FORGIVENESS OF SINS (LUKE 7:36-50)\(^1\)

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Much exegetical discussion of Luke 7:36-50 has centered on the question, “When was the woman of this story forgiven?” There are strong arguments to sustain the opinion that she was forgiven after her gestures of kindness, understood to be gestures of repentance;\(^2\) there are also strong arguments to sustain the opinion that she was forgiven before her gestures, understood now to be acts of love or thanksgiving for forgiveness received.\(^3\)

Important as this discussion is, a much more central issue is the understanding of the multiple relationships, among Jesus, the woman and the Pharisee, that give structure to this story. A study of these relationships will yield the best understanding of the story, and even, I think, help resolve the particular question about when the woman was forgiven.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) For an earlier discussion of this pericope, cf. my “A Proposal for Interpreting Luke 7:36-50,” *Biblica* 72 (1991) 305-330. While incorporating ideas from that essay, I hope here to discuss more adequately the relationships among the story’s three characters and the effects of those relationships. It will become clear, I believe, that the woman has been forgiven her sins before the story begins and that the centrality of the meaning of Jesus forces one to read the story with a methodology beyond form and redaction criticism.

\(^2\) At v. 48 Jesus says “Your sins have been forgiven you”; indeed, the remark of those near him, “Who is this who also forgives sins?” (v. 49), and Jesus’ words, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (v. 50), support the impression that the woman has just been forgiven. A major support to this understanding is the interpretation of “because she has loved much” (v. 47): her loving deeds of kindness to Jesus, deeds showing repentance, lead to the forgiveness given her at v. 48. Cf. J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 1981) I 686: “This interpretation, known since patristic times and used in a number of modern commentaries (Wellhausen, Loisy, Lagrange, Holtzmann, etc.). . . .”

\(^3\) The parable (vv. 41-42) suggests that the woman’s gestures with which the story begins are acts of thanksgiving for forgiveness already received. Verse 47 suggests that the sins have already been forgiven, even though Jesus has not yet spoken about them to the woman; cf. Fitzmyer, *Gospel*, 687: “this interpretation had been used basically by some patristic writers (Cyprian *Ad Quirimum, testimoniorum libri tres* 3.115-116 [CSEL 3/1.182]; and . . . Ambrose *Expositio in Lucam* 6.26 [CC 14.183]); also by interpreters of later periods (Schmid, Schneider, Schürmann, Wilckens).”

\(^4\) As in this essay, one often assumes that the woman had been forgiven either before

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Novum Testamentum XL, 2
The Woman and the Pharisee

The woman of this story performs certain acts on Jesus’ behalf, and listens to him. Beyond this, she is a passive personage in the drama Luke portrays. On the other hand, the Pharisee, Simon, while not dealing directly with the woman, has an opinion of her which is strong and serves as a basic element of the story (v. 39).

To understand the value of Simon’s opinion that the woman is a sinner, one must understand the significance of the word-order of the narrator’s sentence, “...a certain woman was in the city a sinner” (v. 37). The narrator puts “in the city” between “a certain woman was...” and “...a sinner.” By positioning the phrase “in the city” as he does, Luke means to say, not that the woman was a sinner, but that the woman was considered by the city to be a sinner.5 This reveals the truth dramatically: it is no longer certain that she is a sinner, but it is only clear that the city thinks she is a sinner. The Pharisee’s calling the woman a sinner is only a sharing in the city’s opinion.

Luke’s expression here makes clear, then, that we cannot deny the woman’s forgiveness before her entry into Simon’s house; all the reader knows is that the city, with Simon, “thinks” the woman is a sinner. That the woman could be forgiven, and the city still think her to be unforgiven, flows from the confounding reality described by Luke just some verses above, where sinners are said to profit from the baptism of John, while leaders refuse and scoff at it. Their rejection of John, and of Jesus as well, suggests that, to them, sinners remain sinners, no matter how much they hang on either, or both, of these two preachers. The woman becomes a concrete example of what Luke has been describing in 7:29-35.

The Pharisee, then, is essentially wrong in his estimate of this woman’s position before God. Also his error undermines his claim that Jesus is

her gestures towards Jesus, or after them. R. Meynet, Il Vangelo secondo Luca (Roma: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1994) 247 writes: “...nel primo segmento [v. 47a], il perdono è conseguenza dell’ amore, nel secondo [v. 47b] ne [amore] è la causa.”

5 In regard to the meaning I propose for “...was in the city a sinner,” the observations of A. Plummer, The Gospel According to S. Luke (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1922) 210 are apposite: “The exact meaning is not quite clear: either ‘which was a sinner in the city,’ i.e. was known as such in the place itself”; “The ãv need not be pressed to mean, ‘She was even up to this time’” (Alf.); nor does accessit ad Dominum immunda, ut retina munda (Aug.) imply this. “The ãv expresses her public character... She has repented...; but the general opinion of her remained unchanged.” Also, cf. J. Ernst, Das Evangelium nach Lukas (RNT; Regensburg: Pustet, 1976) 256: “Es wird zutreffen, dass sie eine ‘stadtbekannte Dirne’ [war]...”; Ernst cites in support J. Schmid, Das Evangelium nach Lukas (RTN 3; Regensburg: Pustet, 1960) 147. Contra, M.-J. Lagrange,