

PARABLES, "THROUGH PEASANTS EYES!"

Study 49, "The Obedient Servant," Part III, Luke 17:7-10

THE OBEDIENT SERVANT: LUKE 17:7-10

1. STANZA 1:

"Can you imagine having a servant
Plowing or keeping sheep,
Who on coming in from the field
You say to him, 'Come at once and recline to eat?'"

SERVANT
FULFILLING ORDERS
ORDERS FULFILLED
REWARDS?

2. STANZA 2:

"Will he not rather say to him,
'Prepare something for me and I shall dine,
And gird yourself to serve me,
Till I eat and drink,
And afterward you shall eat and drink?'"

SERVE THE MASTER
THEN YOURSELF

3. STANZA 3:

"Does the servant have special merit?
Because he did what was commanded?
So you, also, when you have done what
was commanded-
say 'Nothing is owing us servants, we
have only done our duty.'"

SERVANTS
ORDERS FULFILLED

ORDERS FULFILLED

REWARDS?

4. The traditional understanding of the first line of this stanza is reflected in the RSV, which translates, "Does he thank the servant.....?" The common Greek verb, 'eucharisteo,' occurs twice in Matthew and Mark and four times in Luke. It is used in the account of healing the ten lepers in Luke 17:16. Luke knows the word and uses it more than any other Evangelist. Yet in this parable the actual word is 'me echoi charin to duolo,' Literally it reads, 'Does he have grace/favor for the servant?' The word 'charin,' is the common NT word for grace. The theological weight of this great word must not be overlooked, as we will note below. But here we need ask only

what is meant by the phrase, "have grace/favor for...." In the Epistles there are clear cases where to have grace for" means "to be grateful to; 1 Tim. 1:12, II Tim. 1:3, Romans 7:25 and II Cor. 9:15, (Bauer). Yet in Luke the word grace has to do primarily for credit (6:32-34) and favor (1:30). Bauer lists a series of passages mostly in Luke-Acts, where the word grace appears in the phrase to 'have grace,' and says of them "in these passages the meaning comes close to having a reward." See Luke 2:52, 6:32, Acts 2:47, 7:10, 46. The relational situation implied by the use of this word (In a ME context), can be clearly seen in Luke 1:30. There, Mary is told, "You have found favor with God," then immediately, after this comes the announcement, "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son...." This mirrors the OT refrain, "If I found favor with God...then," see Genesis 18:3, Numbers 11:15, 1 Samuel 20:29, and Esther 5:8. If the servant or inferior has favor from his superior, then the superior is indebted to the petitioner and is expected to grant some special request or offer some special gift. It is true that these texts talk of "finding favor," while Luke 17:8, speaks of "having favor." But in the first case, the petitioner has been granted favor as a gift; it is too great to be earned. Thus, he has only found favor as a gift.

5. The P. is clearly talking about work accomplished and its results. After all of this work does the servant have favor? Is the master indebted to him? Is there any credit due to him (Luke 6:32-34)? Has he earned any merit? Is there anything owing him? The question is much deeper than a verbal expression of thanks. The master may well express appreciation to a servant at the end of a day's work with a friendly word of thanks. The issue is much more serious than this. Is the master indebted to his servant when the orders are carried out? This is the question that expects a resoundingly negative answer in the p..
6. The above understanding of the text is reflected in the great 13th century Arabic version of the Habit Allah Ibn Al-Assal, who translates, "Is there to this servant merit because he did what was commanded him?" Montefiore quotes once Merx(?) who writes, "Has he (the servant) any favor (i.e. in the sight of his master) because he did what was told? Does he acquire any special favor or merit? The sense is improved by this reading."
7. Trench translates as "Doth he count himself embolden to that servant?" These two scholars differ only on the question of the subject of the verb

‘to have.’ For Montefiore the servant is the subject and for Trench the master is the subject. In the matching line in the first stanza we also find the verb to have and there the master is the subject and the servant is the object. This seems to be the best understanding of the present line. This comes across somewhat awkwardly in English and reads literally, “Does he have special merit for the servant?” Semitic languages have no verb ‘to have,’ and this further complicates any attempt to understand the language precisely, yet the sense is clear. The point, is, does the master owe the servant anything because he has carried out his order? Clearly NOT!

8. So, finally, the application is made to the audience. The passive “when you have done what was commanded,” has been identified by Jeremias as “a periphrasis for the divine name.” The final line, like its counterpart in the first stanza, ends with direct speech. Here again we are faced with a long-standing translation problem. The traditional understanding of this concluding statement is “we are miserable/useless servants, we have only done what was our duty.” The key word is ‘achreios,’ which has two shades of meaning. The first is useless (which would refer to their unprofitable functions of servants). The other is miserable, which is somewhat stronger and refers not to their work, but to themselves. B.T.D. Smith summarizes the problem and notes a widely held solution:
“Clearly a slave who does all that is required of him is not useless to his master, and many would therefore omit the adjective as gloss.”
9. Yet Smit accepts the adjective and translates it as “good-for nothing,” Jeremias rejects ‘useless’ in favor of miserable and decides that it is “an expression of modesty.” In summary, the meaning “useless/worthless,” (in reference to their work) cannot be correct because the servant does his duty and is not worthless. The meaning “miserable/good for nothing,” (in reference to themselves) seems harsh and unnecessarily self-critical for a hard working servant. Thus a long list of scholars have decided that the word must be a gloss. (Bauer).
10. However, there is another way to understand the problematic word ‘achreios.’ The Greek word is actually chreios with what the grammarians call an alpha privative prefix. We have the same equivalence in the English with moral and amoral. The prefixing ‘a’ negates the word. In the case the ‘chreios’ by itself means “need,” and thus the word ‘achreios’ literally means ‘without need.’ This understanding of ‘achreios’ was suggested by Bengel: “Akhreios is one who is not in need, or khreos, of whom there is

no need, a person, we can dispense with, dispensable, one to whom God the master owes no thanks or favor."

11. The difficulty here is that Bengel leaves a basic ambiguity unresolved. When we opt for "without need," does it mean the master is "without need" of the servant, or does it mean the servant is "without need of a reward?" Bengel stated the first and hinted at the second and thus left the question unresolved. T. W. Man defined unprofitable as 'not claiming merit.' Yet he does not indicate how he reaches this conclusion linguistically. It is our view that he is right and that this understanding is linguistically defensible.
12. We begin with the Syriac and Arabic versions. A number of the major Arabic translations from the 11th century outward agree with Hibat Allah Ibn al-Assal, who translates, "we are servants to whom nothing is owing. "Literally this reads, "We are servants and have no need." Clearly Hibat Allah has read 'achreios' as meaning, "without need." The question then becomes, Does this translation make any sense in the context? The answer is YES, if the phrase is placed in a ME cultural setting. This is unambiguous speech among Palestinian and Lebanese village people. One village workman renders some small service to a house owner and the following conversation takes place:

House owner: *fi haja?* (Literally "Is there any need?"
Meaning: "Do I owe you anything?")
Workman: *ma fi haja* (Literally: "There is no need."
Meaning: "You owe me nothing.")

13. This idiomatic speech form is widespread and to our knowledge, universal in our ME world. With vocabulary variants we have traced it from Syria to the Sudan. Obviously Hibat Allah is translating a fashion that will make sense to its readers. His 13th century translation gives the reader the above meaning. Furthermore, the translation "w/o need" for 'achreious' occurs in Harclean Syria, which reads 'la hoshho.' (Bailey) . It is well known that this 7th century Syriac version is an extremely literal translation of the Greek. This the Harclean reading may be merely an attempt at literalism. Yes, at the same time, the translator must have expected his readers to understand something by the above phrase.