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**“DO YOU SEE THIS WOMAN?” (LUKE 7:44):**

**A LIBERATIVE LOOK AT LUKE 7:36-50  
AND STRATEGIES FOR READING OTHER LUCAN STORIES AGAINST THE GRAIN<sup>1</sup>**

**“What is in Front of our Eyes”**

In the introduction to her book *But She Said*, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza opens with a poem by Audre Lorde, entitled “Contact Lenses:”

Lacking what they want to see  
makes my eyes hungry  
and eyes can feel  
only pain.

Once I lived behind thick walls  
of glass  
and my eyes belonged  
to a different ethic  
timidly rubbing the edges  
of whatever turned them on.  
Seeing usually  
was a matter of what was  
in front of my eyes  
matching what was  
behind my brain.  
Now my eyes have become  
a part of me exposed  
quick risky and open  
to all the same dangers.

I see much  
better now  
and my eyes hurt.<sup>2</sup>

Feminist hermeneutics asks not only whether “what is in front of our eyes” matches “what is behind our brains,” but it also raises questions about how “what is in front of our eyes” and “what is

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<sup>1</sup> Slightly different versions of this essay appear in *Biblical Research* 40 (1995) 37-49 and *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996) 107-23.

<sup>2</sup> Audre Lorde, *The Black Unicorn: Poems* (New York: Norton, 1978) 94 in Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza *But She Said. Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992) 1.

behind our brains” got there and through whose lenses it has been filtered. In this paper I would like to engage in a Rorschach experiment with the text of Luke 7:36-50. My thesis is that the text itself deals with the issue of perception as it relates to faith in Jesus. The key verse is Luke 7:44, “Do you see this woman?” It offers a challenge and invitation to conversion, not only to Simon, but to contemporary believers as well. Peeling away cataracts formed by gender bias and misguided presuppositions allows us to “see much better,” even if it makes our eyes hurt.

### **Seeing as a Metaphor for Faith**

Before moving to Luke 7:36-50 it is important to note how, throughout the Gospel, Luke uses "seeing" as a metaphor for perceiving the word of God.<sup>3</sup> Although seeing is less frequent in Luke than hearing, both are used as metaphors for the ability to perceive and respond properly to Jesus.

### **Seeing and Believing**

In the opening chapters of the Gospel, the mere sight of the child Jesus turns people to God if they are properly disposed to see Jesus as the bearer of salvation (2:20,30-31). A significant part of Jesus' mission is to bring "recovery of sight to the blind" (4:18). The physical healings also symbolize the capacity to perceive and respond properly to Jesus (e.g., 18:35-43). Seeing Jesus' deeds leads people to glorify God (5:26; 17:15-16). At the sight of Jesus' death, the centurion glorified God and declared Jesus righteous (23:47).

But seeing Jesus and his deeds does not always evoke a positive response. In 8:10, Jesus, using the words of the prophet Isaiah, warns his disciples about looking but not seeing, and hearing but not understanding. And in 10:23-24 Jesus stresses to them their privileged position, saying to them, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I say to you, many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it" (10:23-24). That clarity of vision for them only comes after the resurrection is evident from what happens to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:31). Paradoxically, "their eyes were opened and they recognized him" just as "he vanished from their sight." And at the next appearance to the disciples in Jerusalem (Luke 24:39) Jesus directs them, "Look (ἴδετε) at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see (ἴδετε)." Seeing and believing are linked until the very end of Luke's narrative.

### **Seeing and Not Believing**

There are, however, those who are not disposed to believe on the basis of what they see in Jesus. Herod is a case in point. Luke 9:9 says that Herod "kept trying to see (ἐζήτει ἰδεῖν) him [Jesus]." He succeeds in 23:8, where Luke remarks, "Herod was very glad to see (ἰδεῖν) Jesus; he had been wanting to see (ἰδεῖν) him for a long time, for he had heard about him and had been hoping to see (ἰδεῖν) him perform some sign." But seeing based on curiosity or sign-seeking falls far short of the mark. Or take the parable of the Good Samaritan: When the priest and the Levite each see (ἰδὼν) the man who had been robbed, they pass by on the opposite side (10:31,32). Only

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<sup>3</sup> See Alan Culpepper, "Seeing the Kingdom of God: The Metaphor of Sight in the Gospel of Luke," *CurTM* 21 (1994) 434-443; Dennis Hamm, "What the Samaritan Leper Sees: The Narrative Christology of Luke 17:11-19," *CBQ* 56 (1994) 273-87; "Sight to the Blind: Vision as Metaphor in Luke," *Bib* 67 (1986) 457-77.

the Samaritan traveler "was moved with compassion at the sight" (10:33).

### **Setting the Scene for Luke 7:36-50**

Throughout the Third Gospel, then, seeing Jesus and his deeds leads some to believe, but others not. And this is the theme of the section that precedes the episode at the home of Simon the Pharisee. The dinner party scene comes on the heels of the inquiry of the disciples of John the Baptist to Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" (7:20). The next verse interjects: "At that time he cured many of their diseases, sufferings, and evil spirits; he also granted sight to many who were blind" (7:21). Jesus then replies to John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them" (7:22). He concludes, "And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me" (7:23). The issue is how people evaluate what they see and hear concerning Jesus: does it draw them to faith in him? or do they take offense? Note that Jesus points John's disciples to what they have seen and heard; but it is for them to interpret: to believe or not to believe.

In the next scene (7:24-35), after the messengers of John have left, Jesus speaks to the crowds. He quizzes them about what they went out to the desert to see when they followed John. Three times he asks, "What did you go out to the desert to see---a reed swayed by the wind?" (v. 24). "Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine garments?" (v. 25). And again, "Then what did you go out to see? A prophet?" (v. 26). The issue of seeing a prophet, raised in v. 26, prepares for Simon's objection in v. 39, that if Jesus were a prophet he would know who and what sort of woman was touching him.

Verses 29-30 show that as with Jesus, so with John before him: some were disposed to see the prophet and turn to God; others no. Verse 29 asserts, "all the people who listened, including the tax collectors, and who were baptized with the baptism of John, acknowledged the righteousness of God." By contrast, "the Pharisees and scholars of the law, who were not baptized by him rejected the plan of God for themselves" (v. 30).<sup>4</sup> A parable in vv. 31-32 continues to contrast actual responses to those desired: "We played the flute for you, but you did not dance. We sang a dirge, but you did not weep." The mention of weeping leads into 7:36-50, where the woman who exemplifies the desired response stands behind Jesus, "at his feet weeping" (v. 38).

Following the parable of the children in the marketplace, vv. 33-34 return to the issue of seeing. For those determined not to "see" in a way that leads to faith, they will see what they want: in John, who "came neither eating food nor drinking wine," they see a man "possessed by a demon" (v. 33); in Jesus who "came eating and drinking" they see "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (v. 34). With this as the backdrop, we turn to the episode at Simon's house.

### **Luke 7:36-50**

<sup>36</sup>One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. <sup>37</sup>And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. <sup>38</sup>She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. <sup>39</sup>Now when the Pharisee who had

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<sup>4</sup> See J. T. Carroll, "Luke's Portrayal of the Pharisees," *CBQ* 50 (1988) 604-21, for further detail on how Luke uses Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees to demonstrate competing understandings of the realm of God.

invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him--that she is a sinner." <sup>40</sup>Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." <sup>41</sup>"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup>When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" <sup>43</sup>Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." <sup>44</sup>Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. <sup>45</sup>You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup>You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup>Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." <sup>48</sup>Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." <sup>49</sup>But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" <sup>50</sup>And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

(NRSV)

The first three verses describe an episode that both Jesus and Simon witness. They see the same actions, but interpret them very differently. The point of the story is found not in the interaction between Jesus and the woman; but in the exchange between Jesus and Simon.<sup>5</sup> In the context of Luke 7, Simon exemplifies one who sees what he expects to see. The question that this episode poses is: can Simon ever see differently?

### **What Simon Sees**

Verse 39 gives Simon's initial judgment. Note that two perceptions are intimately related: what Simon sees in the woman and her interaction with Jesus determines how Simon sees Jesus himself. Simon is clear about what he sees: she is a sinner and Jesus is not a prophet. Now it becomes apparent that Simon's ability to see differently not only concerns his attitude toward the woman, but also his relationship with Jesus.

### **A Parable**

The story continues with Jesus confronting Simon about his mistaken perceptions (v. 40). As most often in this Gospel, Jesus does not engage in lengthy discourses about the realm of God, but rather tells a parable (vv. 41-43). Simon easily gets the point when it is presented in story form. But now comes the real test: will Simon "get" it when confronted with the real-life woman? Jesus turns to the woman, but says to Simon, "Do you see this woman?" (v. 44). This is the hinge question of the whole pericope.

### **What Jesus Sees**

Jesus then recounts what he saw the woman do (vv. 44-46). The purpose of this

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<sup>5</sup> Contrary to Evelyn R. Thibeaux, "'Known to be a Sinner': The Narrative Rhetoric of Luke 7:36-50," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 23/4 (1993) 152.

recitation is not so much to accuse Simon for what he did not do.<sup>6</sup> The focus is: Does Simon persist in seeing the woman as a sinner, or is he able to reinterpret her actions? If Simon is still not forthcoming with a different evaluation of what he saw, Jesus articulates his own conclusion, attempting to persuade Simon to see as he sees: she has been forgiven much and now shows great love (vv. 47-48). Verse 47 makes it utterly clear that the woman's sins had already been forgiven before this dinner party. The perfect tense of the verb ἀφέωνται, "have been forgiven," expresses a past action whose effects endure into the present. How or when the woman's sins were forgiven is not narrated. Jesus' words to the woman in v. 48, "Your sins are forgiven," are a reaffirmation to her of what has already occurred. One thing is very clear: the woman is not forgiven because of her lavish demonstrations of love; rather, the loving actions follow from her experience of having been forgiven. The parable in vv. 41-43 and the conclusion of v. 47c make the same point: much love follows much forgiveness.<sup>7</sup>

Is Simon persuaded to adopt this perspective? Can he let go of seeing the woman as a sinner and see, rather, her great love? Can he see Jesus as a prophet and a special agent of God's forgiving love? Can he see himself as one in need of forgiveness as well? We don't know. Like all good parables, the story is open-ended. It remains for us to finish.<sup>8</sup> The woman approaches

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Kenneth E. Bailey, Poet and Peasant & Through Peasant Eyes (2 vols. in 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 2.11, who explores why Simon would have invited Jesus and then deliberately snub him. This is not the point.

<sup>7</sup> The phrase, ὅτι ἠγάπησεν πολὺ allows the meaning, "because she loves much," taking the conjunction ὅτι in a consecutive sense. However, the conclusion in v. 47c, "But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little," and the parable in vv. 41-43 have the opposite point: that the love follows the forgiveness. In this context it is clear that ὅτι must be understood in the causal sense, pointing not to the reason why the fact is so, but whereby it is known to be so. The translation of the Revised English Bible makes this the clearest: "So I tell you, her great love proves that her many sins have been forgiven; where little has been forgiven, little love is shown." This interpretation also makes an important theological point: divine forgiveness is not dependent on a person's demonstrations of love; the remittance of sin is prior. See further Joseph A. Fitzmyer, The Gospel According to Luke I-IX (AB28; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981) 687.

<sup>8</sup> The concluding verses 48-50 append sayings found in other Lucan stories that have only a loose connection to 7:36-47. In the story of the man who had been paralyzed (Luke 5:17-26) Jesus also says, "Your sins are forgiven" (5:20). The scribes and Pharisees react by asking themselves, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who but God alone can forgive sins?" (5:21). Simon's asking himself about Jesus' identity in 7:39 recalls 5:20-21 and prompts Luke to end the episode in chapter 7 with the same statement, "Your sins are forgiven" (7:48) and the same question, "Who is this?" (7:49). The central point of the episode in 7:36-50, however, does not concern Jesus' ability to forgive sins, but rather Simon's misperception of a forgiven sinner. The effect of Jesus' statement in 7:48 is that it reaffirms to the woman the forgiveness she has already experienced. The question in 7:49 indicates that Jesus is the agent of the forgiveness, although the verb ἀφέωνται, "have been forgiven" (v. 47) may be understood as a theological passive, i.e., the forgiving has been done by God. In context, the effect of v. 49 is that Simon's companions are shown as contradicting Jesus' attempt to move Simon to a different perception of the woman. The reader is left wondering who will win out: Jesus or Simon's cronies?

The concluding verse, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (7:50) is identical to the

Jesus without his bidding, and touches him, followed by objections from a character named Simon. This causes Luke to append 7:50 to the story of the woman who loved greatly, giving the two episodes identical endings. It invites us to take up the challenge presented to Simon and to be converted to Jesus' way of seeing.

### **Look Again**

This text can likewise serve as a challenge to modern believers and exegetes to take another look at what we see when we approach a familiar text. If we ask the question of ourselves, "Do you see this woman?" what is it that we see? How has our vision been colored by past interpretations that tend to reinforce Simon's initial perception and never move beyond that? It is startling to see how many commentators and translators do precisely that.

### **Titles**

First, a sampling of titles given to the passage by modern scholars is revealing.<sup>9</sup> The New American Bible (with revised New Testament, 1986) entitles it: "The Pardon of a Sinful Woman." The New Jerusalem Bible (rev. 1985) and the New Revised Standard Version (1989) call it: "The Woman Who Was a Sinner." Harper Collins Study Bible (1993) has, "A Sinful Woman Forgiven." La Nueva Biblia Latinoamericana (1972) confuses matters entirely by making her "La mujer pecadora de Magdala" ("The sinful woman from Magdala")! The Christian Community Bible (1988) is noncommittal: "Jesus, the Woman and the Pharisee."

In five out of these six titles, the sinfulness of the woman is the focus. Two mistakenly lead the reader to believe that the pardon of her sins takes place in this episode. It is remarkable that none has thought to point the reader to the way Jesus perceives her (v. 47) by entitling it: "A Woman who Shows Great Love."

### **Mistranslations**

In addition to titles that direct attention to the woman's sinfulness, there are mistranslations of verse 47. The 1970 edition of the New American Bible translates: "I tell you, that is why her many sins are forgiven--because of her great love. Little is forgiven one whose love is small." Similarly, the 1971 edition of the Revised Standard Version has, "Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he<sup>10</sup> who is forgiven little, loves little." Both of these wrongly make the woman's forgiveness a consequence of her actions. Note that the RSV reverses the direction in the second half of the verse, correctly rendering that

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closing line of the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage (8:43-48). In the latter story, faith is at the heart of the message; in 7:36-50 faith only appears in the final verse, and is not the point of the episode. The similarities of the two narratives, in which a woman thought to be unclean

<sup>9</sup> Although the additions of subtitles by modern translators where there are none in the Greek manuscripts may help the reader to find his or her place in the text, they also interpret the passage--oftentimes in a mistaken direction.

<sup>10</sup> The relative pronoun  $\hat{\omega}$  is rendered inclusively, "the one to whom," in the revised version of 1989.

little forgiveness results in little love.<sup>11</sup> Community Bible, "This is why, I tell you, her sins, her many sins, are forgiven, because she loved much. But the one who is forgiven little, returns little love." Happily, the revised versions of the NAB (1986) and NRSV (1989) have corrected these mistranslations.

Finally, the rendering of verse 37 in some translations also serves to reinforce the woman's sinfulness. The text clearly says that the woman was a sinner, but the verb tense in verse 37 is imperfect, which has the connotation, "used to be." In other words, she was a sinner, but is no longer, as is also clear from v. 47. That the woman was a sinner in the past is completely obscured in the translation of the NAB, "Now there was a sinful woman in the city." Moreover, this translation juxtaposes "sinful" and "woman," making it all the more difficult to ever eradicate the equation of the two. The NRSV is far preferable and translates the Greek more literally, "And a woman in the city, who was a sinner."

### **A Prostitute?**

What about the kinds of sins this woman committed? It is curious that, although the text does not say what sort of sins she had committed, much attention is given to speculation on the nature of her sinful past. By contrast, commentators never discuss what might be the type of sins Simon Peter has committed when he says he is "a sinful man" in the story of his call (Luke 5:7). The usual presumption is that the woman in 7:36-50 was a prostitute.<sup>12</sup> In v. 47 Jesus acknowledges that her sins had been many, and Luke hints in v. 37 that the whole city also knows this. But does that warrant the conclusion that she is a prostitute?

In a first century Galilean city everyone knows everyone else's business. This woman need only have been ill, disabled, or have contact with Gentiles to be considered a sinner by all Jews in the city.<sup>13</sup> Simon's remark in verse 39 implies that the woman's sinfulness is not immediately

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<sup>11</sup> The same is true of the translation of the New Jerusalem Bible, "For this reason I tell you that her sins, many as they are, have been forgiven her, because she has shown such great love. It is someone who is forgiven little who shows little love;" La Nueva Biblia Latinoamericana, "Por esto te digo que sus pecados, sus numerosos pecados, le quedan perdonados, por el mucho amor que demostró. Pero aquel a quien se le perdona poco, demuestra poco amor;" and the Christian

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Kathleen Corley, Private Women. Public Meals (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993) 124; J. D. M. Derrett, Law in the New Testament (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970) 167-68; Elisabeth Moltmann Wendel, The Women Around Jesus (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 65; A. Plummer, The Gospel According to S. Luke (5th ed. ICC. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981) 210; E. Schweizer, The Good News According to Luke (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984) 139; B. Witherington III, Women and the Genesis of Christianity (New York: Cambridge University, 1990) 66. Fitzmyer dissents: "No hint is given of the kind of sins that she has committed" (Luke, 1.689). M. Black (An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts (3d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1967] 181-83) thinks that the Lucan text is playing on the Aramaic word for "sinner," *hayyābtā'*, "debtor," and is thus providing a connection between the pronouncement-story and the parable.

<sup>13</sup> That sickness and disability were equated with sinfulness in Jesus' day is evident from the question of Jesus' disciples in John 9:2, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he

apparent to a stranger. A possible scenario is that the woman is employed in work that brings her into frequent contact with Gentiles,<sup>14</sup> perhaps midwifery. Or her work may be in one of the trades considered unclean, such as dyeing.<sup>15</sup> Everyone in the city would know her occupation and would consider her sinful from her association with the unclean. Simon, unaware of any prior contact between her and Jesus, remarks to himself that if Jesus were, indeed, a prophet, he, too, would know that she is a sinner.

### **Women at Banquets**

The woman's mere presence<sup>16</sup> at the banquet does open her up to the accusation of being a prostitute. In antiquity women who attended banquets were prostitutes who were there to enhance the pleasure of the men. Although in the Roman period respectable women became more liberated and were beginning to attend banquets with men, the pervasive attitude was that such actions made a woman sexually suspect.

However, the woman who comes to Simon's house is not a participant in the banquet. Nor does she do any of the things that banquet courtesans were known to do: engage in witty conversation or discussion with the banqueters, drink with them, recline beside them, dance, act, play the flute or harp, or in any way entertain.<sup>17</sup> Nor is she named by any of the known terms for such women: πόρνη, "prostitute, whore," κοινή, "common," i. e., "shared by all," γύνακ πάγκοινε, "public woman," πιλάσωτος, "wanton," or ἑταῖρα, "companion to men," the term for the highest class prostitutes.<sup>18</sup>

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was born blind?" Jesus' reply is, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him" (John 9:3). The equation of gentile with "sinner" can be seen in 1 Macc 2:44; Gal 2:15, and is implied in Luke 6:32-33; 24:7.

<sup>14</sup> The phrase αἱ ἁμαρτίαι αὐτῆς αἱ πολλάί, "her many sins," in v. 47 indicates that her sinfulness came from numerous acts.

<sup>15</sup> See J. Jeremias, "Despised Trades," Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 303-312.

<sup>16</sup> John Koenig (New Testament Hospitality [Overtures to Biblical Theology 17; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985]) notes that rabbinic texts (Abot. 1:5; Tos. Ber. 4:8; Ta'an. 20.b) speak of virtuous Jews who were known to open their houses to the needy, particularly for Sabbath eve supper. This explains how the woman could have gained access to a Pharisee's meal.

<sup>17</sup> See such descriptions of banquet courtesans in Corley, Public Meals, 38-48; see also Sarah Pomeroy, Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves. Women in Classical Antiquity (New York: Dorset, 1975) 88-92.

<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, it is not known whether any of the women who responded positively to Jesus were prostitutes. Such speculation is based on one lone saying unique to Matthew. It occurs on the lips of Jesus at the end of the parable of the two sons. He says to the chief priests and elders, "Amen, I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. When John came to you in the way of righteousness, you did not believe him; but tax collectors and prostitutes did. Yet even when you saw that, you did not later change your minds and believe him" (Matt 21:31-32). The saying serves as a warning to the religious leaders, who think themselves upright, but who in fact, may not be. It contrasts their negative response to Jesus with that of those least expected to be upright: tax collectors and prostitutes. It is a warning to the leaders, set forth in polemical terms, not a historical attestation on the makeup of



### **Loose Hair = Loose Woman?**

Nonetheless, some find in Luke 7:36-50 proof of the woman's prostitution in the details of her loosening her hair, possessing an expensive alabaster flask of perfume, and emptying it out on Jesus' feet. First the hair. It is true that in Leviticus and Numbers there are references to disheveled hair as a sign of mourning, uncleanness, and shame.<sup>19</sup> Numbers 5:18 prescribes as part of the ordeal for a woman suspected of adultery, that the priest have the woman come forward and stand before the Lord; he would dishevel her hair, and place in her hands the cereal offering of her appeal. The disheveled hair was a sign of uncleanness and shame. However, there is no indication in Luke 7:36-50 that this woman's loosened hair connotes adultery, shame, or uncleanness.<sup>20</sup> The narrative does not say that she entered with her hair disheveled, or that it was already loosened. In fact, had she been a prostitute, her hair would have been beautifully groomed.

J. F. Coakley<sup>21</sup> lists rabbinic texts that show that a *married* woman was not to let down her hair in the presence of other men (t. *Sota* 5.9; y. *Git.* 9.50d, etc.). But he observes that "none of these passages touches the question of what an unmarried woman might decently do in a neighbor's house among friends." He cites m. *Ketub.* 2.1 as seeming to assume that a woman did not bind up her hair until her marriage. He asks further, why, if letting down her hair in public was such a gross act of immodesty, the woman, supposed to be penitent, went out of her way to shock, and why no one commented on the offensiveness of her action.<sup>22</sup> In fact the Pharisee host says to himself (v. 39) that Jesus would have to be a prophet to realize what sort of woman this is!<sup>23</sup>

There are other meanings associated with loose, flowing hair. In the Song of Songs (4:1; 6:5) among the charms extolled by the bridegroom-to-be of his beloved is her beautiful hair that is "like a flock of goats, streaming down the mountains of Gilead." Her dark, flowing hair evokes in him awe and love; there is nothing of shame or uncleanness. As in the Song of Songs, the flowing

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Jesus' itinerant band of followers.

<sup>19</sup> In Leviticus 13:45 the instructions for a person with a leprous disease include wearing torn clothes and letting their hair be disheveled as a sign of their uncleanness. In Lev 10:6; 21:10 are directions that priests were not to perform the mourning observances, including disheveling their hair, since they were to maintain themselves in a state of ritual purity.

<sup>20</sup> Alfred Plummer (*The Gospel According to S. Luke* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981] 211) asserts that among Jews it was shameful for a woman to let her hair down in public, but he interprets the woman's action as a sacrifice she makes in order to minister to Jesus.

<sup>21</sup> "The Anointing at Bethany and the Priority of John," *JBL* 107 (1988) 241-56.

<sup>22</sup> Louise Schotroff, in "Through German and Feminist Eyes: A Liberationist Reading of Luke 7:36-50," a paper presented at the AAR/SBL in Chicago, Nov. 21, 1994, resolves the tension in the opposite direction: the woman is a whore but not repentant. She argues that because of economic necessity the woman remains a prostitute, but has experienced and has given love. She believes the story is not about prostitution that can be overcome by Christian repentance. Rather, the issue is mercy and respect toward prostitutes exhibited by Jesus contrasted with prejudice against them shown by Simon. Schotroff states that it is the moralizing tendency of Christians that prevents us from accepting such an interpretation.

<sup>23</sup> Coakley, "Anointing," 250.

hair of the woman in Luke 7:38 evokes an image of beauty. Like the bridegroom of the Song of Songs, Jesus sees this woman as lovely and loving and attempts to get his host to perceive the same.

Another possibility is that in Luke 7:36-50 the woman's gesture of wiping Jesus' feet with her hair simply signifies that her tears were not premeditated and that, lacking a towel, her hair was the only means at hand for drying Jesus' feet.<sup>24</sup> Or, taking another tack, J. F. Coakley remarks that "the woman's tears can surely not have been so copious as to need wiping up at all!"<sup>25</sup> This detail, he suggests, derives not from factual reporting, but from "quasi-poetic hyperbole," such as found in Psalm 6:6, "every night I flood my bed with weeping; I drench my couch with my tears."

### **A Wealthy Woman**

What of the expensive alabaster flask of ointment? That the woman possessed such attests to her wealth.<sup>26</sup> But prostitution was not the only source of wealth for women in antiquity. Numbers 27:8 asserts that an unmarried woman without brothers could inherit money and property from her father.<sup>27</sup> A woman could also acquire money by working, either on her own, or by sharing in her husband's work. There is evidence of Greco-Roman women employed as weavers, midwives, doctors, hairdressers, wet nurses, masseuses, attendants, and musicians.<sup>28</sup> From Acts 16:14 we know of Lydia of Thyatira, who was a dealer in purple goods, luxury items. Acts 18:3 tells of Prisca working together with her husband Aquila at tentmaking. Inscriptions that Bernadette Brooten has examined from Jewish women who were donors to synagogues show that at least some Greco-roman women had money or property and the power to donate it.<sup>29</sup>

It is curious that although the anonymous women who anoint Jesus in Mark 14:3-9 and Matthew 26:6-13 use alabaster flasks of very expensive ointment commentators never conclude

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<sup>24</sup> I. Howard Marshall, Commentary on Luke (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 308-309.

<sup>25</sup> "Anointing," 250.

<sup>26</sup> In antiquity alabaster was quarried only in Egypt, and so, was a luxury item, as was perfume. See J. L. McKenzie, "Alabaster," Dictionary of the Bible (New York: MacMillan, 1965) 19.

<sup>27</sup> See Moshe Meiselman, Jewish Woman in Jewish Law (New York: KTAV, 1978) 84-95 for information on inheritance by women in rabbinic tradition. He also demonstrates Jewish women's financial independence by entering into contracts to acquire and dispose of property (pp. 81-83).

<sup>28</sup> Jane Gardner, Women in Roman Law and Society (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1986) 233-55.

<sup>29</sup> B. Brooten, Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues (Brown Judaic Studies 36. Chico: Scholars Press, 1982) studies forty-three such inscriptions. See also Richard Atwood, Mary Magdalene in the New Testament Gospels and Early Tradition (European University Studies. Series 23 Band 457. Bern: Peter Lang, 1993) 17 n. 23 for examples of women who gave monetary aid and property to rabbis. B. Witherington, "On the Road With Mary Magdalen, Joanna, Susanna, and Other Disciples---Luke 8:1-3," ZNW 70 (1979) 244 n.9 lists rabbinic texts that refer to women offering support to rabbis and their disciples in the form of money, property, or foodstuffs.

that they were prostitutes. Nor is such a slur directed at Mary of Bethany, who anoints Jesus with a pound of costly ointment of pure nard in John 12:1-8. Nor do commentators ever speak of erotic overtones in these three parallel stories as they do when discussing 7:36-50.<sup>30</sup> A similarly intimate gesture by Jesus when he washes the disciples' feet in John 13:1-20 is never thought to be erotic.

Even the action of pouring out the ointment from the alabaster flask has been interpreted as the action of a prostitute who disposes of a tool of her trade now that she has been forgiven. Kenneth Bailey, for example, notes that women were known to wear a flask with perfume around the neck that hung down below the breast, used to sweeten the breath and perfume the person. He remarks that "it does not take much imagination to understand how important such a flask would be to a prostitute."<sup>31</sup> If one is predisposed to see this woman as a prostitute, then he is right, one's imagination would not have to be pressed far.

### **An Image of Christ**

But if one were predisposed to see in a female figure a potential disciple, or one who could prefigure the Christ, it is possible to envision the symbolic action in another direction. Does not her pouring out of the expensive ointment out of love prefigure Jesus' pouring out of his precious life-blood on behalf of those whom he loves (Luke 22:20)? In fact, this story has a number of thematic connections to the death of Jesus.<sup>32</sup> This woman is assured salvation (7:50), just as is the repentant criminal (23:41-42); her tears stand in contrast to those of Peter, who weeps bitterly after denying Jesus (22:62); her kisses contrast to the betraying kiss of Judas (22:47); and her position at Jesus' feet is the stance of a servant, the stance which Jesus instructs his disciples to take at the last supper (22:26-27).

The woman in 7:36-50 exemplifies one who responds properly to Jesus, and whose actions mirror his own. The key question her story poses, not only to Simon, but to the modern exegete is, "Do you see this woman?" In the narrative, not to see the woman and her actions properly is not to perceive Jesus and his identity correctly. The story is open-ended: there is yet hope that Simon's vision can be corrected. What about ours?

### **Reading Luke Against the Grain**

The preceding exercise in feminist liberationist exegesis attempts to unmask the gender biases that have shaped both the text and our interpretations of it. Such an approach challenges us to look again with new eyes and to excise cataracts formed from misperceptions, prejudgments, and stereotyped views of women that blind us to the full identity of Jesus. Reading Luke in this way, however, is not in conformity with the evangelist's intent.

Luke has more stories about women than any other evangelist, but his narratives do not

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<sup>30</sup> For example, Eduard Schweizer (The Good News According to Luke [Atlanta: John Knox, 1984] 139) observes, "Of course the scene has erotic overtones and may exhibit a touch of hysteria."

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes (2 vols. in 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 2.8.

<sup>32</sup> Corley, Private Women, 128.

portray women as sharing in the mission in the same way as their male counterparts.<sup>33</sup> Although women welcome Jesus (Luke 10:38), believe (Luke 1:45; 7:50; 8:48; Acts 5:14; 8:12; 16:1,15; 17:12,34), are baptized (Acts 16:15), follow Jesus (Luke 23:49), and host house churches (Acts 12:12; 16:40), there are no Lucan narratives showing women as called or commissioned. Women in Luke and Acts do not engage in the mission of preaching, teaching,<sup>34</sup> witnessing, healing, exorcising, forgiving, or feeding. Women who proclaim are reprimanded (11:27-28) or disbelieved (24:11).<sup>35</sup> Women in the third gospel are healed by Jesus and are objects of his compassion (Luke 8:40-56; 13:10-17). Those women disciples who do minister, e.g., the Galilean women in Luke 8:1-3, are cast in behind-the-scenes supportive roles. Those who remain silent and receptive are said to have “chosen the better part” (10:42).<sup>36</sup>

For a church working toward equal discipleship for women and men, such stories cannot be taught, preached, or passed on uncritically. Strategies are needed for unmasking Luke’s kyriarchal framework and reinterpreting and recontextualizing the stories. A first step is to ask questions such as: Through whose lenses has the text been constructed and under what historical circumstances? Through what lenses is a particular exegete looking? A second strategy is to ask: What is wrong with this picture? How does the portrait of women presented by Luke match or contrast with contemporary women’s experience? Are corrective lenses needed to be able to release the text’s full potential for conveying the liberating word of God? A third movement is to discern: In what direction is this text or this interpretation of the text taking us? Does it lead to full, liberated life for all? Or does it serve kyriarchal interests? Fourth, What tools are needed to

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<sup>33</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins [New York, Crossroad, 1983] 50) was the first to show that although Luke knows of women prophets, leaders, and missionaries, he does not portray them as such in his narratives. See also Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Women in Luke-Acts: A Redactional View,” JBL 109/3 (1990) 441-461; Jane Schaberg, “Luke,” The Women’s Bible Commentary (Ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 275-292; Turid Karlsen Seim, The Double Message. Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> The one woman who is said to be teaching is Priscilla, along with her husband, Aquila. In Acts 18:26 Luke relates that they heard Apollos preach in Ephesus, and “they took him aside and explained (ἐξέθεοντο) to him the Way [of God] more accurately.” However, here Luke does not use the verb διδάσκειν, which is the verb used to refer to Jesus’ teaching in Luke 4:15,31,32; 5:3,17; 6:6; 10:39; 11:1; 13:10,22,26; 19:47; 20:1; 21:37; 23:5, and to the teaching of the male disciples in Acts 2:42; 4:2,18; 5:21,25,28,42; 11:26; 13:12; 15:35; 17:19; 18:11,25; 20:20; 21:21,28; 28:31), but rather ἐκτίθημι, meaning, “to explain, set forth.” This seems a deliberate attempt by Luke to downplay Prisca’s teaching ministry; a ministry he considers more properly belonging to male disciples.

<sup>35</sup> The three women in the infancy narratives, Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna, appear as prophetic women who proclaim, but they are not disciples of Jesus. Luke casts them in the mold of OT women prophets such as Miriam, Huldah, and Deborah, who belong to the past era of Israel (Luke 16:16).

<sup>36</sup> See further B. Reid, “Luke the Gospel for Women?” Currents in Theology and Mission 21/6 (1994) 405-414 and Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996).

understand the original historical situation that the text reflects? What tools are needed to reinterpret and recontextualize for a vastly different present situation? Fifth, each must ask: Am I willing to undergo cataract surgery? Am I able to let go of the way I've always seen, even if it is myopic? Can I risk being led to "see better" even if it means that my eyes will hurt? Sixth, as I come to see differently, am I willing to help others do so? Like Jesus with his parables, can I tell the story in such a way that it does not put off another whose vision is blurred, but rather persuades them to see differently as our collective vision for equality and inclusivity improves?

### **Open Horizons**

Feminist liberationist hermeneutics opens vast new horizons for life in the church. We find ourselves at a new juncture not unlike the position of Jesus' first women disciples. Having witnessed the death of the Jesus they had come to love and believe in, the women entered the open space of the empty tomb,<sup>37</sup> which impelled them forward to unimaginable new horizons. Everything they thought they understood about their Scriptures and tradition demanded radical reinterpretation in view of the empty tomb. With eyes newly opened (Luke 24:31) the place of death became an open space leading out to the way of life. With them we embark on new exegetical roads to fuller vision and life.

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<sup>37</sup> This image is from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet. Critical Issues in Feminist Christology (New York: Continuum, 1994) 119-128.