

The Biblical Hermeneutics: Exegesis of Luke 7:36-50

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1. Introduction

Biblical exegesis is the practice of studying and investigating the scriptures to discover the meaning intended by the author (Britannica, 2020). To do so, the practice takes into account the literary forms and vocabulary used to convey the meaning, the physical environment, and historical background of the passage (PRICE, 1969 ; Twomey, 2016). In this piece of writing, the author attempted to exegete Luke 7:36-50 to uncover the theological message pertaining herein. The passage tells the story of Jesus' being invited to dinner in a Pharisee's house, where a sinful woman anointed his feet with tears and dried them with her hair, kissing Jesus and pouring out on His feet perfume. While the Pharisee saw this as shocking behavior, Jesus explained, in parable, that the woman expressed loving gratitude in response to forgiveness of her many sins.

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2. Similarities with other scriptures

This story of Luke 7:36-50 is very similar to the stories about the anointing of Jesus by a woman, found in Matthew 26: 6-13, Mark 14: 1-11 and John 12: 1-10. These last three passages took place in Bethany a few days before Jesus' crucifixion. While they all have a lot of similarities to Luke 7: 36-50, some differences are also noticeable, hence the idea that two separate events are being reported.

In the context of similarities, all of the stories report that Jesus was anointed with expensive perfume, by a woman and during dinner. In both cases, the entourage negatively criticized the woman (Wilson, 2020).

On the other hand, Luke 7:36-50 shows that the story took place at the home of Simon, the Pharisee who had invited Jesus, while the anointing in Bethany took place at the house of Simon the leper. The woman who anointed Jesus at Bethany was not described as a sinner, but actually appears to be Mary, Lazarus' sister. While the anointing at Bethany was to prefigure Jesus' burial, it was done on the head (Matthew 26: 7, Mark 14: 3) rather than on the feet (Luke 7: 38). Furthermore, in Luke 7:39, the criticism came from Simon the Pharisee on the morality of the anointing woman, while in other passages criticism came from disciples, especially Judah Iscariot, on the value of the perfume.

As a result, the stories found in Matthew 26: 6-13, Mark 14: 1-11 and John 12: 1-10 relate the same event, while the one found in Luke 7:36-50 tells a different event. What is evident is that Jesus was anointed with perfume by women more than once and in all cases He shot the scenes to offer a theological message.

3. Analysis

3.1. *Invitation to dinner by a Pharisee (7:36)*

Jesus was invited for dinner by Simon the Pharisee. The event was assumed to take place in Galilee because other events in the section took place there. As one reads the passage, one might wonder: who was Simon or why did he invite Jesus to dinner? Obviously, Simon was one of the Pharisees who followed Jesus' teaching. What can be learned from Jesus' words in the passage is that Simon could not be seen as a believer, but perhaps as a skeptic trying to be open-minded. The reason for inviting Jesus to dinner is apparently because Jesus was a great teacher (rabbi) and a healer, hence the need to learn about Him and the honor of hosting a very famous rabbi. It also appears that Simon was financially well off because this dinner party brought many people together, requiring a bigger house and money for food that an average person could not afford. No matter

what, Jesus accepted invitation for dinner, although He was criticized for eating with sinners (Luke 7:34)

3.2. A Sinful woman vs a self-righteous Pharisee (37-39)

Verse 37 says more about the woman. She was clearly a resident of the city, but she was not invited to the party. Although it has been said that she was considered a sinner, it is not known what her sin was, but it can probably be assumed that she was a prostitute rather than adulteress because an adulteress had to be stoned in accordance with the law (Deuteronomy 22:22; Leviticus 20:10). However sinners were shunned and prohibited from participation in the local synagogue (Bar-Ilan, 2000).

While one cannot tell how the woman became a prostitute, it seems her image was in tatters in the city but deep down she was broken and hurt. It also seems that it was probably difficult for her to come to Simon's home, knowing that Simon could not be happy to see her at his house. However, she presented a heart for Jesus. She has probably heard about Jesus' teachings about God's love and forgiveness and found the kingdom words so compelling. Her inner wound made her weep but she had no hope of restoration except through Jesus.

On the other hand, the way Simon welcomed guests does not seem to be cordial. Jesus reflected on this in verse 44-46. Why? Culture in the Near East took hospitality as a strong value, where olive oil was sometimes offered to anoint a guest's hair (Psalm 23:5b; Amos 6:6), a basin provided for one to wash off the dust from one's feet, and beloved guests kissed as one was greeted (Matthew 26:49; 2 Samuel 15:5). Simon had not made any of these. Yet, Simon still considered himself as righteous, compared with the woman.

Although Simon did not invite the woman, it seems that he was even not alerted that she was to come because verse 45 shows that the woman did not arrive late but arrived at Simon's house even before Jesus. So, she might have been waiting with others.

3.3. Jesus anointed by a sinful woman (37-38)

Jesus reclined at the table, as this was probably an Eastern style of dining. As the woman stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears.

Then she untied her hair, took off the handkerchief she may have worn on it and let it fall. She knelt down and began to wipe his feet with her hair. Going around in public with one's hair down was considered a shameful thing to do, but the woman was not discouraged. Then she wiped His feet with her hair and kissed them.

For a cultural foreign reader, finding a woman kissing a man, might cause one to view this with sexual overtones, but in Hebrew culture kissing the feet could be seen as a common mark of deep reverence, especially for respected rabbis.

Finally, the woman poured perfume Jesus' feet. Here again, the reader may wonder where the woman got the perfume from or whether she had prepared the scene in advance. However, in Jewish culture, women generally wore alabastron, a vial perfume, around their necks. Therefore, this is probably the one that was used.

If one considers the significance of the imperfect tense of the translated Greek words, one sees that wiped, kissed and poured are indications of repeated actions. Since the perfume aroma spreads very easily throughout the room once it is opened, one can imagine that all eyes were on the woman who was continually weeping, wiping, and stroking Jesus' feet with her hair, kissing them with her lips, and pouring perfume on them. This could be very shocking to many guests who watched, and, given the reputation of the woman, it could be downright scandalous; at least that is how Simon the Pharisee interpreted it.

3.4. Simon's judgmental reaction

Verse 39: When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, *"If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."*

It may be surprising that Simon did not condemn the touching act, per se, but judged both Jesus for lack of discernment of who was touching Him and the woman for her sinful background. However, this is not strange, because in verse 40 we see that Simon recognized Jesus as a teacher but in verse 39 he doubted that he could be a

prophet as some claimed. Interestingly, it could not take time for the Messiah to read Simon's mind.

3.5. Jesus' Parable of Two Cancelled Debts (41-43)

While Simon rendered silent judgment, Jesus, who was probably seated in the place of honor, did not want Simon's judgment to go unchallenged. When He said, "Simon, I have something to tell you," He was politely asking permission to speak freely with the full attention of the audience. Jesus then told a parable that led Simon into a trap:

⁴¹ "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

⁴³ Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

On the one hand, Jesus used the parable to explain that the woman, who was forgiven a greater sin, loved Jesus more than the host, hence the expression of her sincere love by weeping, wiping, anointing, and kissing his feet.

On the other hand, the parable also has a broader theological message pertaining to Jesus' mission. Sin took man away from God, and man had nothing to offer to pay off the debt, so God repaid man's penalty by offering salvation to humans and eternal life for which Jesus died to atone for sin in order to make mankind righteous with God (Romans 3:23-27; Ecclesiastes 7:20; James 3:2; 1 John 1:8; Proverbs 20:9; 1 John 1:10). This is only by God's abundant grace and love. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9). Therefore, the parable of Jesus in Luke 7: 41-42 reflects on how man owed a lot to God and had nothing to repay him, so God forgave the debt by giving his son die on the cross so that whoever believed in Him would not be condemned (John 3:16).

3.6. *Jesus turning the judgement to Simon*

When Simon had answered the question correctly, Jesus then turned judgment on him rather than on the woman. He made a comparison between Simon's acts as a host and the sinful woman's acts of love.

44 Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.

What is so obvious is Simon's poor hospitality and lack of discourtesy as he offered none of the marks of a gracious host. Thus, the point of Jesus demonstrated the little love of Simon, while the sinful woman lavished love on Jesus.

Building on this, Jesus then turned the subject from love to forgiveness to help others understand the woman's devotion in terms of forgiveness of sin: "*Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.*" One can imagine Simon's reactions or feelings on stage. But why should he need forgiveness if he is not a sinner?

3.7. *Forgiveness of sins (48-50)*

Finally, Jesus did not focus on Simon's shortcomings but spoke directly to the woman: "*Your sins are forgiven... your faith has saved you; go in peace.*" What is important is not why the other guests wondered whom He was to forgive sins, for they still doubted His messianic status; what one can recognize here is that Jesus confirmed that by faith in Him salvation is given. He then offered the blessing as the Jews do when they separate, but it means more than peace, but also wholeness and welcome back into the fellowship and salvation of God's people. The passage ends with the soul of a prostitute flooded with wonderful peace and light.

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