

# PARABLES, “THROUGH PEASANTS EYES!”

Study 50, “The Obedient Servant,” Part IV, 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. 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 as he has carried out his order? Clearly NOT!

5. 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 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.”

6. Yet Smith 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 has decided that the word must be a gloss. (Bauer).

7. 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 whom you can do without, dispensable, one to whom God the master owes no thanks or favor.”

8. 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. Manson 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.

9. We begin with the Syriac and Arabic versions. A number of the major Arabic translations from the 11<sup>th</sup> 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.”)

10. 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 13<sup>th</sup> 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 7<sup>th</sup> 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. He clearly rejected “unprofitable” for “without need.” Is it not possible to affirm that he also recognized the latter as the intent of the text and for that reason chose it over the Peshitta with its traditional reading of “unprofitable?” Following Hibat Allah’s lead we can suggest that the original editor/author/completer of the Travel narrative has used ‘achreios’ as the equivalent of ouden chreian. That is, he has taken the negative and attached it to the word. Thus the original p. instructs the disciples to say, “we are servants to whom nothing is owing, we have only done our duty.” This translation is etymologically possible. It makes

profound sense in the context of the overall p.. Important early Arabic and Syriac translations give this reading, and we would submit that it is the best understanding of the text. With this meaning the problem of 'hard working' "useless," servants are solved without any need to eliminate the word as a supposed gloss.

11. This is not the only case in the p. where a Greek word with an alpha privative is perhaps better understood as a root word with a negative. In Luke 11:8 the problematic "anaideia" as a Greek composite word means "shamelessness." But when one begins with the root of the word and adds a negative the meaning becomes 'avoidance of shame,' which we have argued is the original intent of "anaideia" in that p. (Bailey). The word "Servant," is *doulos* (In Greek) & means slave also. Because the word "slave" in our society has totally negative connotations it is problematic to use the word 'doulos' in this p.. Paul calls himself "a slave Jesus Christ" (Romans 1:1) and obviously means it in a positive sense is meant. The disciple is not an employee who can work and expect payment. He is a slave for whom the master accepts total responsibility, and who enjoys total security, and who, at the same time, labors out of a sense of duty and loyalty, not in the hope of gaining rewards. Indeed, after he has fulfilled all of commands he says, "Nothing is owed me, I have only done my duty."

12. The theological application of this carefully written p. is weighty indeed. Clearly we are again talking about salvation and good works. The Jewish commentary on the Psalms (Midrash Tehillim,) in explaining Psalm 1 reads, "Not for their works were the children Israelites redeemed from Egypt, but so that God might make himself and eternal name, and because of his favor." (Montifiore, Rabannic). In commenting on this p. Montifiore mentions the rabbinic doctrine of 'tit for tat,' 'in no other point is Jesus' antagonism to, and reaction against, certain tendencies in that teaching more justified and more wholesome than here. (Montifiore, Gospels II). For Jesus salvation was a gift. In addition to works and salvation there is the related topic of motivation for service and its results. Do we serve in order to gain? Having served to we have claims on God? This p says "NO" to both questions.

13. Some contemporary voices supported Jesus' view here set forth. In the Sayings of the Fathers (Pirke Aboth), one Simeon the Just (300 b.c.) is reported to have said, "Be slaves who serve the master not with a view to receive a present; and let the fear of Heaven be upon you."