cultivates all persons with his *mattocks of the word* and *compels a harvest of faith to grow golden*, as the frost of errors flees; the nourishing Spirit forbids him to produce this crop in Asia, nor could Mysia, rich in fields, then *bear the seeds of this salvation*, barren, as it was, of fertile soil. For a Macedonian man appearing in his dreams says as follows: "Take pity, we pray; kindly regard the valleys of Illyria."

Nescius interea curis laxare quietem,
Paulus in orbe docet *verbique ligonibus* omnes
Excolit et *fidei cogit flavescere messem*
Errorum fugiente gelu; quem Spiritus almus
Haec Asiae proferre vetat, nec Mysia quivit
Dives agris *huius tunc semina ferre salutis*,
Fecundo ieiuna solo. Vir quippe Macēdo
In somnis haec visus ait: "Miserere, precamur;
Illyricos dignare sinus." (2.307–15)

⁴⁰ Hillier, *Arator*, 1–2.

The brief passage teems with agricultural imagery, from “the mattocks of the word” with which Paul “carefully cultivates” all persons, to the golden “harvest of faith,” and the mention of Mysia’s inability now to bear “the seeds of this salvation”—none of which imagery, we should note, is found in the corresponding passage of Acts (16:6–10). Indeed, Arator’s use of such imagery seems intended to anticipate the account of Paul’s visit to Athens, where he finally receives his title “word sower.” Throughout that passage, Arator invites us to contemplate Paul’s speech as the source of a harvest of salvation. But first he describes Paul’s response to the vision:

Thus, the night routed, the skilled speaker changes his route, and hungry Macedonia feeds upon the fruit of his speech and through the gifts of sleep deserved to accept the salvation-bearing tongue.

Sic nocte fugata
Doctiloquus convertit iter, fructuque loquelae
Vescitur esuriens Macedōnia perque soporis
Dona salutiferam meruit comprehendere linguam. (2.317–20)

Arator’s language again prepares the way for the eventual emergence of St. Paul as “word sower,” with special emphasis upon the fruitfulness of his speech (*fructuque loquelae*) for a nation hungry for the Gospel sowing.

Finally, beginning at 2.433, Arator describes the climactic event of Paul’s sojourn in Athens:

Paul enters Athens, glorious for its wit and words, and overwhelms with the torrent of his eloquence the city roiling in wild disputes; the throng, astounded at his speech loud with learning, remarks: “From what shores flows this sower of words?” The populace, in their ignorance, declare that Paul bears seeds and, benefitting from the instruction of their mistake, speak the truth; for in fact this man walks and cultivates the earth as a fruit-bearing wayfarer, his toil pressing urgently upon all, that Heaven’s farm may increase and the mind of man, made pure, may bring forth fruit, lest that which ought to bear healthy crops be overspread with tares.

Ingeniis claras et linguis Paulus Athenas
Ingreditur tumidamque feris conflictibus urbem
Eloquio torrente premit, quem turba profari [435]
Doctisonis mirata modis “Quibus” inquit “ab oris

Verborum fluit iste sator?" Plebs nescia Paulum
 Semina ferre vocat fruiturque errore magistro
 Vera loquens; namque hic fecundus in orbe viator
 Ambulat atque colit, cuius labor omnibus instat, [440]
 Ut crescat divinus ager purgataque fructum
 Mens humana ferat, lolii ne sordeat herbis
 Quam segetes portare decet.

Arator has clearly inherited the interpretation of Paul as word sower. Just as Augustine did, Arator associates Paul's evangelism of Athens with agricultural imagery in the Gospels. Although Arator does not refer to the Parable of the Sower, as Augustine did, his mention of "Heaven's farm" (*divinus ager*) and preventing the infestation of "tares" (*lolii herbis*) echoes the Parable of the Wheat and Tares in Matt 13:24–30—and is likely the inspiration of Bede's similar association. Arator's interpretation of the crucial phrase *verborum sator* ("sower of words"), however, closely follows the lines of Augustine's exegesis. The people's naming Paul "sower of words" is due to their ignorance (*plebs nescia*), and yet their error itself acts as a teacher (*errore magistro*), mysteriously enabling them to speak the truth (*vera loquens*). With all of this one may compare the statement from Augustine Sermon 150 quoted above:

Your charity noticed with us that, when the book of the Acts of the Apostles was read, Paul spoke to the Athenians, and by those who mocked his preaching of the truth he was called a "sower of words" [*uerborum seminatore*]. Indeed [the name] was spoken by mockers, but it is not to be rejected by believers: for he was in truth a sower of words [*seminator uerborum*], but also a reaper of good works. (1.5–9)

One obvious difference between the sermon of Augustine and the poem of Arator is their literary forms. The conventions of epic poetry, in which Arator works, allow his imagination greater play with the development of the original theme of St. Paul's *word sowing*. The result is an even more vivid impression upon the imagination of the Apostle's "agricultural" labors upon "Heaven's farm" (*divinus ager*)—another phrase that directly echoes Augustine's sermon (*in agro dei*).

With Arator's poem, the Latin interpretation of St. Paul as word sower (*verborum sator*) rises to a level of vividness and imaginative grandeur that rivals the expression and impressiveness of pagan epic poetry. The small

seed that was planted in Luke's original account and then sprang up in Augustine's exegesis has continued to grow over long years of Christian tradition, and now finally, in the verse of Arator, blossoms and bears much fruit. Having followed the gradual course of its germination, growth, and flowering, let us turn now to consider its reaping in the hands of Erasmus.⁴¹

Erasmus's *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum*

Erasmus's *Novum Instrumentum*—containing not only his own edition of the Greek New Testament and his Latin translation printed in parallel columns, but also extensive notes to justify his departures from the Latin Vulgate—was published in February of 1516, on the very eve of the Reformation. Erasmus's Greek text of the New Testament, in fact, would soon become the basis for Martin Luther's German translation. But the special importance of Erasmus for this story lies in his deep-rooted loyalty to both the Latin interpretive tradition and the humanistic learning made possible by the newly rediscovered arts of philology and textual criticism.⁴²

Erasmus's *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum* were published for the first time in February 1516 as a supplement to his edition of the Greek text of the New Testament and his Latin translation. The goal of Erasmus's project, which also included *Paraphrases* on each of the New Testament books, was "to return scholastic theology, which in his opinion was too concerned with quibbles, to the true sources of theology."⁴³ The *Annotationes* continued to appear in subsequent editions, both during Erasmus's life (1519, 1522, 1527, and 1535) and after his death (1540 and 1705). The subsequent editions reveal the state of Erasmus's mind on the various questions raised by the biblical text. In the annotation to Acts 17:18, Erasmus continued making additions and revisions in each

⁴¹ Perhaps the Athenian philosophers who first called St. Paul σπερμολόγος deserve some share of the credit too.

⁴² On Erasmus's New Testament scholarship as a form of humanism applied to Holy Scripture, see Sider, *New Testament Scholarship of Erasmus*, 4. See also Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 3–31 (ch. 1) and 112–93 (ch. 4), and Alan K. Jenkins and Patrick Preston, *Biblical Scholarship and the Church* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 27–80.

⁴³ John J. Bateman, preface to *New Testament Scholarship: Paraphrase on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 50 in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. Robert D. Sider and John Bateman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), ix. For the dates of the various editions of *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum*, see P. F. Hovingh, ed., *Opera omnia desiderii Erasmi*, ordo 6, tomus 6 (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2003), 1.

subsequent edition. His preference for how best to translate *σπερμολόγος* into Latin continued to change as well.

The most immediately striking quality of Erasmus's annotation on *σπερμολόγος/seminiuerbius* is his concern to fix with precision the exact meaning of the Greek word. This in itself reveals a difference of attitude and purpose from that of Augustine in Sermon 150—or that of Cassiodorus, Bede, and other earlier figures in the Latin tradition. Where Augustine is content to accept the Latin translation as he finds it, Erasmus expends much erudition on discovering the meaning of the original Greek. In his first annotation on Acts 17:18 (from the edition of 1516), Erasmus, just as Bede and the *Glossa Ordinaria*, begins by citing the relevant Greek, *ὁ σπερμολόγος*. He then indicates that “the translator has coined a compound word in imitation of the Greek.” He is perplexed, however, as to why the translator coined a word for this single term but not for many others. This is especially puzzling because the translator's coinage has no obvious meaning in Latin. Not only has he coined a word for no apparent reason; he has coined his word ineptly. He might have done better by coining *verbisator* with the meaning “one who scatters fresh gossip among the rabble.”⁴⁴

Criticism of the Vulgate's tendency to create calques of Greek words is common throughout Erasmus's annotations. He raises similar objections, for instance, to the use of *scandalizare* (his note 26 on Matt 5), *hypocrita* (note 34 on Matt 6), *parabola* (note 39 on Matt 6) and *thesaurizare* (note 10 on Rom 2). On that last example, *thesaurizare*, Erasmus also criticizes the Vulgate's inconsistency: In his note 3 on 1 Cor 16, he points out that here “at last he translated [the participle] into Latin [*recondens*] whereas before he used to leave the Greek word [i.e., *thesaurizare*].” Erika Rummel explains that Erasmus was willing to allow such calques only for special cases, such as words like *mysterium* and *baptismus*, which had taken on special technical significance.⁴⁵ The present case of *seminiverbius* is not exactly parallel with the cases Rummel considers, for each of those is simply a Latinized version of the original Greek, whereas *seminiverbius* rather reflects an attempt to devise a Latin version of the original Greek compound. If the Vulgate had treated *σπερμολόγος* the same way it handled

⁴⁴ “Interpres effinxit Graecanicam compositionem. Mirum autem cur id magis libuerit in hac vna dictione quam in aliis multis. Sed quid tandem significat Latinis seminiuerbius? Fortasse felicius effinxisset, si dixisset: ‘verbisator’, pro eo qui nouos rumores spargit in vulgus.” Here and throughout this section, I cite the text of Hovingh, *Opera omnia* ordo 6, tomos 6 (here at 284).

⁴⁵ Rummel, *Erasmus' Annotations*, 95–96. I take the examples listed above from Rummel.

παραβολή, for example, the result would have been *spermologus*, which, as noted above, is found in one of the earliest Latin translations of the Bible.⁴⁶

Erasmus's annotation on Acts 17:18, in the 1516 edition, concludes with his proposal to replace *seminiverbius* with *verbisator*—which is the word Erasmus used in his own Latin translation. The annotation thus serves merely to support and explain the adoption of *verbisator* in preference to the Vulgate translation. Erasmus's choice of *verbisator* is simply a more philologically correct updating of the traditional interpretation of Acts 17:18. Erasmus thus improves the quality of the Latin while still adhering to the traditional interpretation. His choice of *verbisator* is therefore evidence of the strong influence of that tradition upon his own understanding of the biblical text. As he does elsewhere in his annotations, Erasmus takes issue with the decision of the Vulgate translator, but does not alter the substance of the Vulgate translation, or the interpretation it implies. In fact, Erasmus even indulges in the very practice he elsewhere criticizes—for *verbisator* is not a word that exists in Latin independently of the translation of *σπερμολόγος*. It is simply a coinage that better reflects the native character of Latin.

Beginning with the edition of the *Annotationes* of 1519, Erasmus's thinking begins to turn away from acceptance of the traditional Latin interpretation. Here, Erasmus indicates that *seminiuerbius* in the Latin Vulgate is used "in place of what Augustine cites, *seminator verborum*," which, Erasmus notes, is also found in copies he has collated for his own edition. But now Erasmus proposes another rendering as an alternative to *verbisator*: *seminilegus* ("seed gatherer"), in the sense of "a babbler, one who prattles on about anything for his own profit."⁴⁷ Here is the complete sentence as it appears in the edition of 1519: "Fortasse felicius effinxisset, si dixisset: 'verbisator', pro eo qui nouos rumores spargit in vulgus, [B] siue 'seminilegus' pro locutuleio et ad quaestum quiduis garriente"—"Perhaps he might have made a more felicitous calque, had he said, *verbisator*, indicating one who scatters fresh rumors among the rabble, [B] or else *seminilegus* in the sense of babbler, one prattling out whatever occurs to him as advantageous." P. F. Hovingh, editor of Erasmus's *opera omnia*, indicates the beginning of the material added in 1519 with [B]. As we saw above in our first main section, when considering modern biblical lexica and commentaries, the Gloss which begins at [B] gives the same explanation now universally adopted by modern scholars of the text, scholars who quote

⁴⁶ See note 13 above.

⁴⁷ "... siue 'seminilegus' pro locutuleio et ad quaestum quiduis garriente."

in defense of that explanation the same evidence which Erasmus proceeds to marshal in the present note. But before returning to that evidence and considering the conclusion Erasmus draws from it, we should try to perceive just how sharp the turn from the earlier Latin tradition is—a turn completed in merely two words: *siue* ‘*seminilegus*.’

As noted above, Erasmus’s original translation, *verbisator*, is merely a formal improvement upon translations long established in the Latin interpretative tradition of terms such as *seminator verborum*, *seminiverbius*, which mean, like *verbisator*, a “sower of words” or “word sower.” *Seminilegus*, however, cannot bear that traditional meaning. A “seed picker” cannot be a “word sower.” Indeed, the word that signified “word” in “word sower,” the Latin *verbum*, has been ejected from the new translation Erasmus now proposes. Any subsequent translator’s decision to use *seminilegus*, or a similar word, in preference to *verbisator* would amount to a victory of philological erudition over long-established liturgical, exegetical, and broader cultural tradition. But before considering the eventual consequences of Erasmus’s note, we should first briefly review the evidence he produces—evidence which we encountered already in the first main section above—in support of his judgments.

As do the modern scholars I considered above, Erasmus proceeds through a list of attestations of *σπερμολόγος* from both a Greek lexicon (Hesychius) and the usage of classical authors (Athenaeus and Demosthenes). He points out, just as modern scholars still do, that *σπερμολόγος* was used first literally of certain birds before acquiring its metaphorical pejorative senses. After quoting the same speech of Demosthenes cited by both LSJ and Montanari in their entries on *σπερμολόγος*, Erasmus appeals to the interpretation of a scholion on section 133 of Demosthenes’s *De coronā*.⁴⁸ Erasmus writes:

One who explains several words collected from this [passage; i.e., a scholiast] says that this insult is customarily applied to a vile person,

⁴⁸ I need to make a clarification here regarding the text of *De Coronā* 133 as it appears in Hovingh’s edition of Erasmus’s *Annotationes*. The relevant clause in section 133 is the following: . . . καὶ τὸ δίκην δοῦναι διαδὺς ἐξεπέμπετ’ ἂν ὑπὸ τοῦ *σπερμολόγου* τουτουί. Modern editors of Demosthenes, however, (e.g., Samuel Henry Butcher for Oxford Classical Texts in 1903, and Harvey Yunis in 2001) accept the reading *σεμολόγου* (“one who speaks solemnly or affectedly”; LSJ) in place of *σπερμολόγου*. The relevant passage of *De Coronā* for modern scholars is thus not 133, but 127: . . . ἀλλὰ μὴ *σπερμολόγος*, περίτριμμι’ ἀγορᾶς . . . But everything which Erasmus’s source says of the (now-emended) *σπερμολόγου* of *De Coronā* 133 applies equally to the instance of the same word at 127.

one of no account, who is thought worthless—he further wonders whether it befits him who is nourished, not from his own store, but feeds upon another’s food. The metaphor is taken from a little bird of which I just now made mention. Furthermore, Demosthenes calls Aeschines a *spermologos*—a word full of abuse—because he would say anything for his own advantage.⁴⁹

Erasmus gives no citation of his source, which was most likely the margin of a manuscript of Demosthenes—he instead merely refers to “one who explains several words collected from this [passage].” But the substance of Erasmus’s paraphrase closely resembles the scholion to *Scholia Demosthenica* 18.127 in M. R. Dils’s edition of the *Scholia Demosthenica*:

[. . . but not a *spermologos* . . .] some say this name is given to the jackdaw, since it avails itself of [the food of] other birds: In this particular case, Aischines has nothing of his own, but has availed himself of the arguments of others, being himself utterly bereft of education. Alternatively, *spermologos* means “ungodly,” one who collects from altars the offerings made by others. Or perhaps even “pauper,” one who picks up [the scraps] that fall from those carrying [sacks] and collects them little by little from the ground; in this way he feeds himself.⁵⁰

Having marshaled the same kind of evidence which modern scholars still adduce today, Erasmus now proceeds to draw the following conclusion to his annotation of this verse in the edition of 1519:

⁴⁹ “Qui voculas aliquot ex hoc sublectas interpretatur, ait hoc conuicium dici solere in hominem nequam minimique precii et pro nihilo habitum, addubitans etiam num conueniat in eum qui non ex suis alatur, sed alieno pascitur cibo. Metaphora sumpta ab auicula cuius modo meminimus. Caeterum Demosthenes Aeschinem *σπερμολόγον* appellat, contumelioso vocabulo, quod ad quaestum quiduis diceret” (Hovingh, *Opera omnia*, 284).

⁵⁰ “[. . . ἀλλὰ μὴ σπερμολόγος] τινές φασιν οὕτω καλεῖσθαι τὸν κολοῖον, ὡς ἄλλοτρίοις πτεροῖς προσχρησάμενον· καὶ δὴ καὶ ὁ Αἰσχίνης οὐδὲν ἴδιον ἔχει, τοῖς δὲ τῶν ἄλλων λόγοις προσεκέχρητο αὐτὸς ἀπαίδευτος ὢν. ἢ σπερμολόγος, ἀσεβής, ἀπὸ τῶν βωμῶν συλλέγων τὰ ἐπιτιθέμενα ὑπὸ τῶν ἄλλων. τάχα δὲ καὶ πένης, ὁ τὰ ἀποπίπτοντα ἀπὸ τῶν βασταζόντων ἀναλαμβάνων καὶ κατὰ βραχὺ ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς συλλέγων καὶ οὕτω τρεφόμενος” (M. R. Dils, *Scholia Demosthenica*, 2 vols. [Leipzig: Teubner, 1983; 1986], oration 18, sec. 223; retrieved from the TGL at stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/Iris).

Paul, too, while still unknown, seemed a character of this sort to certain Athenians. Further, [the word σπερμολόγος] cannot be understood in the sense of “sower of words,” as Augustine thinks, since the word is composed of σπέρμα and λέγω (in the sense of “collect”).⁵¹

It would seem from this conclusion that Erasmus has effectively demolished the Latin interpretation of Acts 17:18 that stretches all the way back to St. Augustine. The effect of Erasmus’s annotation would thus be to sweep that entire tradition, of some eleven hundred years’ duration, into the dustbin of exegetical history—which in fact, with the lone exceptions of the Latin Vulgate and Douay-Rheims, is where it resides today.

Erasmus continued revising and expanding his note on Acts 17:18 through several subsequent editions of the *Annotationes* (1522, 1527, 1535). With each expansion of the note, we can see how he came to embrace the new interpretation ever more completely. In 1522, he proposes the translation *rabula* (“wrangler” or “pettifogger”)—which is attractive because it makes clear the philosophers’ perception of Paul as an amateur or mere hack. In 1535, Erasmus commends Leonardo Bruni (Leonardus Aretinus) for his use of *rabula* in his own translation; and he further notes that the kindred Greek verb σπερμολογείν is used in the sense of Latin *nugari* (“to trifle, talk nonsense, or deceive”). Starting from the edition of 1527, Erasmus added the comment that σπερμολόγος should be derived from “collecting seeds” (*a colligendis seminibus*), and that therefore the formation σπειρολόγος “could have better expressed the meaning which Augustine perceives.”⁵²

This last quotation marks the conclusion of Erasmus’s *annotatio* on Acts 17:18, as it now appears in the edition of Hovingh, and as it has appeared ever since the edition of 1527. Erasmus’s final judgment would seem to put him squarely on the side of the modern scholars I considered in the

⁵¹ “Huiusmodi quispiam et Paulus adhuc incognitus visus est quibusdam Atheniensibus. Porro non potest accipi pro ‘seminatore verborum,’ quod arbitratur Augustinus, cum vox composita sit a σπέρμα et λέγω, τὸ συλλέγω.”

⁵² This last comment of Erasmus, which is the conclusion of his note to Acts 17:18 in its final form, perhaps lies behind the second half of the definition of σπερμολόγος which I cited above from Estienne’s 1572 *TGL*. For, there Estienne declares that σπερμολόγος can in fact signify not only ὁ σπέρματα λέγων (“one who gathers seeds”)—which is Erasmus’s conclusion—but also ὁ σπείρων λόγους (“one who scatters [or sows] words”)—which Erasmus finally denies. Estienne, in other words, although he does not name Erasmus, seems to insist that σπερμολόγος can in fact mean the same as σπειρολόγος.

first main section of this article (with the possible exception of Henri Estienne)—scholars who, like Erasmus himself, explain the various senses of *σπερμολόγος* as they can be retrieved only through exhaustive philological research—or, as is often the case now, by simply repeating the remarks of earlier generations of scholars. We should therefore place Erasmus, it seems, on the opposite side from that of Augustine and his many successors in the traditional Latin *interpretatio* of Acts 17:18. Indeed, for Augustine and his successors, *spermologos*, while often acknowledged to be an insult, still bore the further significance of “word sower”—a sower of God’s Word. Beginning with Erasmus, however, St. Paul—at least the Paul of Acts 17:18—suffers a demotion. No longer the original and exemplary word sower, Paul becomes instead a mere “seed picker” or “scrapmonger” or “babbler.”

This would seem to be the inevitable conclusion regarding Erasmus’s contribution to the interpretation of Acts 17:18. It would indeed be inevitable, except for another, curious fact: Erasmus himself never used any of the translations which his own annotation amply justifies. From 1519 onwards—when he first added to his note on *σπερμολόγος* the clause “sive ‘seminilegus,’ etc.”—Erasmus replaced his original translation, *verbisator*, not with one of the translations he approves in his notes (*seminilegus*, *locutuleius*, or *rabula*), but rather with the mere transliteration of the Greek word, *spermologus*. This translation—whether known to Erasmus or not, is unclear—in fact revives the practice of some of the earliest Latin translators of the New Testament. It is the translation found in *Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis*, dated to the fourth or early fifth century.⁵³ In 1524, moreover, when Erasmus published his first edition of his *Paraphrase on Acts*, he used the same translation, *spermologus*. Here is the relevant section of his paraphrase:

Moreover, in the market-place he spoke with all who came his way, whether Jews or Greeks. Among them were some Epicureans and Stoics, who hold vastly different dogmas. Epicureans, measuring the highest human happiness by the standard of pleasure, believe either that there are no gods or that they have no concern for human affairs. Stoics besides their other paradoxes, measure human happiness by a single disposition of the mind which they call “virtue” or “the morally honourable.” These engaged Paul in vigorous combat, as though he were some philosopher, the founder of a new school.

⁵³ See above note 13, where I cited the collation files of Old Latin Version manuscripts.

But when Paul had set forth for them the philosophy of the gospel, a philosophy disagreeing widely with all the tenets that please philosophers, some said out of mockery, “What is that ‘trifler’ trying to say?”—for this was the term of insult the Greeks fastened upon a babbler and a pettifogger, since the heavenly wisdom seemed to them to be folly.⁵⁴

Erasmus’s explication of the rival doctrines of the Stoics and Epicureans and his contrasting of either school with the “philosophy of the gospel” (*philosophia Euangelica*) are strongly redolent of Augustine’s Sermon 150 (see especially no. 5), which Bede closely followed in his *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* and then later quoted in his *Retractatio*; the comments of Bede were, in turn, later incorporated into the *Glossa Ordinaria*. And so, Robert Sider, in his note on the beginning of this passage, points to the relevant portion of the Gloss (1171B) and notes its citation of Bede.⁵⁵ Erasmus evidently still relies upon the tradition which we traced above in our third main section. As we saw there, however, a major feature of that tradition’s interpretation of this passage is its gloss of the rare word *spermologus* as “sower of words.”

But Sider’s decision to translate Erasmus’s *spermologus* as “trifler” is misleading, because it obscures the fact that Erasmus—instead of producing a Latin word with the meaning “trifler” (e.g., *nugator*)—has decided rather to dodge the issue altogether. Erasmus even goes so far as to adopt an approach he elsewhere explicitly condemns. The relevant clause now reads, “*Quid vult dicere spermologus iste?*” Erasmus, it seems, now commits the same error he condemned in the cases of *scandalizare*, *hypocrita*,

⁵⁴ “Praeterea [Paulus] in foro disserebat cum omnibus, qui ipsum adissent, sive Iudaei essent sive Graeci. Inter hos erant Epicuræi quidam et Stoici, inter se longe dissidentes decretis. Nam Epicuræi summam felicitatem hominis voluptate metientes, aut nullos credunt esse deos, aut illis nullam esse curam rerum humanarum. Stoici praeter alia paradoxa felicitatem hominum solo mentis habitu metiuntur, quam illi virtutem sive honestum apellant. Hi cum Paulo conflictati sunt, veluti cum philosopho quopiam novae sectae autore. Quum autem Paulus illis exposuisset philosophiam Euangelicam, ab omnibus philosophorum placitis longe dissonantem, quidam ludibrii causa dixerunt: *Quid vult dicere spermologus iste?* Nam hoc conuicio Graeci notabant hominem inepte loquacem ac rabulam. Siquidem sapientia coelestis videbatur illis esse stulticia” (*Paraphrasis D. Erasmi Roterodami in Acta Apostolorum* [Antwerp, Ioannes Steelsius, 1541], 59–60). I have quoted the translation of Sider and Bateman, *New Testament Scholarship: Paraphrase on the Acts of the Apostles*, 107.

⁵⁵ Sider and Bateman, *New Testament Scholarship: Paraphrase on the Acts of the Apostles*, 283n20.

parabola, and *thesaurizare*—which I discussed above. Sider does point out that, “taken literally, the clause [in 17:18] reads, ‘What is that *spermologus* trying to say?’”⁵⁶ Sider then summarizes the content and the gradual expansion of Erasmus’s annotation on 17:18, including the fact that *spermologus* replaced Erasmus’s original translation *verbisator*, beginning in his translation of 1519. But he does not consider why Erasmus, in apparent opposition to his own preference for avoiding loan words, simply declines to translate *σπερμολόγος*.

Conclusion

The achievements of modern biblical scholarship have bestowed an enormous blessing upon all students of Holy Scripture today. St. Augustine once described Scripture as “a thing not understood by the proud, nor laid open to children, but lowly in access, in its recesses lofty, and veiled with mysteries.”⁵⁷ “Veiled with mysteries” (*velatam mysteriis*) is a rich and resonant phrase—not least because the word *mysterium*, and its proper interpretation (in the sense used throughout this essay), presents a puzzle, deceptively simple at first glance, but in fact one whose solution demands all the resources of scholarly analysis and faithful inquiry. No one today who endeavors to untangle the mystery of the meaning of *mysterium* would ever wish to do so without the aid of all the lexicons, critical editions, and scholarly discourse that have accumulated since the dawn of humanistic learning. But the accumulations of scholarly learning initiated by humanists like Erasmus have themselves become a kind of veil that conceals the true nature of the humanists’ own encounter with Scripture—an encounter inevitably mediated by the centuries of interpretive tradition that had grown up through the life of the Church. Thus, a constant temptation to modern scholars is to assume that discussions such as that of Erasmus on Acts 17:18 have superseded the material on which Erasmus himself based his discussion. Nothing really new has been added to Erasmus’s discussion of the meaning of *spermologos* in the five hundred years that have passed since he composed his note. It is commonplace now, in discussions of the Greek word, merely to repeat (with attribution to Erasmus’s *epigoni* but not to the man himself) the substance of Erasmus’s annotation. But the entire

⁵⁶ Sider and Bateman, *New Testament Scholarship: Paraphrase on the Acts of the Apostles*, 283n20.

⁵⁷ *Confessiones* 3.5.9: “. . . rem non compertam superbis neque nudatam pueris, sed incesso humilem, successu excelsam et velatam mysteriis” (PL, 32:686).

tradition with which Erasmus himself thoroughly reckoned has become invisible to the modern student of Scripture.

Erasmus finally concluded that *σπερμολόγος* could not be understood in the sense of “sower of words,” as Augustine thought. But Augustine was nonetheless an interlocutor with whom Erasmus conversed. The whole tradition of interpretation that Augustine’s Sermon 150 germinated was alive and active and an inducement to Erasmus’s own thought.



Dei Verbum, the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, offers the following counsel to interpreters of Holy Scripture:

Since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words. . . . For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another. (§12)

To conclude our reflection upon *σπερμολόγος* and its interpretation, it is fitting that we should attend closely to the actual words recorded by St. Luke—not only in Acts 17:18 but in his Parable of the Sower as well. Do those words give us any reason for supposing that the connection which St. Augustine makes in his sermon may have been present already in the mind of the Evangelist himself?

Luke begins the parable as follows: ἐξῆλθεν ὁ σπείρων τοῦ σπείραι τὸν σπόρον αὐτοῦ. (8:5) This introduction differs from those of Mark and Matthew. Mark (4:3) writes, ἰδοὺ ἐξῆλθεν ὁ σπείρων σπείραι. And Matthew (13:3) similarly begins: ἰδοὺ ἐξῆλθεν ὁ σπείρων τοῦ σπείρειν. Of the three versions—no two of which are identical—Mark’s and Matthew’s are closer to each other than either is to Luke’s. Mark and Matthew both begin with the interjection ἰδοὺ followed by slightly different variations of the statement “the sower went forth to sow.” Luke, on the other hand, if we translate his Greek very literally, writes: “There went forth the sower to

sow his sowing.” The word I translated “sowing”—σπόρος—is usually translated “seed.”⁵⁸ But the translation conceals Luke’s very deliberate repetition—one might even say redundancy—of a noun with the same stem (or seed!) as the preceding verb and participle: a figure of speech known as paronomasia. Notice, too, that each element in the sequence—the sower (ὁ σπείρων); *to sow* (τοῦ σπείρειν); *the sowing* (τὸν σπόρον)—is composed of the definite article and a disyllabic form of the σπειρ-/σπορ- root. Why has Luke done this?

One answer is that Luke thus prepares the way for his explanation of the parable, which begins at verse 11: Ἔστιν δὲ αὕτη ἡ παραβολή· Ὁ σπόρος ἐστὶν ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ (“And this parable is [as follows]: The seed is the Word of God”). What is immediately apparent to any reader of Luke’s Greek—but what English translations conceal—is that Luke has created a neat little jingle between the words σπόρος and λόγος. Just say them ten times to see what I mean: σπόρος, λόγος, σπόρος, λόγος . . . and so on. Also, the last phrase in Luke’s beginning—τὸν σπόρον αὐτοῦ—rhymes with the last phrase in the first sentence of his explanation—ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ. This special quality of Luke’s version of the parable and its explanation especially stands out when compared with Mark’s and Matthew’s. Mark writes instead, ὁ σπείρων τὸν λόγον σπείρει (4:14), and Matthew gives no analogous statement. These sound effects produced by Luke’s Greek should put us in mind of the etymology of the word *catechize*, which derives from *κατηχέω*, literally “to sound over or through” (from the word ἡχώ, “an echo”) and then, metaphorically, “to teach by word of mouth, instruct,” and specifically, “instruct in the elements of religion” (LSJ). Luke has literally made the sound of the truth that “the seed is the word God” (ὁ σπόρος ἐστὶν ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ) echo in our ears.

It is reasonable to wonder, then, what a writer so sensitive to the sound of words and their possible associations must have thought when, attending St. Paul on his Athenian disputations, he heard the philosophers’ quip: Τί ἂν θέλοι ὁ σπερμολόγος οὗτος λέγειν (“What could this *spermologos* wish to say?”). Might Luke’s first thought have been, “The word of God! For his *sporos* is God’s *logos*” (τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ! ὁ σπόρος γὰρ αὐτοῦ ἐστὶν ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ)? In other words, might Luke have written his version of the Parable of the Sower in such a way as to anticipate the subsequent quotation of the philosophers’ insult in Acts 17:18?

Such reflections are admittedly speculative. But they are certainly relevant to our contemplation of “a thing not understood by the proud, nor

⁵⁸ For example, the RSVCE has: “A sower went out to sow his seed.”

laid open to children, but lowly in access, in its recesses lofty, and veiled with mysteries.” If such is the character of the thing contemplated, we should welcome as partner in our contemplation anyone whose gaze may have noticed a detail that escaped our own. NEV