

JESUS IN THE PARABLES: CLASS AND GENDER READINGS

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1 INTRODUCTION

Many of us have become accustomed to reading the Bible with the use and help of commentaries. This is especially true for those trained in theological disciplines or in homiletics. There is of course nothing particularly wrong with that. In fact, like all technological aids, commentaries save time, are convenient and offer the benefits of previous scholarship. Similarly, however, an over-dependence on commentaries and on previous scholarship has its problems. Among these is the simple problem of de-skilling. All technologies do that, and it might be well for us to keep this in mind as we read the Bible through the eyes of others.

In this paper I propose an exegetical and hermeneutical conversation on the parables of Jesus without the use of commentaries. The aim is to see whether it is not possible to open up avenues and ways of understanding that may not be possible if we simply rely on established perspectives. The conversation will in particular pay attention to social class and gender issues. My motivation to confront the texts of the Bible on my own and with the resources of my community and struggle comes from the words of an introduction to an issue of a Journal entitled: *Radical Religion*, and sub-titled *Class Origins and Class Readings*. The editors say:

Organized religion is not about to give us access to the full story of the Bible. We have to recover the Bible through our own efforts to penetrate and unlock its full resources. The clue to the Bible as a social class resource is the recognition of an inner affinity between life struggle in biblical world and life struggle today. The biblical world only looks placid when viewed from the composure of an established class perspective. If we are comfortable with having 'arrived' at a reasonable end

for our lives, biblical communities will appear to us as similarly secure and 'realized' communities. If we are engaged in identifying and overcoming the splits and barriers to imperfect community, biblical communities may 'open up' to us as kindred struggle contexts. (Radical Religion, vol. ii, nos. 2&3, 1974, p. 3)

2 MARK 14:3-9 THE WOMAN ANOINTS JESUS

The first observation to make is that apart from John none of the synoptic gospels names the woman in this story. There does seem like there is some uneasiness about who she is. Instead, the host and owner of the house where the anointing takes place gets to be named. It is a certain Simon who is to be remembered by the fact that he had 'suffered from a dreaded skin-disease'.

It is John's gospel that takes the jump and tells us who the woman was. Traditional exegesis makes no fuss about the fact that the synoptics, unlike John, do not care to name the woman. If it is Mary, as John's gospel, indicates then there are absences and presences as well as silences and eloquences that we must still probe.

The second observation I would like to make concerns the Action of the woman. In John's gospel she Took a litre of expensive perfume and poured the contents out on Jesus. In Matthew the woman Came with an alabaster full of perfume and poured it on Jesus. In Mark she Came with an alabaster full of perfume. In addition, she Broke the jar and poured the perfume on Jesus head.

I suspect that Mark intends us to capture something with this act of Breaking. Why did she break the jar. Or is this just another word for opening the jar. If not, I would like to know the symbolism of her act. Is this an act of defiance. How are we going to know and why are we not being explained to in the story. More importantly, is this story capable of explaining this to us.

The last point raises a key question for an exegete of liberation: Whose story is this anyway? It is quiet clear who about the story is. But what are the principal ideological and social class questions underlying this story? The reactions of other characters in the story helps to answer this question. The text says: "Some of the people there became angry and said to one another: What was the use of wasting the perfume? It could have been sold for more

than three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor!' They criticized her harshly." (vs. 5).

The issue of the poor is quiet prominent in the story. It comes out both in the reaction of the group of people who criticized the woman and in the response we are told Jesus made to them. Clearly, we are dealing with a group that sees itself as having a conscience about the condition of the poor. It is also a group that has taste or is able to judge value. The group is concerned about the wasting of an expensive perfume. According to them, if the perfume is to be wasted, there are morally more acceptable ways of dispensing with such a valuable commodity: sell it and use the money to give it to the poor. That is certainly a smart combination of a sense of value and a social conscience.

Jesus also comments on the issue of the poor. And his statement on the poor is responsible for a deeply ingrained attitude about poverty and the poor on the part of a section of Christian people all over the world. The statement says, with a ring of pain for those who are poor today, and I suspect then also, that: "The poor you will always have with you" (vs. 7). I have difficulty accepting that Jesus said this. I would like to have some help from New Testament scholars. Is there a basis for accepting this rendering of Jesus' response? I have an ideological hunch that Jesus said something else. I am, however, open to be convinced otherwise. It seems more probable to me that Jesus would have said, rather, that: The poor you have always had with you, You hypocrites. Why now are you pretending that you are concerned about them when you see what this woman is doing?

Be that as it may. It is unlike Jesus to dismiss the poor in the way the text suggests. On the other hand, it is like the Biblical texts themselves in general to take such a position. And so once again, we are faced with an excruciating hermeneutical challenge.

I am not as impressed as Elizabeth Schlusser Fiorenza about the comment that wherever the gospel is preached what she has done will be told in memory of her. Something else would have made a greater impression on me. It is this: Her own reason, told through her own voice, why it is she did what she did. I am dying to find out what was going on in her heart and mind. What is the point of telling the story of what she did in the words of those who silenced her and disallowed her speaking to us? It seems to me that a hermeneutics of liberation should truly concern itself with the silence of this

woman or the eloquence of her action by engaging it through the silences of women in our time or the eloquence of their actions. Everybody speaks for her. Neither the text, nor the host in the text, nor the unnamed audience, nor even Jesus allows the woman to speak.

3 LUKE 19:11-27 THE PARABLE OF THE GOLD COINS OR THE NOBLE MAN

The key observation I want to make about this parable is that like many texts of the Bible it strongly dictates how it should be read. And surprise, surprise, that is how generations of readers and scholars have read it. It call on us to judge harshly, as it itself does, the servant who followed a alternative logic in dealing with the coins given him by the Noble man. The text also enjoins us by some subtle means to support it in ignoring the voice of protest of the crowd who complained: "Sir he already has ten coins", surely he cannot be given the only coin that the other servant has. And the ideology of this story has ruled the world ever since without an ideological protest from Christians against this ideology. Here is the ideology: "I tell you," Jesus replied, "that to every person that has something, even more will be given; but the person who has nothing, even the little that he has will be taken away from him"(v26).

If you think that is bad, wait for the trump card and imagine the implications in situations of repression especially where the army may be the instrument of such a repression. The story ends with the following words: "Now as for those enemies of mine who did not want me to be their king, bring them here and kill them in my presence!"(vs27)

From the point of view of liberation theology, though, it is the suppression in the text of the story of the explanation of the man who did not invest his coin which is significant. He draws clearly from his experience of oppression and acts on the basis of that. He says: I know you oppressors. You are predictable. There is no way of winning with you. I am afraid of you, and I have cause to be afraid of you: You are a hard man; you take what is not yours and reap what you did now sow!(vs21).

I still do not understand why it is that oppressed readers of the Bible have not found these words resonating with their own experience. I do not know

why scholars of the bible from oppressed and exploited communities have not chosen the side of the marginalized servant in this story?

4 MATTHEW 21:33-45 PARABLE OF THE TENANTS IN THE VINEYARD

It is interesting that the Good News Bible captions this parable: the parable of the tenants in the Vineyard. I would argue that it should more appropriately be entitled: the parable of the absentee landlord.

Be that as it may. In this story, as in most parables and texts of the Bible, there is a clear perspective which the text is championing. The reader is in no doubt as to what needs to be condemned: the beating, killing and stoning of the messengers of the landlord. The concentration of feeling and drama with which the text communicates these acts takes away from any other features of the story. There is no time to think about the landlord to tenant economic and power relations! The reader cannot even begin to ponder the nature of the mode of production that underlies the social system from which the text was produced!

Without much ado, the reader knows which side she or he must take in the story. And most readers do indeed take that side. The situation is made worse by when the tenants kill not only the subsequent groups of messengers, but also the son of the landlord!

It may feel and look really bad for any morally motivate person. For Christians it is really worse because of the christological implications which the story itself draws from this climax of the text: "Jesus to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: The stone which the builders rejected, has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?" (vs. 42)

And then the writer adds a piece which I think the ideologists of the IMF and the World Bank will love to know exists in the Bible, in the New Testament, if it is not already the basis of the way they are able to punish countries and nations by moving their resources to obedient clients. Jesus is reported to have said: "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it"(vs. 43).

5 INDEPENDENCE, RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT: BEYOND F.W. DE KLERK AND NELSON MANDELA

In my country in the past four years we have seen a move from an old status quo to a new settlement. The key players in that process have been De Klerk and Mandela. Like the texts of the Bible in which we hear certain things and do not hear others, see certain things and miss to notice others, the political texts of De Klerk and Mandela have made present certain realities and have absented others; they voice to certain formerly unheard things and rendered yet others silent. The challenge for a theology of genuine freedom is whether it can beat the faith of the exodus in its struggle with the Davidic establishment and go beyond De Klerk and Mandela.

It seems to me that in seeking to develop a hermeneutic of good news to the poor in the Third World, the question is no longer on which side God is. That was a good question for its time. Now, however, the relevant question is how to interpret the eloquence with which the poor are silent and the absence through which they are present in the pages of the Bible. It is in struggling with these silences and absences that a new and creative reappropriation of the liberation of the gospel takes place. It would be really nice to know that God is on our side, but in the context of the continuing reality of colonisation and recolonisation in the countries of the Third World, we simply cannot start there. We may indeed end there.

For myself I would not mind a theology of liberation which although it cannot start there but can certainly work itself to a point of ending with the great affirmation of Paul that: "If God be for us, who can be against us?"(Romans 8:31)