

NEW INTERPRETATIONS ON SOME BIBLICAL PASSAGES*

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I. *Serpent, “More Subtle than Any Other Wild Creature”?* — *Interpretation of Gn 3*

One would surely doubt whether there can be any new interpretation about this famous story of Gn 3. For example, the fact that there is an evident wordplay between Gn 2:25 עָרוֹם “naked” and Gn 3:1 עָרוֹם “subtle, crafty” is very well known¹.

However, one can wonder whether the implication of this wordplay has been fully explored or not. I suggest that it reveals on the part of the author a sense of irony which permeates the entire story of Gn 3.

In what sense can we perceive an irony?

We all know the verse Gn 3:1: “Now the serpent was more subtle (RSV; “more crafty” according to NRSV) than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made.” And whether the serpent is considered wicked or good (as in some Gnostic circles), such a judgement is in any case an interpretation based on this verse.

But if we leave aside this tradition of interpretation and observe afresh the serpent as it is, what can we see? Is the serpent really the most “subtle” or “crafty” of all the creatures? or rather, is it not the most “naked” of all the animals? I think the latter is the reality.

Of course, this observation does not change the meaning of the verse Gn 3:1, according to which the serpent is the most “subtle” or “crafty”. However, if our observation is valid, we can then perceive the irony of the author: in the story of Gn 3, the serpent is regarded as the most “subtle”, whereas *in reality* it is simply the most “naked” creature, and by this “false sage”, so to speak, the first human couple was deceived.

The result of this deception confirms the irony (vv. 6-7): whereas the couple wanted to become “wise” by eating the fruit, instead they realized that they were “naked”². Thus the irony continues working behind the scene.

* The present paper originates from the theses (“stellingen” in Dutch) annexed to my doctoral dissertation presented to Leiden University in March 2006. A slightly different version of it has been published as Toda S., “Some Reflections on Biblical Interpretation”, *Pedilavium* 60 (2006), pp. 50-63 (in Japanese).

¹ The following commentaries mention this wordplay: U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part I: From Adam to Noah. Genesis 1 - VI₈*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961, pp. 143-144; G.J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 1: *Genesis 1-15*, Waco: Word Books, 1987, p. 72; D.E. Gowan, *From Eden to Babel. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 1-11*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988, p. 51; T.E. Fretheim, “Genesis”, in: *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, p. 359; H. Seebass, *Genesis I. Urgeschichte (1, 1-11, 26)*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1996, p. 120. Furthermore, a recent Japanese translation of the Genesis (A. Tsukimoto (transl.), *The Old Testament*, vol. 1: *Genesis*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1997) contains the following observations:

- There is a wordplay between עָרוֹם (Gn 2:25) and עָרוֹם (Gn 3:1) (p. 9 n. 8);
- The pronunciation of עָרוֹם (Gn 3:1) is similar to אָרוּר (Gn 3:14) (p. 10 n. 2).

² This point itself is rightly observed in e.g. Wenham, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

The irony culminates in the verse 22:

Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.”

As to the question whether, according to the Bible, a man can become like God, the answer can only be negative. And here the irony is said by God Himself.

To sum up, the irony, which appears at the beginning of the story with the wordplay עָרוּם - עָרוּם, culminates in the word of God which concludes the story. It is thus a *basso continuo* of the entire story, and this observation leads to another one: it is probable that the story was originally conceived in a language which enabled such a wordplay, i.e. in Hebrew.

For any reader, the loss of primeval bliss can only mean discouragement (or perhaps disillusion), and the author of Genesis expressed this sentiment by using the *basso continuo* of irony — this seems to be the intended meaning of the story of Gn 3.

II. *Jesus, “Genius of Debate”, Trapped by His Own Words* — *Interpretation of Mt 15:21-28*

In the case of Mt 15:21-28, the point will be made clearer by quoting first the relevant passage. The following quotation is from RSV:

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon.” But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” And he answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

The verse 27 (“She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat ...”) poses a problem: the Greek text reads *ναί, κύριε, καὶ γὰρ ...*, and the normal rendering of *καὶ γὰρ* is “for indeed”. Thus the correct translation of the verse 27 should be as follows:

She said, “Yes [probably in the sense of “You are right”, T. S.], Lord, *for indeed* the dogs eat ...”³

It seems that the Canaanite woman accepts Jesus’ words which contemptuously treat her as a dog, and in accordance with that treatment, she asks Jesus to give her what is due to dogs; she

³ Actually, such an interpretation of the passage already exists at least in one of the major translations. Concretely, *Bible de Jérusalem* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1973) provides the following translation of the verse 27:

Oui, Seigneur! et justement les petits chiens mangent des miettes qui tombent de la table de leurs maîtres!
To add another example, a recent Japanese translation (M. Sato (transl.), *The New Testament*, vol. 1: *Gospel of Mark / Gospel of Matthew*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995, p. 161) renders the verse in the same meaning.

found hope in the fact that she was treated by Jesus as a dog. To put it differently, although Jesus was not inclined to be helpful to her, he was obliged to do so, trapped by his own words. Hence Jesus' praise for her faith ("O woman, great is your faith!"), because she believed strongly in Jesus' words. In this connection we may recall that the famous centurion also believed strongly in Jesus' words — another example of Gentile conversion.

This interpretation in itself is not new at all; many are commentaries which point out such a meaning of the passage⁴. However, since it is not yet reflected in major translations, it should be stressed as a new one; all the more so, because one can say in a sense that in Mt Jesus is presented as a genius of debate (especially in a series of questions and answers in Mt 22)⁵.

III. *Preaching the Gospel in One's Own Country* — *Interpretation of Lk 9:59-60*

Once again, the discussion begins with the quotation of the passage in question (Lk 9:59-60), together with the parallel passage in Mt 8:21-22.

Mt 8:21-22: Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead."

Lk 9:59-60: To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." But he said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

The quotation is from RSV, and from this translation no significant difference between the two

⁴ I could consult the following commentaries: H.A.W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2, Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, 1979 (repr. of 1883), p. 285: *Νοί*, as in xi. 9, 26, *confirms* the whole statement of Jesus in ver. 26 ...; and *καὶ ἄρ* means, as everywhere in the New testament, ... *for even*.

J. Schniewind, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1950, p. 183: Sie aber sprach: Ja, Herr! Denn auch die Kündchen essen von der Bröckchen, die von Tisch ihrer Herren fallen, and p. 184: Aber die Frau (V. 27) nimmt Jesus eben bei diesem Wort; ähnlich wie der Centurio (8,8) Jesus damit überwindet, daß er ihm völlig das Recht zur Abweisung gibt. Und ähnlich wie dort antwortet Jesus mit einem Wort machtvoller Zusage: hier ist "großer Glaube", nicht (14,31) "Kleinglaube". ... Auch beim Centurio was es (8,10) der Glaube, was ihn vom Juden unterschied.

F.V. Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1960, p. 178: She said, 'Yes, Lord; for even the puppies eat of the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.', and p. 180: The woman senses that his word is not final, and she is quick to show him that he can help her without giving up his concentrated mission to fellow-Jews. Jesus cannot resist her great **faith** and persistent love; he praises her faith and assures her that her daughter will be healed. The story is more a lesson in faith than a miracle story.

R.H. Gundry, *Matthew. A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982, p. 315: To the statement concerning the little dogs Matthew characteristically adds *ἄρ* (62-63,15). Hence, the statement provides a reason for the woman's agreement with Jesus ("Yes, Lord, for also the little dogs ..."). In Mark, contrastingly, the statement contains an expression of disagreement with Jesus ("Lord, even the little dogs ...").

D.J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Sacra Pagina Series, 1), Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991, p. 234: But she said: "Yes, Lord. For even the dogs eat from the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

⁵ Seen from this viewpoint, Mt 22:46 ("And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did any one dare to ask him any more questions.", RSV) appears to be a declaration about Jesus as an invincible champion of debates.

passages can be perceived. The situation is the same with other major translations⁶, and as far as I could check, no commentary has pointed out any significant difference⁷.

The original Greek text is as follows⁸:

Mt 8:21-22: ἄλλος δὲ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· κύριε, ἐπίτρεψόν μοι πρῶτον ἀπελθεῖν καὶ θάψαι τὸν πατέρα μου. ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς λέγει αὐτῷ· ἀκολούθει μοι καὶ ἄψες τοὺς νεκροὺς θάψαι τοὺς ἑαυτῶν νεκροὺς.

Lk 9:59-60: Εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς ἕτερον· ἀκολούθει μοι. ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· κύριε, ἐπίτρεψόν μοι ἀπελθόντι πρῶτον θάψαι τὸν πατέρα μου. εἶπεν δὲ αὐτῷ· ἄψες τοὺς νεκροὺς θάψαι τοὺς ἑαυτῶν νεκροὺς, σὺ δὲ ἀπελθὼν διάγγελλε τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

Actually, the difference between these two passages lies in the fact that in Luke's version, Jesus seems to allow the disciple in question to go to his own country.

Why is such an interpretation possible? The key is the verb ἀπέρχομαι, used both in Mt and Lk. It is used in the first place by the disciple, both in Mt (ἀπελθεῖν) and Lk (ἀπελθόντι), and here no significant difference can be seen.

What makes difference is Jesus' answer. According to Mt, Jesus answered, saying "follow me" (ἀκολούθει μοι). It is hardly conceivable that Jesus went with the disciple as far as the

⁶ NRSV:

Mt 8:21-22: Another of his disciples said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

Lk 9:59-60: To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Einheitsübersetzung:

Mt 8:21-22: Ein anderer aber, einer seiner Jünger, sagte zu ihm: Herr, lass mich zuerst heimgehen und meinen Vater begraben! Jesus erwiderte: Folge mir nach; lass die Toten ihre Toten begraben!

Lk 9:59-60: Zu einem anderen sagte er: Folge mir nach! Der erwiderte: Lass mich zuerst heimgehen und meinen Vater begraben. Jesus sagte zu ihm: Lass die Toten ihre Toten begraben; du aber geh und verkünde das Reich Gottes!

Bible de Jérusalem:

Mt 8:21-22: Un autre des disciples lui dit : "Seigneur, permets-moi de m'en aller d'abord enterrer mon père." Mais Jésus lui dit : "Suis-moi, et laisse les morts enterrer leurs morts."

Lk 9:59-60: Il dit à un autre : "Suis-moi." Celui-ci dit : "Permetts-moi de m'en aller d'abord enterrer mon père." Mais il lui dit : "Laisse les morts enterrer leurs morts ; pour toi, va-t'en annoncer le Royaume de Dieu."

⁷ I could consult the following commentaries: A.R.C. Leaney, *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1958, p. 171: And he said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but do you go away and spread the news of the kingdom of God.'

E. J. Tinsley, *The Gospel according to Luke*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965, p. 109: Jesus said, 'Leave the dead to bury their dead; you must go and announce the kingdom of God.'

W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, rev. ed., Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975, p. 131: He said to him, "Let the dead bury their dead; but do you go and tell abroad the news of the kingdom of God."

J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I-IX)* (The Anchor Bible), Garden City: Double Day & Company, 1981, p. 833: Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their dead; rather you go and announce the kingdom of God."

L. T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina Series, 3), Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991, p. 161: Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead. But you go announce the kingdom of God."

J. Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35B: *Luke 9:21-18:34*, Dallas: Word Books, 1993, p. 538: He said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead; and you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

R. A. Culpepper, "Luke", in: *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 216: But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

All these are more or less the same, and none of them is exempt from our criticism.

⁸ Ed. Nestle-Aland, p. 19 (Mt 8:21-22) and p. 190 (Lk 9:59-60).

country of the latter where the funeral was to take place; Jesus told the disciple to act as missionary rather than to fulfill his familial duty. Thus according to Mt, the funeral was to be celebrated by “the dead” in the absence of the son who was one of Jesus’ disciples.

What does Jesus say according to Lk? First comes his famous word, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead”, i.e. a disciple of Jesus should not be involved in the funeral. This saying is the same as that in Mt.

But what follows makes the difference: the Greek text says “σὺ δὲ ἀπελθών”, which can be translated as “if you go” or “when you go”, if we duly pay attention to the fact that a participle, instead of an imperative, is used here.

Where does Jesus say that the disciple will or should go? The verbal prefix “ἀπό” of the verb ἀπέρχομαι means “away from”, i.e. *away from Jesus* in this case. Then, where does the disciple go away from Jesus? The only possible answer to the question is that he goes to his own country where the funeral is to take place, all the more because Jesus in Lk uses the same verb (ἀπέρχομαι) as used by the disciple when the latter asked for a permission. And since participation in the funeral is prohibited by Jesus, the only thing that the disciple can do there is to “proclaim the kingdom of God”.

It seems that all the major modern translations interpret Luke’s passage in question under the influence of the interpretation of the parallel passage in Mt, and fail to understand this minute, but nonetheless significant, difference of detail⁹. I think that Luke probably consulted Matthew’s passage in question and introduced into it a subtle modification which we saw above, in order to significantly change the meaning; and if this is correct, Luke’s “art of modification”, so to speak, proves to be remarkable.

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In no way do I pretend to be a biblical scholar, and the new interpretations presented above simply constitute what might be called a “beginner’s luck”. Still, it seems that a closer look on the original text, much more than a meticulous examination of the bulky secondary literature on the same text, can contribute to a better understanding of the Bible.

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⁹ The only commentary worthy of mention here is A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920, p. 267. The author says:

σὺ δὲ ἀπελθών διάγγελλε τ. β. τ. Θ. Mt. omits this charge. Clem. Alex., quoting from memory, substitutes for it the preceding charge, σὺ δὲ ἀκολούθει μοι (*loc. cit.*). Word by word, it forms a contrast to the man’s request; ἀπελθών το ἀπελθόντι, διάγγελλε το θάψαι, τὴν βασιλείαν το τὸν πατέρα, τοῦ Θεοῦ το μου.

Thus the author rightly points out the correlation of the phrases. However, right after this comment, the author adds the following: “Depart, *not home, but away from it*; not to bury, but to spread *abroad*; not a father, but the Kingdom; not thine own, but God’s.” (italics are mine, T.S.), thus introducing something which is not written in the original text.