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Rebel soldiers as good Samaritans: New Testament parables in an African context

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Abstract

This article aims to critique western understanding of New Testament times. Most of the historical reconstructions done in the West are based on what biblical scholars have learned through primary and secondary written sources, occasionally from archaeological findings. The article recounts the author's experiences at Africa University in Mutare, Zimbabwe. Students who themselves live in agrarian, technologically undeveloped rural areas, convinced her to return to Africa in order to travel with them and learn for herself how they relate to an economically poor lifestyle of two thousand years ago. As a result, the article argues that the ordinary in Africa should be seen as extraordinary from a western worldview and completes a full circle by being in the context of New Testament times.

In 1995, I was shopping in the suburb of Bujumbura when I heard gun fire nearby. Two soldiers were shot dead. The rebels were around. In a confused situation, I ran away in the hills. I was not alone. When we began to climb the hill, one mother realized that her five-year-old son was not with her. She was so disturbed. She decided to go back to look for him. We [tried to] persuade her not to go back. She refused. "I have to go to look for my son; if I am to die today, there is no option," she said. When she was moving around, the child saw his mother very far. He was in rebels' hands. He started crying. The rebels suddenly saw the mother and called her to come and take the child. First, she was afraid, but she got courage and she approached them and took the child.

(Jean Ntahoturi)

1. INTRODUCTION

My adventures on the Continent of Africa began in July 2000 when I did my sabbatical leave at Africa University in Mutare, Zimbabwe. As a newcomer to African cultures, I was immediately humbled as a New Testament scholar because I discovered very quickly that rural Africans know far more and have better insights into the study of the New Testament than we as westerners

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(i.e., from the United States) could ever possibly hope to have. One of the classes that I taught at Africa University was to fourth-year students (seniors) who graduated the following June with bachelor of divinity degrees; the title of the class was "The Parables of Jesus." As a part of their weekly assignment, each student was to write a parable from his or her own oral tradition or experience that paralleled and/or served as an introduction to New Testament parables.

Their writing served as a reminder to me that, contrary to the western world where books about the Bible now have exceeded the sale of Bibles (thus contributing to an ever-growing biblical illiteracy), the Bible itself is probably the most widely read book in Africa. Fidon R Mwombeki (2001:121-128) categorizes five different ways that the Bible is used in Africa:

- the Bible is seen as a symbol of God's presence and protection; for example, Bibles are placed under pillows, in suitcases, in new houses, and in coffins.
- The Bible is read for practical utilization, for example, giving comfort, instruction, exhortation, even condemnation.
- The Bible does not always have to be understood rationally:

The biblical reading is appropriated spiritually, emotionally, mystically. The historical setting of a text is not significant, and even less the identity of its author. African spiritualism supersedes intelligibility. Most often, the Bible is appropriated worshipfully, by heart, not necessarily by mind.

- Some settings do demand intelligibility. His examples include a first-born seven-year-old boy asking why an angel from God would slaughter the firstborn child of every Egyptian family; defending monogamy in the light of Abraham, David, Solomon, Elkanah, and many others; a young intellectual asking why Africans identify with Israel when they should be identifying with Egyptians, Jebusites, Philistines, and other peoples who were wiped out and driven out of their lands to give way to the migrating Jews. And,
- there is strong affinity between the religious and cultural context of the Bible and that of contemporary Africa, e.g., people going out to fish for that day's breakfast, beggars and prostitutes in the streets, women carrying the family's load, exclusion of women and children in counts and censuses, light from oil lamps, neighbors going to ask for bread to feed an unexpected guest in the middle of the night, free "all-you-can-eat" weddings for all relatives and friends, demon-possessed men, women, and children, as well as the strong affinity in social arrangements between African and biblical

cultures such as lineage, age-grouping, the value of royalty, birthrights and inheritance laws, the value of the elderly, and emotional attachment to ancestral lands.

2. PROJECT

As the students (who were from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Burundi, and Angola) and I worked our way through a semester of New Testament parables and their African-culture counterparts, students began to identify problems in western analyses of biblical texts; that is, these students continue to live in agrarian, technologically undeveloped rural areas and can, therefore, relate to an economically poor lifestyle of two thousand years ago. The oral culture is still the means for transmitting stories and traditions from person to person, village to village and generation to generation. Quite simply, we in the West have no point of reference for understanding first-century stories and customs. Students convinced me, therefore, that I needed to return to Africa and travel with them to the rural areas from which they came. I did that for three consecutive summers (so far) and was fascinated by the stories and songs I heard and the dances I witnessed.

Many of their ancient traditions, as well as current ways of living, parallel and, therefore, help to explain the context of the New Testament teachings; that is, rural Africans, in my opinion, are living very much like first-century residents of Palestine likely were. I am convinced that there are strong connections between the cultural context of the New Testament and that of contemporary Africa. In Zimbabwe, South Africa, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, and Kenya, I saw many of Mwombeki's examples as well as women grinding maize for the day's meal, small boys catching mice and roasting them on sticks to eat and sell, women carrying babies on their backs and baskets on their heads, paraffin lamps on the roads at night (which constitutes a language unto itself), being the unexpected guest (on many occasions), and one of my traveling companion's sixteen-year-old epileptic brother who died this past summer one week before I arrived to visit him a second time. As I talk with chiefs and elders of villages, I see for myself the comparisons between biblical times and the rural African cultures of which Mwombeki writes.

3. EXAMPLES

Introductions to parables from my students at Africa University serve as additional examples of what I hear in the rural areas of Africa. Jean Ntahoturi, a Hutu from Burundi, introduced his analysis of the Samaritan (Lk 10:30-35) with the story at the beginning of this essay. According to Ntahoturi, one

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should identify with the victim rather than with the so-called Good Samaritan because help comes from the most unexpected source, in this case, a soldier from the enemy Tutsi tribe.

In another parable, the Barren Tree (Lk 13:6-9), Ntahoturi wrote the following as an introduction:

The Kudzunga family rejoiced when their elder son got married. Everyone in the family looked forward to the success of this couple (Tatenda and Tendai). After the wedding day the aunts expected their sister-in-law to have conceived. Two months, five months, a year, there were no signs of pregnancy. One of the aunts was bold enough, she went and asked her brother, Tatenda. She said, "Tatenda, what is going on between you and Tendai? It is high time that you should have a child." Tatenda calmly responded, "Auntie, give us one more chance; we will do it, just allow us to look into the issue." The auntie finally said, "If your wife is barren you better divorce her and marry somebody who is productive or you better marry a second wife who will give you children."

Jean not only understood the story of the barren fig tree perfectly, he also comprehended the consequences of barrenness in a more enlightened and critical manner than my own understanding.

As we were talking about the parables of the Treasure (Mt 13:44//Thom 109:1-3) and the Pearl (Mt 13:45-46//Thom 7:1-2), Sophirina Sign, an associate pastor at Old Mutare Mission and student in the Parables class, said that she understood the stories exactly because her uncle had been trying to get her elderly grandmother to leave her tiny plot of land and live with him. But the grandmother refused to leave because a long time ago she had buried a treasure; she couldn't remember where she buried it or even what the treasure was, but she certainly wasn't going to leave it.

A typical, and very recent, exegetical commentary on the parable of the hidden treasure goes as follows:

The hiding of valuables in the earth is an age-old method of storing them safely. According to Josephus, in the aftermath of their conquest of Jerusalem (AD 70), the Romans discovered gold, silver, and other treasured articles that had been stored underground "in view of the uncertain fortunes of war," and the *Copper Scroll* from Qumran (3Q15) – which is from the first century AD – contains a long list of buried treasures, many items of which are underground. Moreover, in another of Jesus' parables a man is portrayed as hiding money in the ground (Mt 25:18, 25).

(Hultgren 2000:411)

My point is that we do not have to go back two thousand years to gain this understanding, nor do we need to be so incredulous at such practices.

Tafadzwa Mabambe, a Zimbabwean, introduced the Parable of the Wedding Celebration (Mt 22:1-14//Lk 14:16-24//Thom 64:1-12) with these comments:

In an African context if you are invited to a family occasion, for that moment you are part and parcel of that family. The people who see you will associate you with that family. For this reason one has to make up his or her mind before accepting an invitation; [i.e.,] will you be comfortable to be associated?

Mabambe's understanding of the parable played out in my own flat in Mutare when my daughter Wendy and I invited the class for pizza; before they entered our home (literally at the threshold), they let us know that if we did in fact invite them in and they came in, that meant that we had a reciprocal notion of family commitment. And another student, Samuel Dzobo, also a Zimbabwean, told me that in his village, the entire population gets an invitation to a wedding – that is, there is no hierarchical or exclusivist guest list. He, therefore, questioned the entire premise of the story that Jesus told: the end of Jesus' parable should have been the normative, not the other way around.

In a final example of this type, that same student, Dzobo, introduced the Parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner (Mt 20:1-15) with this parallel:

When I was growing up in the village, during the planting season, we used to have some form of cooperative where families in the villages organized themselves to rotate cultivating and planting each family's field. It worked like this: ten families would come together, go to one family's field and plough it and plant the seed. In the afternoon they would go to the next family. In five days all the fields of the ten families would be ploughed and planted. There were those who would come late to someone's field after working in their own field. Those who came late would argue that "Yatsika yamwa." This is a Shona proverb meaning that even those who do things at the last minute no matter how little effort they have put they are considered to have worked. When those who were late had their turn to have the fields cultivated, people would still go and cultivate. Maybe this is the concept that Jesus was teaching.

Dzobo also wrote his own Parable of the Widow:

It is like the rains have come and everyone is busy in his/her fields. Then a widow has her only two oxen get lost in the forest. For two

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weeks, she has been looking for the two oxen to no avail. She knows she is late with planting. She goes to her deceased husband's brother to ask him to plough her one field, but he refuses because she refused to be inherited. She goes to another and he refuses because he has not finished ploughing his last field and that his oxen are tired. The widow then goes to the aunt of her deceased husband to have her son plough her field, but the aunt refuses because her son would want to rest for he had been busy with their own fields. The widow gives up and she knows she cannot plant in her field. Then a friend of her deceased husband comes by and he finds that her field has not been ploughed. He brought his own oxen and ploughs the field and sent his sons to look for the lost oxen. That year the widow had a great harvest, more than anyone else in the village.

I often use this parable as a tool for teaching Jesus' parables in my own classroom at Otterbein College in Ohio and I ask questions such as: What background information or questions about the culture does one need to ask to understand this parable? Why are these particular characters included in the story; that is, what is the role of each? What is "inheritance"? After they have discussed the possibilities, I offer them Dzobo's own explanation:

In my culture the custom of inheritance is still practiced. A woman who refuses to be inherited after the death of her husband is saying, "Leave me alone, I can manage my own life." This woman stays at her home probably because all her daughters are married. The fact that she bore some children makes stay at her home [possible]. Otherwise she would go to her parents if she has no children and refused inheritance. The uncles refused to plough her field because she can do it. For them to plough the field she has to accept inheritance. Her aunt refuses because she is responsible for the inheritance, by refusing the inheritance the widow was disrespecting the aunt. So the widow has no relative in the midst of relatives. Either she accepts inheritance or she has no relative. The other option is that she can go to her parents but she cannot do that because she has children. So the widow is in the midst of nowhere. To lack food would make her depend on the same people whom she refused to be inherited. But her husband had a friend, a "sahwira." This is more than a friend for a friend is "shamwari." A sahwira takes his friend's burdens as his and he can do anything to help a friend like he is doing it to his own family. The friendship is not over because the husband has died. This is what the woman had forgotten that the Sahwira was still there. When he comes along, he helped her in her field and having the lost oxen found and she has a great harvest. The Shona proverb which says *usahwira unokunda ukama* (this Agape kind of relationship cannot be

compared to family relationship) subverts conventional wisdom of blood is thicker than water which emphasizes the family relationship as more important than any other relationship. Her uncles were ashamed because of the harvest. (NB The custom of inheritance is fast losing grip because of HIV/AIDS.)

I also must note Sebastian Bakare's (1993:31-33) appropriation of the parables in the land crisis that exists in Zimbabwe now. He supports Matthew's sense of God's justice in the parable of the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16) in that the vineyard owner was responding to the needs of the people – everyone needed a day's wage and so it was a day's wage everyone received no matter how long he had worked. In the parable of the tenants (Mk 12:1-12), Bakare (1993:36) claims that [according to Mark] "Jesus succeeds in confronting the ruling class with their own injustice. The retribution which the tenants suffer at the hands of the landlord, and which they readily affirm, will be inflicted on them. As the ruling elite have dispossessed the poor, so they too will be dispossessed." And in the parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16:1-16), Bakare (1993:39) suggests that the manager identifies himself with the peasants instead of the elite; he no longer fears downward mobility: "His future is now with the peasantry instead of the upper-class. That is what the kingdom of God is like: identifying oneself with the oppressed and exploited peasants and making one's future with them, by fighting for a just socio-economic system." Bakare (1993:1993:39) quotes John Dominic Crossan (1973:33), "The parable breaks the bond between power and justice. Instead it equates justice and vulnerability."

4. RELEVANCE

Not only am I humbled as a New Testament scholar in Africa, but I also see the need to critique western understanding of New Testament times. Most of the historical reconstructions we in the West do are based on what we have learned through primary and secondary written sources, occasionally archaeological findings; few of us take the time to actually live like first-century persons may have lived. As an example, one of the highlights of two different trips to Malawi has been fishing at night in boats in the middle of Lake Malawi with the local fishermen; my hunch is that their fishing culture is very similar to that of first-century Palestine. Many other scholars are engaged in theological and biblical studies in rural Africa². But as a westerner coming into an African context, my eyes and ears are wide open and unaccustomed: I see the

² In addition to Mwombeki (2001) and Bakare (1993) see, for example, Dube (1998, 2001); Jackson (2004); Oduyoye (2003); Scholz (2003); Segovia & Tolbert (1998); Thorpe (1991); Ukpong (2003); Ukpong, Dube, West, Masoga, Gottwald, Punt, Maluleke & Wimbush (2002); West & Dube (2001).

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ordinary in Africa as extraordinary from my worldview and then it circles around to be the ordinary in the context of New Testament times.

One of my commitments, therefore, is to the students with whom I have the pleasure and privilege of knowing at Africa University. By writing and retelling their stories and parables, they affirm their own cultures and understandings and realize that they have something to offer themselves and the rest of the world that probably surpasses what we think we know from a western analysis. It is no surprise to most of us that oppression through racism, sexism, and classism was, for the most part, successful because of western greed and justified by Christianity's own patriarchal hierarchy. Mwombeki's two challenges must be included, therefore, in my final remarks: the first is that as a trained reader or theologian, one must work through what has been called the "hermeneutic of resonance" – to identify the resonance of the biblical text with the theology of the church as well as with the situation of the readers. The situations vary, and each one must be taken seriously into account. The second challenge is to face African realities. Unless one is in Africa, in the banana groves and the desert places, the stinking refugee camps, the crowded town neighborhoods without proper sanitation, and the hospitals without medicine, one cannot really appreciate how complicated reading the Bible is in such situations – and yet, how real (Mwombeki 2001:127-128).³ One of my eight students in the Parables class at Africa University died of Hepatitis while I was there: a needless death that would not have occurred among my students at Otterbein College in Ohio. I dedicate my research to him.

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³ I am indebted to Owen K Ross (2002) for his bibliography on the subject in his Africa University class paper: Banana (1996); Chossudovsky (1997); Deng (1998); Kasenene (1998); Martey (1993); Mbiti (1995).

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