

Can there be a Forgiveness that makes a
Difference Ecologically?
An Eco-Materialist Account of Forgiveness as Freedom
(ἄφεσις) in the Gospel of Luke*

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Abstract: The article considers master/slave relations in the Gospel of Luke as a background for understanding forgiveness (as ἄφεσις) ecologically. I draw on the work of ecophilosopher Val Plumwood, who identifies a master/slave dynamic operating in a logic of colonisation. An important aspect of the master/slave dynamic is the ascription of agency to the master and no, or limited, agency to the slave. I re-situate agency within a more-than-human sociality that includes both human and other than human members of the Earth community. I interpret forgiveness in Luke as a gracious interruption (or gift) that occurs within the materiality of this community. Through a life-giving shift toward freedom, this gift of forgiveness enables in turn a life-giving agency, enacted in a more-than-human community.

IN HIS ESSAY "ON FORGIVENESS", Jacques Derrida writes of forgiving the unforgivable. Like hospitality, forgiveness participates in the "aneconomic" structure of the gift; that is, forgiveness lies outside (or, if within, then counter to) the modes of relation of exchange and property signalled by a certain kind of capitalist and consumerist economics.¹¹ The paradox of forgiveness is such that in forgiving that

* Versions of this article were presented at the Cultures of Sustainability Symposium, RMIT, 27 September 2008, and "God, Freedom and Nature", Biennial Conference in Philosophy, Religion and Culture, Catholic Institute of Sydney, 3-5 October, 2008. My thanks go to Elaine Wainwright and Mark Brett for their generosity in commenting on earlier versions of this article. Research leading to this article was supported by the Melbourne College of Divinity.

1. Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness", in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001) 27-60, esp. 32-3.

which is forgivable or excusable, one forgives nothing; yet to forgive the unforgivable, even where there is no acknowledgement of wrongdoing on the part of the perpetrator, is ethically suspect.² Unconditional forgiveness, like unconditional hospitality, has the character of the gift as “the impossible”: simultaneously possible and impossible.³ For forgiveness to be forgiveness it must be unconditional; but unconditional forgiveness seems impossible.

Within a context of ecological crisis, signalled most prominently today by climate change, the question of forgiving the unforgivable has particular significance.⁴ If by my (or our) action or inaction, I (or we) contribute to ecological destruction, which has material effects for the flourishing of more-than-human others and if I am (or we are) aware of this, then do I (or we) need forgiveness? Let me emphasise three definitional matters in relation to this question. Firstly, the term “more-than-human” does not exclude humans; rather, more-than-human includes humankind as one diverse species among many constituents of an Earth community of which mammals, and animals more generally, are only part. Secondly, in emphasising materiality, I am seeking neither to reinstate through reversal a spirit/matter dualism nor to assert a pantheist phenomenology. Rather, while I would prefer to speak in terms of a materially spiritual, spiritually material phenomenology, a temporary shift of focus to the material allows for a renewed respect for matter’s inherent otherness (and “inspiredness”), of which the phenomenon of forgiveness may be one example. Thirdly, I use singular and plural first person pronouns deliberately to signal the combination of individual and social aspects of destructive human action in a more-than-human context. From whom can we seek forgiveness? Is our being forgiven meaningful in an ecological context? Can there be a forgiveness that makes a difference ecologically?

In this article, I consider a particular understanding of forgiveness in the Gospel of Luke against the background of Val Plumwood’s eco-philosophical analysis of a colonising master/slave dynamic. Plumwood, to whom I would like to dedicate this article, offers an

2. Anne F. Elvey, *An Ecological Feminist Reading of the Gospel of Luke: A Gestational Paradigm* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005) 297.

3. John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Jacques Derrida, *Given Time. I, Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

4. Kate Rigby raised this issue in a short paper for the forum, “The Gift of Being: Being With and Being Given. Priorities in Ecophilosophy. Ecological Thinkers in Discussion: A sequel to the visit of Jacques Derrida”, Monash University Clayton Campus, 15 November 1999.

incisive critique of a logic of colonisation, emerging in the ancient Mediterranean world going back to Plato and continuing to influence western ways of thinking and acting today.⁵ The Gospel of Luke, emerging slightly later in an ancient Mediterranean context where a master/slave relation is deeply embedded in the culture, offers a particular understanding of forgiveness (as ἄφεσις) in an early Christian framework that may unsettle the master/slave dynamic even as it assumes it. An important aspect of this dynamic is the ascription of agency to the master and no, or limited, agency to the slave. This article instead situates agency within a more-than-human sociality, and interprets forgiveness in Luke within this context as a gracious interruption that occurs within the materiality of the Earth community, enabling a life-giving shift toward freedom in human relations with more-than-human others, remembering that this term includes other humans.⁶

SOME PARAMETERS

The main parameters I draw around these questions of forgiveness in an ecological context occur in two areas:

- i) the relationship between an ecological call to conversion, requiring both individual and cultural change, and my engagement with Christian texts and traditions;
- ii) the relationship between forgiveness, responsibility and right action in an ecological context.

In the first area, I take the perspective that an ecological call to conversion requires an openness to understanding humans to be interdependent with a wider more-than-human Earth community of which we, as human beings, are part. This openness is the first step in a shift, or reformation, of consciousness that requires that westerners in particular learn, or continue to learn, from the more-than-human Earth community what it is to be of Earth, and as a corollary what it is to be human.⁷ From this perspective, Christian texts and traditions can be

5. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993). A key eco-philosophical thinker and activist both nationally and internationally, Val died at her Braidwood home on 29 February 2008.

6. While a related and helpful eco-theological consideration of forgiveness in the context of the Roman Catholic sacrament of reconciliation would be possible, such is beyond the scope of this article.

7. Whilst through European colonisation few if any cultures have escaped western influence, the particular formation, reformation, or shift of consciousness will be different across cultures and places. Moreover, some cultures, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ones hold perspectives and practices quite counter to those formed from the

understood within a more-than-human framework as material cultural products of a particular Earth species, handed on and interpreted within identifiable human communities and places, or habitats.⁸ Without assuming that such an understanding describes comprehensively the phenomenality of our texts and traditions, I suggest that it offers a valid shift of emphasis in western Christianity consonant with a call to ecological conversion. My position is that such a stance does not devalue Christianity; rather it re-evaluates and re-values Christian texts and traditions, especially as they express particular aspects of the phenomenality of the Earth community. Is forgiveness one aspect of this Earthly or material phenomenality, for which Christian texts and traditions can suggest a paradigm?

As a starting point for this article, I assume that forgiveness as understood within a Christian context represents a particular material phenomenon that is expressed (and sometimes encapsulated) in various Christian descriptions and practices of forgiveness. While beyond the scope of this article to describe in full, such an assumption has a basis not only in an eco-materialist phenomenology and philosophy, but more particularly in the incarnational paradigm of Christianity itself. In this context, to speak of forgiveness as an Earthly, material phenomenon is not opposed to understanding it as a spiritual, graced phenomenon. Rather, the Christian doctrine of the incarnation situates spiritual, graced phenomena firmly within the materiality of the Earth community that includes humans among its more-than-human constituents. With particular reference to the Gospel of Luke, I aim to understand forgiveness as a material phenomenon, especially where such an understanding might inform an environmental ethics.

In the second area, if forgiveness is an aspect of an Earthly phenomenality, it cannot be tied directly to concepts of individual or corporate responsibility and right action. Responsibility for ecological damage and right action in relation to Earth others are vitally important. However, considered in the light of the interconnectedness and interdependence of the Earth community and the global realities of climate change, extreme poverty, loss of biodiversity, and consumerist excess, there is seldom, if ever, a one-to-one correspondence between human individual or corporate actions and their more-than-

west and often much more ecologically respectful. My main concern in this article is with western, and western Christian, thought. My aim is to seek possible wisdom for a necessary western cultural shift in our Christian texts and traditions. I see this not as supplanting once more the wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but as working within my own cultural heritage, as others do within theirs, for a pluralist and cooperative ecological ethics.

8. Elaine Wainwright is taking up this notion of habitat in her current research.

human effects. If forgiveness has meaning in an ecological context, this meaning is not tied directly to the actions of individual or corporate “persons”. While I understand the dangers in moving away from discussions of responsibility and right action, I want to open a place for a material forgiveness that might empower these precisely because it is not tied to them.

Moreover, to consider forgiveness in the context of a more-than-human Earth community broadens the horizon of agency and effect. When a fire engulfs towns or a crocodile attacks a human, how are we to respond to the damage done to ourselves? Do more-than-human others need our forgiveness? Do we need to forgive? Perhaps we can allow that on occasion, as in the case of a crocodile attack, such as Plumwood suffered, a non-human other may be a candidate for forgiveness.⁹ What might this mean? In considering forgiveness in a more-than-human context, two perspectives intersect around the notion of damage. On the one hand, we experience damage to ourselves from more-than-human others, where the agents of the damage are neither solely human nor other than human. On the other hand, through our own agency we contribute directly and indirectly to damaging both humans and other than humans in a more-than-human context. In both cases the locus of responsibility for damage is not wholly decidable nor is an intention to harm necessarily, or even usually, the prompt for the damage. Nevertheless, the damage requires a response; depending on our part in relation to it, this may be a response, for example, of acceptance, repentance, or restitution. What might a materially embedded forgiveness offer by way of response to the kinds of damage for which humans are in large part responsible?

AGENCY

Our more-than-human context of agency and effect; damage; responsibility for damage; and responsiveness to damage is complex and requires a particular understanding of agency. For some, agency – especially moral agency – is a specifically human characteristic. Stephan Fuchs, for example, writes: “Agency is the faculty for action. This faculty may be uniquely human. Action differs from the (mere) behavior of non-human organisms, which is driven by innate or conditioned reflexes and instincts.”¹⁰ He then claims, “Action is

9. For Plumwood’s critical reflection on her experience of the crocodile attack, see Val Plumwood, “Being Prey”, in D. Rothenberg and M. Ulvaeus (eds.), *The New Earth Reader: The Best of Terra Nova* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1999) 76-92.

10. Stephan Fuchs, “Agency (and Intention)”, in George Ritzer (ed.), *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Blackwell Publishing, 2007) Blackwell Reference Online, 07

contingent; behavior is necessary" and locates the faculty for agency in the human mind, as "the seat of reflexivity, deliberation, and intentionality".¹¹ As Fuchs goes on to suggest, however, the ascription of a singular intentional agency to individual human actors needs to be modulated by positioning humans within particular social structures.¹² Social theorists have considered the ways in which not only human intentions, but human actions which may or not be intended, are influenced by, or interrelated to, their social contexts.¹³ Moreover, social structures, such as the market, can be considered as agents in terms of their effects. Structure and agency are not oppositional categories; rather agency can be understood as effected in and affecting particular social structures, which have already entered into the (human) agents and "provide enabling or constraining conditions for action".¹⁴

Within an ecological context, the question of agency needs to be understood in a wider more-than-human framework, where the habitus that is a particular human social structure intersects with the sociality of the more-than-human habitat in which that structure subsists. When a human acts, for example, to form a pot on a potter's wheel, the action of making the pot occurs within a contextual field in which the qualities of the clay, the technology of the wheel, the place of work, are integral to the making of a particular pot.¹⁵ The intention to form a pot is elicited from, and actualised by, a "world of things" as an

April 2009, http://www.blackwellreference.com.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405124331_chunk_g97814051243317_ss1-24.

11. Fuchs, "Agency (and Intention)".

12. Fuchs, "Agency (and Intention)".

13. Fuchs, "Agency (and Intention)". A distinction can be made between agency and intention. The common sense view that I form an intention on which I then act, as master of my own action, is complicated by the possibility that my intention is already *in* the action, in the process of its being enacted. See, for example, Lambros Malafouris, "At the Potter's Wheel: An Argument for Material Agency", in Carl Knappett and Lambros Malafouris (eds), *Material Agency: Toward a Non-Anthropocentric Approach* (New York: Springer, 2008) 19-36, esp. 26-31.

14. Rob Stones, "Structure and Agency", in Ritzer, *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, Blackwell Reference Online, 07 April 2009, http://www.blackwellreference.com.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405124331_chunk_g978140512433125_ss1-293. Among major social theorists of agency and structure are Emile Durkheim, Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens. Stones writes: "Each emphasizes not only structures external to agents, and the stocks of knowledge possessed by agents, but also the *social* origins and grounding of agents' knowledgeability. The key mediating concepts are *habitus* for Bourdieu, *practical consciousness* for Giddens, and the phenomenological *lifeworld* for Habermas." See also, Rob Stones, "Structuration Theory", in Ritzer, *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, Blackwell Reference Online, 07 April 2009, http://www.blackwellreference.com.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405124331_chunk_g978140512433125_ss1-292.

15. Malafouris, "At the Potter's Wheel", 33.

engagement with the possibilities their materiality and material situation affords.¹⁶ More negatively, for example, when a human or a company acts to pollute a river, the properties of the waste and the water, and the geography and flow of the river, each contribute to the “world of things” in which the pollution is actualised. Moreover, the polluting act may be a by-product of an act of which the governing intention was not to pollute but to dispose of waste. While the intention is not tied directly to the effect, the responsibility for the action *is*, precisely because the intending agent does not adequately account for the more-than-human contextual field of the action. With more complex actions, it may be that the intending agent cannot wholly account for the more-than-human contextual field of the action. In all these contexts, from an ecological perspective, the concept of agency, finds a focus not in an individual entity that acts, but in the process of enactment, distributed in “collectives of humans and nonhumans”.¹⁷

MASTER/SLAVE DUALISM AND THE ATTRIBUTION OF AGENCY

Moreover, rather than standing on the active side of an active/passive divide, the concept of *agency as process* allows that an entity acted upon may be at the same time active on its own behalf.¹⁸ From a feminist perspective, Diana Meyers considers the question of this active/passive aspect of agency (especially moral agency) for women as shaped in the colonising structures and imaginary of patriarchy.¹⁹ A pattern of relationship between master and slave is, for Plumwood, the basis of a logic of colonisation. When she describes a system of dualisms as the structure of this logic, Plumwood argues that the definition of higher in terms of lower categories follows this pattern: master/slave; man/woman; human/animal; culture/nature;

16. Malafouris, “At the Potter’s Wheel”, 33. See also, Jane Bennett’s exploration of the possibility of “thing power” as a kind of material agency. Jane Bennett, “The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter”, *Political Theory* 32 (2004) 347-72; esp. 365-7.

17. Carl Knappett, “The Neglected Networks of Material Agency: Artefacts, Pictures and Texts”, in Knappett and Malafouris, *Material Agency*, 139-56, see 140, 143. See also, John Law and Annemarie Mol, “The Actor-Enacted: Cumbrian Sheep in 2001”, in Knappett and Malafouris, *Material Agency*, 57-77; and Owain Jones and Paul Cloke, “Non-Human Agencies: Trees in Place and Time”, in Knappett and Malafouris, *Material Agency*, 79-96.

18. Law and Mol, “The Actor-Enacted”, 66.

19. Diana Tietjens Meyers, “Agency”, in Alison M. Jaggar and Iris Marion Young (eds), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (Blackwell Publishing, 1999), Blackwell Reference Online, 07 April 2009, http://www.blackwellreference.com.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9780631220671_chunk_g978063122067138.

spirit/matter; soul/body; self/other; and so on.²⁰ Defined in terms of their second elements, the first elements also form a metonymy so that master, man, human, culture, spirit, soul and self are identified with reason, as superior to and exclusive of slave, woman, animal, nature, matter and other.²¹ Within such structures, agency is always both active and passive. A distinction can be made between two kinds of agency. The individual agency (its lack or limit) a master affords a slave, within the social structure supporting his or her mastery, may differ from the more-than-human processes of agency in which the slave participates through her or his actions. But the dualistic structure Plumwood describes insists on the master's control over the ascription of agency to the slave.

One implication for Plumwood is that the term nature itself becomes a code for the lack of agency of the dominated group. She writes:

Colonizing perspectives find the category of nature serviceable both to suppress resistance and to hide certain kinds of (human and non-human) inputs they wish to appropriate, refusing to recognize the suppressed other's agency and creation of value, and assimilating relevant cases to that of nature. Usually this is possible because within the dominant narrative, *nature's agency as such* is denied, so that to be included within the category of nature is to be deprived of recognition as an agent. Indeed, to the extent that nonhuman species have their own forms of culture, agencies and autonomy, the opposition between nature and culture is simply invalid, and depends on an oppressively reductionist and instrumentalist view of nonhuman animals (which may then be read back into selected human cases, to oppress them also).²²

This denial of agency to nature can exist alongside recognition and fear concerning lack of human control over certain "natural" phenomena such as fires, floods, and earthquakes. Such experiences of nature "out of control" can stimulate the desire for control expressed in such dualistic frameworks of thought.

From this eco-philosophical perspective, Luke 17:5-6 appears particularly problematic:

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say

20. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 43.

21. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 41-68.

22. Val Plumwood, "Nature as Agency and the Prospects for a Progressive Naturalism", *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 12, no. 4 (2001) 3-32; see 6-7.

to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." (Luke 17:5–6 NRSV).

Immediately following a short discourse on wrongdoing and forgiveness (17:1–4), the representation of a tree as subject to the will of a human (17:5–6) occurs just before an appeal to the dynamic of expectation that slave will be obedient to her or his master (17:9). Like the tree, the faithful disciple is portrayed as slave (17:7–10). In Luke 17:6, the tree appears obedient to the human in this extraordinary context of faith, as an implicit contrast to the ordinary case in which a human word does not have the power to compel a tree (at least not without some physical violence on the part of the speaker or others subject to her or him). Perhaps the intent is ironic. Clearly, a human cannot compel a tree. But the local context of the passage, particularly the reference to slavery in 17:7–10 and the wider Lukan context where Jesus exercises mastery over more-than-human chaotic forces (8:22–39) suggest that an ironic intent does not completely reduce the problematic character of the passage from an ecological perspective.

While Luke's image of the mastered thing is perhaps more humble than the mountain of Matthew and Mark (Matt 17:19–21; Mark 11:22–23), the passage raises significant and complex questions concerning the interrelationship of mastery and agency. Seen within the framework of the master/slave dynamic that returns in 17:7–10, in 17:5–6 the faithful human can have agency like the divine whose word is always effective.²³ Further, the role of human agency in response to the divine purpose is a particular theme in Luke, for which Mary's *fiat* provides a positive paradigm (esp. 1: 26–38; see also, and compare with, 8:19–21, 11:27–28). But in Luke 17:5–10, this theme of human agency in response to a divine purpose becomes conflated with the image of human mastery of other than human entities, such as a mulberry tree.

Backgrounding and instrumentalism, for Plumwood, are two of five ways in which the presumption of human mastery of nature (as the other) operates in and supports a system of hierarchical dualism:²⁴

23. The long tradition of the efficacy of the divine word, from the "God said: 'Let there be...'. And it was so" of Genesis 1 to Isaiah 55:11("so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;/it shall not return to me empty,/but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,/and succeed in the thing for which I sent it") continues in Luke, for example, in the motif of the authority of Jesus' word (4:31–37).

24. The five ways are backgrounding or denial; radical exclusion or hyperseparation; incorporation or relational definition; instrumentalism or objectification; and homogenisation or stereotyping. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 47–55; see also, Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), 100–11. The logic of colonisation Plumwood describes parallels the framework of hierarchical dualism set out by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as situating agency with the

The view of the other as inessential is the master's perspective. The master's view is set up as universal, and it is part of the mechanism of backgrounding that it never occurs to him that there might be other perspectives from which he is the background. Yet this inessentialness which he believes the slave to have in relation to his own essentialness is an illusion. First, the master more than the slave requires the other in order to define his boundaries and identity, since these are defined against the inferiorised other...; it is the slave who makes the master a master, the colonised who makes the coloniser, the periphery which makes the centre. Second, the master also requires the other materially, in order to survive, for the relation of complementation has made the master dependent on the slave for fulfilment of his needs. But this dependency is also hated and feared by the master, for it subtly challenges his dominance, and is denied in a variety of indirect and direct ways, with all the consequences of repression.²⁵

In her commentary on Luke, Sharon Ringe recounts an experience of a seminary class when one of her students prompted her to notice the slaves whose presence and labour forms part of the background in the parable of the Lost Son (15:11–32).²⁶ From this perspective, the divine hospitality the father enacts relies on the slaves whom he commands as master: "But the father said to his slaves, 'Quick, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate'" (15:22–23). Moreover, this hospitality also relies on the sacrifice of the calf.

Instrumentalism refers to the way in which the other is defined solely in terms of its use. The slave must put aside her or his needs in favour of the needs, desires, or purposes of the master, becoming his or

kyriarchal polis of elite freeborn males. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 8, 114–20. A political kyriarchal framework extends a notion of patriarchy focussed solely in definitions and relations of sex and gender, by describing relations of interlocking oppression based on sex, gender, class, race, sexuality and so forth. Insofar as this framework informs not only the socio-cultural and political, but also the individual imagination and unconscious, we can speak of a kyriarchal imaginary. Psychoanalytic theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva have dealt carefully with this aspect of the corporeal and material force of the imaginary. See, for example, Luce Irigaray, *Divine Women*, trans. S. Muecke, *Local Consumption Paper 8* (Sydney: Local Consumption, 1986); Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993); Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

25. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 48–9.

26. Sharon Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 8–9.

her instrument or resource.²⁷ Luke 17:7–9 seems to reflect this attitude: “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table?’ Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?”

The examples I have offered from the Lukan narrative to demonstrate features of hierarchical dualism identified by Plumwood suggest that something of the master/slave dynamic she critiques is operative in the imagery Luke employs. But these indications by example are not exhaustive either of the outlook of the Lukan gospel itself or of the particular episodes cited. Moreover, the dualistic framework Plumwood describes represents a boundary situation, where difference is understood as governed by opposition and mutual exclusion.²⁸ This boundary can be interrupted by more subtle understandings of difference and continuity, accompanied by active interventions in master/slave patterns of relationship. In the gospel of Luke, the motif of reversal, more particularly the understanding of ἀφ᾽εσῆς, both liberation and forgiveness, to which I will come below, forms such an interruption to a pattern of master/slave relations.

SLAVERY AND LUKE

Slaves and agency in the Roman empire of the first century CE

At one level, the Gospel of Luke inherits a complex tapestry of master/slave relations and more-than-human agency from its immediate context within the Roman empire. Broadly speaking, two scholarly interpretations of slavery in the Roman empire stand in tension: for some, slavery was an unfortunate, but not wholly negative, aspect of Roman society and culture; others argue that slavery was inextricably entwined with the imperial system, which produced a steady supply of slaves and which the labour of slaves supported.²⁹

27. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 53.

28. Plumwood herself argues that difference need not, and should not, be viewed in this way. Nevertheless, she notes that “residues of dualism are often remarkably persistent”. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 59–68, esp. 59.

29. See discussion in Allen Dwight Callahan, Richard A. Horsley, and Abraham Smith, “Introduction: The Slavery of New Testament Studies”, *Semeia* 83/84 (1998) 1–15; Richard A. Horsley, “The Slave Systems of Classical Antiquity and Their Reluctant Recognition by Modern Scholars”, *Semeia* 83/84 (1998) 19–66; Elizabeth Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound: Women, Theology and the Parable of the Pounds in the Gospel of Luke* (London: T & T Clark International, 2007) 11–18; and Elizabeth Dowling, “Slave Parables in the Gospel of Luke”, *Australian Biblical Review* 56 (2008): 62–3. Note, also, that the capture of Jerusalem itself in 70CE is estimated to have “produced 97,000 captives”, those over the age of

The former view emphasises the way in which sometimes slaves were materially better off than those of the free poor who were unable to sustain themselves without the benefit of a patron or master; that slaves could be manumitted; and that some (elite) slaves were given significant leeway to act on behalf of their masters.³⁰ The latter view focuses on the social effects of enslavement through the denial of liberty insured through legitimised violence; the forced displacement of slaves from their homelands; the systematic subordination of the will of the slave to that of the master; and the availability of the slave's body for the master's purposes.³¹ Freedom from slavery was the prerogative of masters rather than slaves.³² Moreover, the dislocation of persons from their homelands and social groups, through a slave trade fed by war and its accompanying imperial expansion, and the location of slaves outside the category of honour, contributed to the "social death" of slaves.³³

In this imperial framework, the slave appears to have had no agency other than that the master afforded. The complex processes of more-than-human agency occurrent in the tasks the slave carried out in support of the master, for example, in the labours of agriculture, hospitality, child care, and business seem to have been enacted in response to, and as an extension of, the agency of the master.³⁴ The

seventeen becoming slaves. See F. Hugh Thompson, *The Archaeology of Greek and Roman Slavery* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 2003), 35.

30. See, James Malcolm Arlandson, *Women, Class, and Society in Early Christianity: Models from Luke-Acts* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 98; cf. Horsley, "The Slave Systems", 55-8.

31. Callahan, Horsley and Smith, "Introduction", 2. See also, Arlandson, *Women, Class, and Society*, 99-102; K. R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (Bruxelles: Latomus revue d'études Latinus, 1984) 123, 143; Dowling, "Slave Parables", 62-3; Horsley, "The Slave Systems", 36-55.

32. For example, rather than being a benign release for the benefit of the slave, in the Roman empire manumission may free the master from the economic cost of supporting an aging slave, enabling the purchase of a younger, stronger one. Callahan, Horsley and Smith, "Introduction", 6-7.

33. The term "social death" as applied to slavery comes from Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) esp. 5-8, 35-76; see also, Horsley, "The Slave Systems", 28-31; Jane Webster, "Less Beloved: Roman Archaeology, Slavery and the Failure to Compare", *Archaeological Dialogues* 15, 2 (2008) 103-23, esp. 103, 108.

34. Considering the socio-cultural and historical background to the representation of slaves in the New Testament, J. Albert Harrill argues that in a Greek framework considered from the perspective of the master slaves were without agency, but in a Roman one certain slaves could act with limited agency on behalf of their masters. J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006) 18-21. Mitzi Smith refers to this limited agency as "psuedo-agency"; see Mitzi J. Smith, "Review of J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006)", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, 1 (2007) 219-23; see 221. Referring

more-than-human co-agents of slaves, tools, animals, plants, and matter became subsumed to one another as instruments responsive to the free command of the master. But because of this, masters were alienated not only from the slaves on whom they depended, but also from the more-than-human context of the slaves' action on their behalf. Nevertheless, slaves also acted on their own behalf. As Jane Webster comments, the "social death" of the slave may be "something wished for by slave-owners but impossible to achieve ... because slaves fought successfully against efforts to suppress their humanity, often using material culture in that struggle".³⁵ Thus, the agency of slaves may have included not only the more obvious exercises of opposition, such as running away and open revolt, and instances of theft and violence, but also resistance to their subsumption to the culture of the masters, through the more-than-human community of action that produced the slaves' own material culture however limited this may have been.³⁶

Slaves in the Gospel of Luke

On the whole, Luke's portrayal of the institution of Roman slavery is also ambiguous. J. Albert Harrill contends that in the depiction of slaves in Luke-Acts (esp. in Acts 12:14-16 and Luke 16:1-8), Luke does not subvert slavery, but rather reinforces the stereotype of the slave through parody.³⁷ Elizabeth Dowling argues that at times Luke's parables are "texts of terror", presenting as ordinary the control of slaves through violence (for example, 12:41-48); at other times Luke subverts the master/slave paradigm (for example, 12:37).³⁸

While the widespread practice of chattel slavery in the first century CE Roman empire stands behind references to slavery in the Second Testament, when considering the Gospel of Luke, particularly the

particularly to Aristotle, Elizabeth Dowling offers a helpful consideration of the varieties and difference in agency between slaves and women in ancient Greek contexts. Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound*, 11-18.

35. Webster, "Less Beloved", 108. Based on archaeological work on more recent slave cultures, Webster argues that archaeologists need to consider the material culture of ancient slaves to decide the extent to which they attempted to keep alive something of their own cultural heritage within their displacement and subordination as slaves. Webster, "Less Beloved", 116-17.

36. Allen Dwight Callahan and Richard A. Horsley, "Slave Resistance in Classical Antiquity", *Semeia* 83/84 (1998) 133-51; and particularly on slave revolts around the first century CE, Thompson, *The Archaeology of Greek and Roman Slavery*, 263-5. That masters were concerned about the capacity of their slaves for resistant agency is shown by Roman references to the slave as enemy. See Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament*, 147-53; Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*, 113. Although it refers to an earlier time, see also, Paul Millett, "Aristotle and Slavery in Athens", *Greece and Rome* 54, 2 (2007) 178-209, esp. 208.

37. Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament*, 59-83.

38. Dowling, "Slave Parables".

references to ἄφεσις in 4:18–19, biblical and Hellenised Jewish approaches to slavery must also be taken into account.³⁹ Of particular note for an understanding of forgiveness (as ἄφεσις) in Luke is the question of captivity related to debt. Gregory Chirichigno's discussion of debt slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East highlights a difference between institutionalised chattel slavery and practices of debt slavery and forced labour, as represented in the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁰ While some scholars assume that debt slavery existed in the Roman empire, others claim that debt slavery was not practised in Second Testament times.⁴¹ Brent Kinman argues rather that Hellenistic practices of imprisonment and corporal punishment for unpaid debt stand behind the Lukan usage of the imagery of debt (esp. 12:57–59).⁴² Whether or not debt led to slavery or other forced labour in Luke's time, the paradigm of debt as a form of captivity resonates with the wider system of oppression in the Roman empire, and the denial of agency, for which the institution of chattel slavery forms a limit case.

The Lukan usage of captivity, debt and slave imagery is complicated, however, by earlier biblical usage, not only in its relation to the institutions of debt- and chattel-slavery, but as descriptive of relationship with God. In his analysis of the Jewish background to Paul's use of slave metaphors, John Byron gives particular attention to the Jewish "slave of God" tradition.⁴³ The images of slavery that appear in Luke's gospel, especially in relation to faithful characters such as Mary of Nazareth (1:38, 48) and Simeon (2:29), are probably also indebted to this "slave of God" tradition. For Byron, the "slave of God" tradition has four key elements: firstly, faithfulness to the one God of Israel; secondly, an assumption that the socio-economic situation of slavery was unavoidable, and slavery to God was preferable to slavery to human oppressors; thirdly, corporately and nationally Israel was identified as God's slave; fourthly, through the

39. Benjamin G. Wright III, "Ebd/doulos: Terms and Social Status in the Meeting of Hebrew Biblical and Hellenistic Roman Culture", *Semeia* 83/84 (1998) 83-111. On major similarities (and differences of nuance) between slavery in Jewish, Greek and Roman discourses and practices during Hellenistic and Roman times, see Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) esp. 380-92.

40. Gregory C. Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (JSOT Supplement Series 141; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), esp. 145-7.

41. See, for example, Peter Temin, "The Labor Market of the Early Roman Empire", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34, 4 (2004) 513-38, see 524; Brent Kinman, "Debtor's Prison and the Future of Israel (Luke 12:57-59)", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42, 3 (1999) 411-25, see 419.

42. Kinman, "Debtor's Prison", esp. 418. I am not sure that Hellenistic practices can be so readily distinguished from Roman ones in the context of Roman imperialism.

43. John Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

designation “slave of God”, Israel was identified with its national history in the Exodus story.⁴⁴ Thus, the Deuteronomic imperative to just relations, “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt ...”, resonates in the description of Israel as “slave of God” (Deut 5:15). While in the biblical framework Luke inherits, agency is ultimately situated with God who affords Israel agency, Israel’s agency (exercised as obedience or resistance) can only be effected in the more-than-human framework of a social justice inextricably tied to the land (see, for example, Deut 16:20; 28:1–19).⁴⁵

FORGIVENESS AS FREEDOM IN LUKE

This intersection of land and justice finds a particular focus in Leviticus 25:8–55 which informs the programmatic proclamation of Luke 4:18–19:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim
release (ἀφῆσιν) to the captives,
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free (ἐν ἀφέσει),
to proclaim the year (ἐνιαυτὸν) of the Lord’s favour
(4:18–19 NRSV; cf. Isa 58:6 and 61:1–2).⁴⁶

The key word here is ἀφῆσις – which also occurs at several other places in Luke (1:77; 3:3; 4:18; 5:20–21, 23–24; 7:47–49; 11:4; 12:10; 17:3–4; 23:34; 24:47) – and its related verb ἀφίημι (4:39; 5:11; 6:42; 8:51; 9:60; 10:30; 12:39; 13:8; 13:35; 17:34–35; 18:16; 18:28–29; 19:44; 21:6) referring to liberation, and more generally allowing, letting be and letting go, even leaving.⁴⁷ More particularly ἀφίημι is one of the two verbs used for “to forgive”. The other, ἀπολύω (2:29; 6:37; 8:38; 9:12; 13:12; 14:4; 16:18;

44. Byron, *Slavery Metaphors*, 58–9.

45. See Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*. Second edn. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) 56–62.

46. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (New York: Doubleday, 1981) 529. Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 210. As E. Earle Ellis notes, the “speaker in Isaiah...with whom Jesus identifies himself, is ‘the servant of the Lord’”. E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, softback edn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 97.

47. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, second edn; translated, revised and augmented by William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) 125–6 (hereafter BAGD).

23:16, 18, 20, 22, 25), has a similar range of meaning.⁴⁸ Etymologically, forgiveness as ἄφεσις is related to freedom from captivity and oppression.

In the Septuagint, ἐνιαυτὸς ἀφέσεως σημασία αὕτη (Lev 25:10), the cycle (year) or extended time of this signalling (or commanding) of liberty designates what has come to be known as the Jubilee, described in Leviticus 25:8–55 as occurring in the fiftieth cycle or year. Here ἄφεσις interrupts the usual social cycles with freedom upon the land/earth for all its inhabitants (ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς πᾶσιν τοῖς κατοικοῦσιν αὐτήν; Lev 25:10 LXX). Agricultural labour is suspended (Lev 25:11) and from the open country (ἀπὸ τῶν πεδίων) the people are to eat the land's products (τὰ γενήματα αὐτῆς; Lev 25:12). Moreover, ἄφεσις extends to the way the people buy and sell the land and its produce; the Jubilee interrupts the capacity for anyone to own the land (Lev 25:13–17). On the principle that the land belongs to YHWH (Lev 25:23), the people are tenants who must keep the land (Lev 25:23–24) in such a way that they enable the divine blessing to be effective in the season of Jubilee (Lev 25:18–22). They must provide for the redemption of the land (Lev 25:24–28), so that all can return to their ancestral holdings as to a gift. In this dispensation of liberation (ἄφεσις), kin who fall into difficulty are not to be treated as slaves, but to be paid workers, who are released from the authority of the house in the Jubilee, returning to their ancestral holdings (Lev 25:40–41).⁴⁹

In Luke this Jubilee obligation toward kin comes under the influence of the redefinition of neighbour in the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25–37), where the neighbour is the other who enacts divine mercy.⁵⁰ The interruption of social cycles signalled by ἄφεσις plays out in the Lukan motif of reversal. Even as it assumes a hierarchy of master over slave, the Gospel of Luke undermines the master/slave relation, through a series of reversals integral to the programme of the gospel (1:46–55; 6:20–26; 16:19–31).⁵¹ While in the Magnificat, God appears as the primary agent of reversal (Mary celebrates God's doings in 1:51–53), in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the reversal of fortunes occurs through the mediation of angels (16:22), a “great chasm” reflecting the social chasm between the two men (16:25–26),

48. BAGD 96.

49. The servant of God tradition underlies this principle (Lev 25:42, 55). Nevertheless, problematically other peoples may be kept as slaves (Lev 25:44–46).

50. See Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel* (Strathfield NSW: St Pauls, 2000) 101; Elvey, *An Ecological Feminist Reading*, 242.

51. While at times these reversals seem to reinstate the master/slave, self/other, dynamic they are intended to replace, this is not the whole story. On the dual effect of these reversals, see, Mark Coleridge, “In Defence of the Other: Deconstruction and the Bible. [Applied to Luke's Infancy Narrative]”, *Pacifica* 5, 2 (1992) 123–44.

and as an effect of the rich man's neglectful exercise of his agency (16:19–21). In the Lukan beatitudes and woes, the agent of reversal is hidden in the passive, usually taken as code for divine agency. Read between the Magnificat and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the reversal of fortunes in Luke 6:20–26 may be understood in a wider framework of more-than-human agency, that is neither solely divine nor solely human, but describes the interplay of divine, human and other than human agents of blessing and woe.

A further clue to Luke's unsettling of a master/slave dynamic appears in chapter 12 where a master is depicted as serving his slaves:

"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves." (12:35–38, NRSV).

This unsettling of the master/slave dynamic reappears in the context of Jesus' final meal with his disciples before his arrest, trial and execution, where he describes himself as "one who serves":

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." (22:24–27 NRSV).

An implicit assumption of the "naturalness" of the relation between slave and master becomes the background for a radical displacement of that relation, so that when in the narrative the disciple responds to the divine purpose in the character of a slave, she or he responds as the divine agent, Jesus, does himself.⁵² Luke's appeal to Isaiah in Jesus'

52. This assumption and unsettling of the master/slave relation may be part of a strategy of covert resistance to the imperial Roman social framework in which Luke and his community find themselves. See Gary Gilbert, "Luke-Acts and the Negotiation of Authority and Identity in the Roman World", in *The Multivalence of Biblical Texts and Theological Meanings*, ed. Christine Helmer and Charlene Higbe (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), esp. 100, 104; Brigitte Kahl, "Reading Luke against Luke: Non-Uniformity of Text, Hermeneutics of Conspiracy and the 'Scriptural Principle' in Luke 1", in Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Luke* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) esp. 75.

preaching in the synagogue in Nazareth (4:16–30) situates this theme of reversal at the heart of Jesus' message and mission, where the interruption of social relations signalled by ἄφεσις marks a divine visitation (1:77–78).

FORGIVENESS AND DIVINE NECESSITY IN LUKE

Luke understands the divine visitation (1:68–79; 19:44), in both the advent of Jesus and the reign of God which Jesus preaches and enacts, within the framework of a divine necessity (δεῖ) having the character of a gift. The Gospel of Luke refers five times to a divine necessity: 9:22; 17:25; 22:36–37; 24:5–7; 24:25–26. The divine necessity is an effect of divine providence, which in Luke is neither fully identifiable with Greek notions of fate (that is, of events as wholly determined without the effect of human will or action) nor with Jewish scriptural notions of divine election.⁵³ For Charles Cosgrove the divine δεῖ points to God's plan or purpose in history, calling forth a response.⁵⁴ Although understood to be free, human responsiveness to (and cooperation with) the divine purpose, is likened to that of a slave (for example, 1:38, 17:10).⁵⁵ However, frequently a coincidence exists between divine call and human response. Ensuring the divine plan, the divine necessity signals a co-agency between God and humans in the freedom of human response to the divine purpose, even where this response is a refusal.⁵⁶ Moreover, the divine δεῖ continually returns "to surprise or interrupt history".⁵⁷

This continual, surprising return or interruption suggests that the divine necessity shares in the character of the gift. While in Luke gifts are part of a circle of exchange that ensures the social – marked by the

53. Charles H. Cosgrove, "The Divine Δεῖ in Luke-Acts", *Novum Testamentum* 26 (1984) 168-90; see also Mark Reasoner, "The Theme of Acts: Institutional History or Divine Necessity in History?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118, 4 (1999) 635-59; Elvey, *An Ecological Feminist Reading*, 97.

54. Cosgrove, "The Divine Δεῖ".

55. Cf. John T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 177-78.

56. This is particularly evident in the passion predictions (esp. 9:22; 17:25) where the rejection by the religious authorities that leads to Jesus' death (and for Luke also the destruction of Jerusalem, 19:41-44) is co-agential with the divine necessity. The point is a subtle one: while there is for Luke an inevitability to the divine purpose, nonetheless this does not render human acceptance or rejection of that purpose, and hence human response, irrelevant. But it does suggest that the divine necessity has a resilience that is not destroyed by human intransigence or refusal.

57. Robert Brawley argues that this capacity to surprise adds complexity to a Lukan characterisation of divine superiority with respect to changing circumstances. Robert L. Brawley, *Centering on God: Method and Message in Luke-Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990) 123-4.

triple obligation to give, to receive, and to return – they are also ambiguous, and can potentially escape the circle of reciprocity.⁵⁸ The cycle of the gift also bears an uncanny logic of credit for credit and debt for debt (8:18; 19:26), suggesting an excess in the divine gift, which must be expected or received, but which can be turned into a metaphorical “black hole”, swallowing the gift if expectation or reception fails.⁵⁹

For Derrida, the sociality of the gift – a more-than-human community of action in which the social is maintained through exchange of gifts, giving credit for credit – is unsettled by the unconditional character of the gift in excess of the circle of exchange.⁶⁰ As John Caputo explains, this excessive character of the gift does not escape the circle of exchange; rather it stretches the circle so that it opens to an interruption or visitation by what Derrida calls “the impossible”.⁶¹ In ἄφεςις Luke’s divine visitation can be understood as having the excessive character of Derrida’s “the impossible”. Where the land and its people are subject to imperial Rome, forgiveness, metaphorically (and perhaps also literally) for Luke a release from the oppression (of debt), is an integral part of this visitation.⁶² In this context of military and economic captivity, slavery, with its denial or diminishment of agency, is a paradigm of oppression undone by the Lukan divine visitation.⁶³

58. Gary Stansell, “Gifts, Tributes, and Offerings” in Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina and Gerd Theissen (eds.), *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) 349-64, esp. 360; see also, Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D Halls (London: Routledge, 1990).

59. For an alternate reading of Luke 19:11-27, see Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound*, and Merrill Kitchen, “The Parable of the Pounds: A Reading of Luke 19:11-28 within the Social and Narrative Framework of the Gospel of Luke” M. Theol. thesis (Melbourne College of Divinity, April 1993).

60. Derrida, *Given Time*, esp. 7.

61. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 161, 181.

62. In Luke’s socio-cultural context, captives of war became Roman slaves; those oppressed by the economic system as debtors often become captive themselves, and in biblical memory and perhaps in Luke’s time itself, debtors could sell themselves or members of their household into slavery to service their debts. Ivoni Richter Reimer, “The Forgiveness of Debts in Matthew and Luke: For an Economy without Exclusions”, in Ross Kinsler and Gloria Kinsler (eds.), *God’s Economy: Biblical Studies from Latin America* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005) 154-6. See also, Richard A. Horsley and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 28.

63. Drawing on Robert Tannehill and Brendan Byrne, Elizabeth Dowling notes the significance of the repetition, suggesting that release – understood in terms of social justice, hospitality to the poor, and forgiveness – is central to the programme of Luke’s gospel. Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound*, 102-3; see also, Byrne, *The Hospitality of God*, 45-53; Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts. Vol. 1*, 62, 65.

FORGIVENESS AND AGENCY: LUKE 7:36–50

In the overall framework of Luke, the divine visitation which Brendan Byrne describes as the “hospitality of God” is experienced through encounter with Jesus.⁶⁴ Such meetings, often within the setting of a meal (for example, 5:27–32; 19:1–10), have an uncanny character in that the one who welcomes finds her- or him-self already and in turn the subject of a divine welcome, that is marked by compassion and forgiveness (see 7:11–17; 10:29–37; 15:11–32; 7:36–50).⁶⁵ In Luke 7:36–50, divine hospitality arrives as a forgiveness that has already taken place. A contrast is set up between a woman and the putative host Simon who, like the narrator, regards her as a sinner (7:37, 39). The woman arrives and in a highly eroticised gesture anoints Jesus’ feet, washes them with her tears and wipes them with her unbound hair (7:37–38).⁶⁶ Answering Simon’s unspoken criticism of her and more particularly of Jesus’ allowing her to touch him (7:39), Jesus tells a parable concerning a creditor’s release of two debtors (7:40–41), challenging Simon to see her differently (7:44) as one released of a great debt who acts in response to her experience (7:42–43).⁶⁷ Forgiveness is like the release (by a creditor) of a debtor from her or his debt (see, in particular 7:41–49). The verb χαρίζομαι conveys the cancelling of the debt; the form ἐχαρίσατο is aorist and suggests an act of grace or gift (7:42–43).⁶⁸ The implication is that in relation to the divine, the sinner is in a state analogous to debt; the release from this state, ἡ ἄφεσις, forgiveness, annuls the contract of (giving) credit and (receiving) debt, by enacting a gracious return of credit to the debtor, a gift of credit in place of debt.

Following the parable, Jesus sets out in detail the contrast between the failures of Simon’s and the enactment of the woman’s hospitality (7:44–46). Her agency as one who has loved much is the mark of a forgiveness that has already arrived (7:47–48). Moreover, her agency occurs as a process of anointing, where the woman, the ointment, the

64. Byrne, *The Hospitality of God*, esp. 73.

65. Byrne, *The Hospitality of God*, 237–42; Judith Lieu, *The Gospel of Luke* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1997) 52; Elvey, *An Ecological Feminist Reading*, 207–8, 240–1.

66. Elaine M. Wainwright, “Unbound Hair and Ointmented Feet: An Ecofeminist Reading of Luke 7.36–50”, in Natalie K. Watson and Stephen Burns (eds.), *Exchanges of Grace: Essays in Honour of Ann Loades* (London: SCM, 2008) 178–89.

67. The parallel with the parable implies that she acts in response to a forgiveness already experienced. See Byrne, *The Hospitality of God*, 75; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 306–7; David A. Neale, “None but the Sinners”: *Religious Categories in the Gospel of Luke*, JSNT Supplement Series 58 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991) 146.

68. BAGD 876–7.

space of anointing, and Jesus (as active recipient) form the more-than-human community of her action.⁶⁹ As the parable indicates, this community of action can be understood as an effect of grace. While we do not know what is the woman's debt or what has been her capacity for agency in relation to this oppression, the story suggests that in understanding her debt to have been cancelled she is enabled to act with great love. Here Luke is less interested in rules that may govern the proper bounds of love; rather her agency appears as the unbound eros of her hospitality in the more-than-human community of its enactment. As gracious interruption, forgiveness (as ἄφεσις) enables her loving exercise of agency.

FORGIVENESS ECOLOGICALLY

Paul Ricoeur writes:

Forgiveness is, in the first place, something that is begged from others, especially from the victim. And whoever sets out to beg forgiveness has to be prepared to meet with refusal. To enter the realm of forgiveness is to accept a confrontation with the always-open possibility of the unforgiveable. Forgiveness begged for is not forgiveness that is due. It is in the price of these restrictions that the greatness of forgiveness manifests itself. In it comes to light what one might call the economy of the gift, if one characterizes the latter in terms of the logic of superabundance which distinguishes love from the logic of the reciprocity of justice.⁷⁰

For our contemporary situation of ecological distress, the question becomes who, if anyone, forgives our ecological destructiveness? What is such forgiveness *for* ecologically?

Perhaps Christians are not at a point where we can appeal to a visitation of divine forgiveness, precisely because as Christians we hardly yet know how to speak of God in a deeply ecologically meaningful way. Nor do we in the humanities know how to speak ecologically of the good or the ground, concepts which postmodernism has so unsettled for us. A key shift of focus is to affirm that human moral agency, like divine agency, always occurs within a more-than-

69. See Wainwright, "Unbound Hair and Ointmented Feet", on the agency of the woman and the ointment. Also, on the woman's agency in unbinding her hair, see Charles H. Cosgrove, "A Woman's Unbound Hair in the Greco-Roman World, with Special Reference to the Story of The 'SINFUL WOMAN' In Luke 7:36-50", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124, 4 (2005) 675-92.

70. Paul Ricoeur, "Can Forgiveness Heal?" in Hendrik J. Opdebeeck (ed.), *The Foundation and Application of Moral Philosophy: Ricoeur's Ethical Order, Morality and the Meaning of Life* 10 (Leuven: Peeters, 2000) 35.

human context of enactment, a more-than-human community of action. How we are to understand this embedded agency needs to be considered on a case by case basis, through careful and engaged observation of the more-than-human subject, in the mode of openness to learning about the agency of the other and the more-than-human processes of our own actions.⁷¹

At one level a forgiveness that is already given could be understood as being simply the hospitality that by and large the other than human offers the human species.⁷² We might allow this to act as grace, for an ecologically attentive human agency that returns hospitality to the other. At another level we might understand that such forgiveness, whether situated in the more-than-human hospitality that many in the west have wrongly assumed as a right rather than a gift, or in a relationship with a divine that takes the part of the oppressed, gives us freedom to act otherwise.

Another aspect of forgiveness presents itself to those who have long lived attentive to their other than human companions and ecological habitat (*ecos*), that toward which Derrida points us: forgiving the unforgivable, for example, the wanton placing of profit over more-than-human lives and communities, the multiple economic and political failures to protect other than humans. Can we forgive? Is this ethical at all? In such cases, can forgiveness free the other human to act with ecological sensitivity and grace?

In the framework of a divine visitation marked by ἄφεσις, forgiveness in Luke graciously interrupts destructive social cycles marked by the master/slave paradigm. Without denying the problematic aspects of Luke's slave imagery, his multivalent representation of slavery might prompt us to recall the multiple ways in which our own lack of agency in economic systems of global consumerist capital and in relations shaped by a kyriarchal imaginary (including in many churches) affects our treatment of more-than-human others.⁷³ Ricoeur writes that forgiveness "belongs to the poetics of existence" which "exercises an influence over politics".⁷⁴ Luke's

71. For Plumwood, agency needs to be considered on a case by case basis, through careful observation of the more-than-human subject. Email communication 21 November 2007.

72. The question of damage done to humans by the other than human is beyond the scope of the current article. However, within the logic of mastery Plumwood critiques, the woman stands both with Earth others as oppressed and with humans as valued above other animals, plants, and systems. By analogy with Luke 7:36-50, the grace of forgiveness may make room, as Plumwood did, for a crocodile to exercise its own agency within its own material context, as free as possible, from human determinations.

73. On a kyriarchal imaginary, see above n. 24.

74. Ricoeur, "Can Forgiveness Heal?", 35-6.

understanding of forgiveness suggests a “poetics of existence” in which grace is the capacity of things to shift toward freedom, not the freedom of Roman masters in relation to slaves, but the freedom to act as we are. In our own context, this may be a freedom to know ourselves as participants in a more-than-human *ecos* where we continue to learn what it means to exercise our co-agency well.