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FORGIVING SINS AT A PHARISEE'S TABLE: LUKE 7:36–50 AND THE MISSION OF
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

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Table fellowship with Jesus in the Gospel of Luke tends to mark a significant encounter in the lives of people. It leaves both Jesus's fellow guests and hosts with profound insights into the identity of Jesus and the purpose of his ministry. Among the Gospels, Luke's account shows the strongest emphasis on the mission of Jesus as bringing the fulfillment of a divine plan. The setting of this fulfillment is ordinary table fellowship that tends to reveal extraordinary realities about sin and salvation. Luke 7:36–50 is certainly no exception to this. At this occasion, Jesus, a Pharisee, named Simon, and notorious sinner come together under the same roof. This paper demonstrates how this pericope reverses the misconception of the Pharisee about Jesus's prophetic identity by presenting him as the Messiah whose mission is to bring God's people "the forgiveness of their sins" by his own divine right (1:77). When seen in this way, the passage at hand is an integral part of the Lukan theme of fulfillment (1:1) as realized in Jesus's redemptive mission to sinners. For a proper appreciation of this passage and to show its significance to this Gospel's overall message, the following Lukan emphases need to be considered: the theme of the "sinner" in this Gospel, the forgiveness of sins as constitutive for Jesus's saving mission, and the Messianic fulfillment of his mission and as it relates to the two former themes. These emphases help to appreciate how Luke 7:36–50 contributes to the mission of Jesus in this Gospel as both accomplishing and reversing redemptive expectations.

THE LUKAN CONTEXT: RELEVANT THEMES

The Lukan Theme of ἁματωλός

Of all the four canonical Gospels, the "sinner" (ἁματωλός) is most prominent in the Gospel of Luke.¹ Luke's sondergut that mentions ἁματωλός is important for his distinct message on Jesus's relationship with sinners. More than the other Gospels, the Evangelist often combines sinners with another related category, namely, tax-collectors (οἱ τελῶναι καὶ οἱ ἁματωλοί). In Luke's account of the calling of Simon Peter, the first disciple, Peter prostrates himself before Jesus after a miraculous catch of fish with the words, "Ἐξελθε ἀπ' ἐμοῦ, ὅτι ἀνήρ

¹ Raw data serves as best clue to this: ἁματωλός is mentioned fourteen times by Luke and in most instances, the other Gospels do not include those passages. For more data see Dwayne H. Adams, *The Sinner in Luke*, ETSMS (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2008), xi–xii.

ἁμαρτωλός εἰμι, κύριε” (Luke 5:8).² While the term ἁμαρτωλός is often bound up with Jesus’s salvific mission, Luke 13:2 demonstrates how Jesus considers human tragedies as eschatological warning signs of a future judgment that call for repentance in light of humanity’s universal sinfulness; he is asking his listeners rhetorically, “Δοκεῖτε ὅτι οἱ Γαλιλαῖοι οὗτοι ἁμαρτωλοὶ παρὰ πάντας τοὺς Γαλιλαίους ἐγένοντο, ὅτι ταῦτα πεπόνθασιν;” The three ‘lost–found’ parables in Luke 15 are set in the context of “οἱ τελῶναι καὶ οἱ ἁμαρτωλοὶ” drawing near to Jesus (v. 1) and proclaim the joy in heaven “ἐπὶ ἐνὶ ἁμαρτωλῷ μετανοοῦντι” (v. 7, cf. v. 10), which gives rise to Pharisaical complaints: “Οὗτος ἁμαρτωλὸς προσδέχεται καὶ συνεσθίει αὐτοῖς” (v. 2). Another juxtaposition between a Pharisee and a ἁμαρτωλός takes place in Luke 18. While the Pharisee can only thank God that he is not like the ἁμαρτωλοί, the figure who is aware of his existential need for grace identifies himself as sinful: “Ὁ θεός, ἰλάσθητί μοι τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ” (v. 13). Finally, Luke 7:36–50 itself, as we will see, is part of this Lukan material. These examples are not exhaustive of the author’s usage of the term; the mentioned pericopes, however, are most distinct of his presentation of sinners and salvation. It remains to capture the meaning of the Luke’s ἁμαρτωλός.

There is no scholarly consensus on the exact definition of ἁμαρτωλός in Luke. Dwayne H. Adams has summarized the main developments in the interpretive history of the term.³ Although it is impossible to present a full-range survey of the state of scholarship on this question, it will be helpful to understand the main contributions and use them for a closer study of our passage.⁴ As Adams shows, the long-held idea that ἁμαρτωλός stands for someone who is simply morally wicked has become much more differentiated and qualified since at least the nineteenth century. A closer look at ancient rabbinical sources and the New Testament’s Jewish context expanded knowledge about first-century Palestinian culture. Unearthing rabbinical materials shifted the focus towards the Pharisees’s own perspective. From the vantage point of the Pharisees, those who were known to be ἁμαρτωλός caused a threat to their own religious purity. An association with sinners would potentially ruin their moral reputation. Joachim Jeremias has further elaborated on the Pharisaical perspective and pointed out that the way the

² All emphases in Biblical quotations in this study are added. To improve readability, I have omitted to mention this in every single reference.

³ Adams, *Sinner in Luke*, 1–20.

⁴ Another helpful survey of scholarship can be found in Graig L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus’ Meals with Sinners*, NSBT 19 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 23–26.

Gospels present ἀμαρτωλοί suggests a narrower definition. Jeremias seeks to explain who was counted among the ἀμαρτωλοί from the perspective of the people rather than from just the Pharisees. Based on Mishnah sources that tell us about the social standing of different professions, Jeremias concludes that sinners were either known for an immoral lifestyle or involved in dishonorable professions.⁵ Jeremias's analysis further states that in contrast to this narrow circle of people known as sinful, the Pharisaical definition of a ἀμαρτωλός is much broader; to the Pharisees, the common people⁶ are morally despicable and therefore cause a threat. To Jeremias, the narrower definition remains the crucial one.

E.P. Sander's New Testament scholarship gave rise to a significant move towards seeing Jesus in the context of first-century Judaism. According to Sanders, ἀμαρτωλός must be understood on legalistic rather than ritualistic grounds; the Pharisees rejected ἀμαρτωλοί for their refusal to keep the moral demands of the law. A more recent alternative to the historical identification of the term is offered by a study through the lens of literary criticism, chiefly reflected in David A. Neale's contribution, which tries to detach the Lukan sinner figure from a concrete historical idea and define it as a literary device. Despite the benefit of literary interpretation, a detachment from historical context seems to disregard Luke's own self-understanding as historian.⁷ A more recent contribution to the theme comes from Sławomir Szkredka who makes use of narrative criticism to show that the concept of sinner in Luke cannot be reduced to those passages that mention the term. Rather, the reader's pre-existing notions and the way the narrator shapes the reader's assumptions about what constitutes sinfulness need to be taken into account. In other words, the characterization of sinfulness through narrative

⁵ "In der Wendung 'Zöllner und Sünder' sind mit den 'Sündern' teils Leute gemeint, deren unmoralischer Lebenswandel bekannt war—wie Ehebrecher, Dirnen, Mörder, Räuber, Betrüger—, teils Leute, die einen unehrenhaften Beruf ausübten." "Zöllner und Sünder," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 30 (1931): 300.

⁶ In rabbinical literature the term 'Am ha'aretz stood roughly for 'the people of the land' in contradistinction to the rabbinical elite. For a detailed study of the concept as part of a "vocabulary of orthodoxy" see Rocco Bernasconi, "Meanings, Function and Linguistic Usages of the Term 'am ha-aretz in the Mishnah," *Revue des Études Juives* 170 (2011): 399–428.

⁷ This self-understanding is nowhere made clearer than in the Prologue (1:1–4). Adams writes that, "Luke intends the reader to believe that he is reading history, not fiction. This suggests that for any proposed definition of the 'sinner' in Luke, one must ask if the proposal has support in the historical use of the term." *Sinner in Luke*, 83. See also the critique of Luke scholar Joel B. Green, "Book Review: *None but the Sinners: Religious Categories in the Gospel of Luke* (JSNT Supplement 58)." *Themelio* 18 (1993): n.p. Considering modern criticism that seeks to portray the New Testament authors as theological stylizers, I. Howard Marshall has argued comprehensively that Luke was both theologian and historian: *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, 3rd. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

development and setting each contribute to the sinner theme. Even if this approach runs the danger to underemphasize the historical context, this perspective can prove helpful, as will become clearer later on.⁸

To gain a proper redemptive-historical understanding of the theme we need to look at the most important historical sources for Luke's background, the Old Testament itself, as well as intertestamental Jewish literature. Several characteristics of the "sinner" against this background emerge from Adams's analysis. First of all, "basic to the understanding of the term 'sinner' is its association with guilt because of law-breaking,"⁹ which shows the obvious contrast to the "righteous" (cf. Ps 1). If Sanders is right about the law as the primary lens through which the Pharisees in Jesus's day judged who was considered a sinner and who was not, then this understanding would have been heavily rooted in the legal language of the Old Testament. Secondly, "Gentiles were sometimes designated 'sinners,'" especially in later intertestamental literature.¹⁰ Before all else, the "sinner" category is therefore a theological one as rooted in the revelation of God's law and judgement of God, whose wrath abides on sinners who fail to keep his law. This qualification is especially significant in light of scholarship's heavy emphasis on the social dimension of the term. To be sure, Luke does present ἀμαρτωλοί as those who are known as such by society. However, the theological meaning is one rooted in the history of the God of Israel.

Some concluding observations on the meaning of ἁμαρτωλός can be drawn. ἁμαρτωλός is primarily a socioreligious category for Luke. On the one hand, there certainly is a narrow definition, reflected in the way how the larger society would look at people notorious for their outstanding sinfulness. The Pharisaical perspective on the ἁμαρτωλός, however, seems more crucial in the Gospel account; in fact, it is this definition, as opposed to Jeremias's analysis, that we need to keep in mind to understand Luke's agenda and Jesus's mission. Luke 5:29–30 serves as a good example that undermines this point. As Levi, the tax-collector who just left everything to follow his new master, prepares a feast for Jesus in his house, we read: "καὶ ἦν ὄχλος πολὺς τελωνῶν καὶ ἄλλων οἱ ἦσαν μετ' αὐτῶν κατακείμενοι" (V. 29b). According to their custom, the Pharisees and scribes complain greatly about this. Yet they describe the "τελωνῶν καὶ ἄλλων"

⁸ Sławomir Szkredka, *Sinners and Sinfulness in Luke: A Study of Direct and Indirect References in the Initial Episodes of Jesus' Activity*, WUNT II 434 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

⁹ Adams, *Sinner in Luke*, 66.

¹⁰ Adams, *Sinner in Luke*, 67.

from their own perspective as “τελωνῶν καὶ ἁμαρτωλῶν” (V. 30b). When it comes to the subsequent usage of the term in the stories of Jesus’s encounters with ἁμαρτωλοί, Joel B. Green rightly states that, “Jesus’s antagonists introduce the term, so we must hear it from their perspective.”¹¹ Part of Luke’s depiction of Jesus’s activity is that he picks up on the pre-existing notions prevalent at the time to reverse them according to the Messiah’s saving mission. For understanding the meaning of forgiveness, both the Old Testament and theological as well as the socioreligious connotations of ἁμαρτωλός are important; thus, Jesus is understood as both the promised sin-forgiving Messiah and the one who indeed reverses the Pharisees’s ideas about how his Messiahship is revealed.

The Forgiveness of Sins in Light of Luke’s Emphasis on Fulfillment

Luke’s emphasis on salvation is noted by virtually all scholars who have traced the major Lukan themes.¹² This salvation does not occur without a context, but is set in the framework of a fulfillment, as the opening verses show. The Gospel’s introduction states the author’s purpose to “διῆγησιν περὶ τῶν ἐν ἡμῖν” (Luke 1:1). The term “πεπληροφορημένων” conveys the idea of “events brought to completion, namely the events leading to salvation,”¹³ which implies that salvation is realized in history. This legitimizes the narrator’s meticulous task of creating an account that faithfully hands down those events. In fact, the idea of bare historical data cannot be the sole means of bringing Theophilus “ἀσφάλειαν” about the content of faith in Jesus; it is rather the message conveyed by these historical facts.¹⁴ Further, “the passive form suggests that these are divine acts which God himself has promised and has now fully brought to pass, and the use of the perfect indicates that they are seen as a finished series in past time.”¹⁵ Divine agency within the realm of human history is undeniably affirmed in Luke’s Prologue. The overall

¹¹ Joel B. Green, *Conversion in Luke–Acts: Divine Action, Human Cognition, and the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademics, 2015), 107.

¹² For only a few examples see Robert J. Cara, “Luke,” in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016): 103–104; Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, NTT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 76–86; Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 172–190.

¹³ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 41.

¹⁴ Guy D. Nave, Jr., *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke–Acts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 12.

¹⁵ Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 41.

framework of the entire account is God's historical intervention; as John T. Squires writes, "Luke will build a case for viewing everything which he narrates as part of the overall plan of God."¹⁶ The crucial episodes that develop how this redemptive fulfillment is going to occur are the birth narratives of John and Jesus, the ministry of John, and Jesus's proclamation in Nazareth. These three scenes are therefore also important to understand how our passage functions within this historic-redemptive unfolding.

The birth of both John the Baptist and Jesus (Luke 1:5–2:38) are portrayed themselves as fulfillment of prophesy spoken by angelic beings but also as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Isaiah 40:3–5 is an important reference point for this promise–fulfillment structure, as it consists of a call to preparation by repentance and a promise of God's revelation: "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed" (Isiah 40:5). The first mentioning of forgiveness by Luke sets the paradigm for the divine forgiveness that Jesus is going to bring to God's people. In looking to John the Baptist as "προφήτης ὑψίστου," Zechariah's prophecy foretells that John will go before Jesus to bring to the people "τοῦ δοῦναι γινῶσιν σωτηρίας τῷ λαῷ αὐτοῦ ἐν ἀφέσει ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν," thereby marking forgiveness of sins as essential to Jesus's own ministry. John the Baptist's mission of revealing knowledge of salvation is introduced by a clear reference to Isaiah 40: "you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways" (Luke 1:76). Clearly, the identification of God's name, "Lord", with Jesus sheds light on who Luke is portraying in this prophesy.¹⁷ The Lukan post-resurrection account reflects the early announcement of forgiveness by Jesus's coming as fulfilling Luke 1:77. The key text is Jesus's commissioning of his disciples. Just as it was foretold of this prophet that he will bring forgiveness through his ministry while he was on earth, now his ascension into heaven was to be followed by the proclamation of his work as the divine means of forgiveness: "καὶ κηρυχθῆναι ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ μετάνοιαν εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν εἰς πάντα τὰ ἔθνη" (Luke 24:47). The crucial addition "ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ" shows that the availability of forgiveness is fully bound to the person of Jesus—both as the one who establishes the means for forgiveness as well as the one who offers it.

Luke 3 introduces the activity of John the Baptist as "proclaiming a baptism of

¹⁶ John T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke–Acts*, SNTSMS (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 31.

¹⁷ "'Lord' could only be understood as Yahweh. But the subsequent narrative has embodied a subtle shift in this identification, with the result that *God's* visitation is now understood to take form of the coming of *Jesus*—of whom the title 'Lord' is appropriate." Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 118 (emphasis original).

repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” His ministry is said to fulfill Isaiah 40:3–5, glimpses of which were already visible earlier. However, it is noteworthy that Luke includes the wider context of Isaiah 40. The result of the preparation for the Lord’s way is that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God,” fulfilling the promise to the Israelites in Isaiah 40:2. The message of repentance goes out to those who claim a special status because of their descent from Abraham, with a warning not to rely on outward ritualism, but also to tax collectors. This anticipates the future audience of the salvation message in this Gospel account: the whole spectrum, from those who are self-righteous to those already socially ostracized—both need to repent and be forgiven. This setting, as Adams puts it, “creates an attitude of Messianic expectation. ... John initiates a mission that will continue throughout Luke–Acts and reach out to the world.”¹⁸

If Luke 1:1–4 establishes the fulfillment of a divine plan as the framework for the entire Gospel, Luke 4:16–30 provides the key to this plan as realized in the person of Jesus and his *heilsgeschichtliche*¹⁹ mission. For the present study, Jesus’s emphasis on the release of a debt is particularly noteworthy. After the temptation in the wilderness, Jesus returns to his hometown Nazareth and reads an Old Testament passage in the synagogue. The reading is mainly drawn from Isaiah 61:1–2. Jesus proclaims himself as the Anointed One on whom the Spirit of the Lord rests and describes his ministry of proclaiming good news, proclaiming liberty, and recovering sight. What Jesus leaves out, however, is equally telling. Jesus does not mention Isaiah 61:2b (“to proclaim ... the day of vengeance of our God”) and adds Isaiah 58:6d (which literally reads “to send forth the oppressed in release”). The idea of ἄφεσις as of the release of a debt²⁰ is stressed in Jesus’s disclosure of his God-appointed mission. Considering the prophecies in Luke 1–2 and the ministry of John the Baptist, forgiveness has already been established as prominent theme in the prophetic ministry of Jesus. As the Old Testament background makes clear, “the text merges Jubilee and Sabbatical year texts ... to refer to the eschatological release of the last days.”²¹ Jesus comes to bring salvation by forgiveness, just as has been announced in Luke 1:77.

¹⁸ Adams, *Sinner in Luke*, 89.

¹⁹ Leon Morris gives a good reason for the usage of the term, “The word is not easy to translate into English, but it at least directs attention to Luke’s concern for history and his conviction that what God did in Jesus took place against a broad historical background.” *New Testament Theology*, 179 (see especially the footnote).

²⁰ Walter Bauer, *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur* (6th ed. Edited by Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1988), 352–353.

²¹ Adams, *Sinner in Luke*, 96.

The preceding context was one of announcement of forgiveness. John the Baptist called for repentance and pointed in his ministry to the fulfillment of forgiveness as a coming reality. At this point it is therefore right to ask, as Szkredka puts it, „if John ministered to sinners by calling them to repentance, how is Jesus’s ministry to them similar or different from John’s?”²² As Jesus encounters with sinners will show, he will bring forgiveness as a present reality to those who are the objects of his mission—namely, sinners.

LUKE 7:36–50 AND THE MISSION OF JESUS

Context: Luke 7:18–35

In the story preceding our passage the imprisoned John the Baptist receives Jesus’s clear answer to his question if he was truly the Coming One. Due to the ministry of Jesus, “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them” (Luke 7:22b). But Luke builds in a crucial assessment of the two kinds of people that make up John’s and Jesus’s audience. While the people, including the ostracized tax-collectors, receive and respond to the message positively, “the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves” (Luke 7:30).²³ This thematic context for the story of the sinful woman must not be dismissed for rightly understanding Luke’s point.²⁴ It creates the anticipation of a grand reversal. While we would expect the righteous to repent, and the sinner to be hard-hearted, just the opposite is true; “[t]his links the narrative to Luke’s theme of reversal introduced in the birth narrative.”²⁵ The following story will vividly exemplify this reversal.

²² Szkredka, *Sinners and Sinfulness in Luke*, 39.

²³ Marshall notices about Luke’s language, “βουλή, especially when qualified by τοῦ θεοῦ is Lukan...; it refers to God’s plan of salvation, and here the use stresses that the activity of John and Jesus was the outworking of a divine purpose.” *The Gospel of Luke*, 299. See also Richard C. Bligh who puts it this way, “John’s general call to repentance and baptism was not regarded as applicable to themselves and so they treated God’s plan with contempt.” *An Exegetical Summary of Luke 1–11* (Dallas, Texas: SIL International), 308.

²⁴ John J. Kilgallen, “Forgiveness of Sins (Luke 7:36–50),” *Novum Testamentum* 14 (1998): 115.

²⁵ Adams, *Sinner in Luke*, 140.

The Text of Luke 7:36–50²⁶

36 Ἦρώτα δέ τις αὐτὸν τῶν Φαρισαίων ἵνα φάγη μετ’ αὐτοῦ, καὶ εἰσελθὼν εἰς τὸν οἶκον τοῦ Φαρισαίου κατεκλίθη. 37 καὶ ἰδοὺ γυνὴ ἥτις ἦν ἐν τῇ πόλει ἀμαρτωλός, καὶ ἐπιγνοῦσα ὅτι κατάκειται ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ τοῦ Φαρισαίου, κομίσασα ἀλάβαστρον μύρου 38 καὶ στᾶσα ὀπίσω παρὰ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ κλαίουσα τοῖς δάκρυσιν ἤρξατο βρέχειν τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ καὶ ταῖς θριξίν τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτῆς ἐξέμασσε καὶ κατεφίλει τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ καὶ ἤλειφεν τῷ μύρῳ. 39 ἰδὼν δὲ ὁ Φαρισαῖος ὁ καλέσας αὐτὸν εἶπεν ἐν ἑαυτῷ λέγων· οὗτος εἰ ἦν προφήτης, ἐγίνωσκεν ἂν τίς καὶ ποταπὴ ἢ γυνὴ ἥτις ἄπτεται αὐτοῦ, ὅτι ἀμαρτωλός ἐστιν. 40 Καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτόν· Σίμων, ἔχω σοί τι εἰπεῖν. ὁ δὲ· διδάσκαλε, εἰπέ, φησὶν. 41 δύο χρεοφειλέται ἦσαν δανιστῇ τινι· ὁ εἷς ὥφειλεν δηνάρια πεντακόσια, ὁ δὲ ἕτερος πεντήκοντα. 42 μὴ ἐχόντων αὐτῶν ἀποδοῦναι ἀμφοτέροις ἐχαρίσατο. τίς οὖν αὐτῶν πλεῖον ἀγαπήσει αὐτόν; 43 ἀποκριθεὶς Σίμων εἶπεν· ὑπολαμβάνω ὅτι ὃ τὸ πλεῖον ἐχαρίσατο. ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· ὀρθῶς ἔκρινας. 44 καὶ στραφεὶς πρὸς τὴν γυναῖκα τῷ Σίμωνι ἔφη· βλέπεις ταύτην τὴν γυναῖκα; εἰσῆλθὼν σου εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν, ὕδωρ μοι ἐπὶ πόδας οὐκ ἔδωκας· αὕτη δὲ τοῖς δάκρυσιν ἔβρεξέν μου τοὺς πόδας καὶ ταῖς θριξίν αὐτῆς ἐξέμαξε. 45 φίλημά μοι οὐκ ἔδωκας· αὕτη δὲ ἀφ’ ἧς εἰσῆλθον οὐ διέλιπεν καταφιλοῦσά μου τοὺς πόδας. 46 ἐλαίῳ τὴν κεφαλὴν μου οὐκ ἤλειψας· αὕτη δὲ μύρῳ ἤλειπεν τοὺς πόδας μου. 47 οὗ χάριν λέγω σοι, ἀφέωνται αἱ ἀμαρτίαι αὐτῆς αἱ πολλαί, ὅτι ἡγάπησεν πολὺ· ὃ δὲ ὀλίγον ἀφίεται, ὀλίγον ἀγαπᾷ. 48 εἶπεν δὲ αὐτῇ· ἀφέωνταί σου αἱ ἀμαρτίαι. 49 Καὶ ἤρξαντο οἱ συνανακείμενοι λέγειν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς· τίς οὗτός ἐστιν ὃς καὶ ἀμαρτίας ἀφήσιν; 50 εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς τὴν γυναῖκα· ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκέν σε· πορεύου εἰς εἰρήνην.

Exegetical Observations

The context of the scene at hand is that, “one of the Pharisees asked him [Jesus] to eat with him” (Lukas 7:36) The motives of the Pharisee are not clear, yet he seems to assume at least that his guest is a prophet with some kind of special standing.²⁷ Jesus’s table fellowship with a Pharisee shows, against certain expectations, his relatively good relationship with the religious

²⁶ All quotations from Luke 7:36–50 into English in the following section are my own translation. I have employed the text from the Nestle-Aland New Testament, which can be found in *Novum Testamentum Graece*, Nestle-Aland, 28th ed.

²⁷ Hans Drexler, “Die große Sünderin Lucas 7,36–50” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 59 (1968): 162.

leaders. Indeed, Luke is the only Gospel author who includes a meal with Jesus and a Pharisee.²⁸ The fact that the sinful woman rather than the Pharisee will show a right understanding of Jesus as the fulfillment of God's plan must not obscure the secondary insight into Jesus's ministry presented here: Jesus associates with both the religious ones, even though he proves them wrong, *and* the sinful outsider. What makes this table fellowship rather unexpected is the preceding passage that stated the Pharisees's rejection of God's purpose. This background creates the anticipation of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisee.

We do not learn anything about the conversation between host and guest before the woman appears.²⁹ The encounter between Jesus, his host, and the woman in the house of the Pharisee thus encapsulates the whole point of Luke's story, which is underlined by the "behold" in verse 37:

And behold, a woman who was in the city a sinner, knowing that they have lain down to eat in the house of the Pharisee, brought an alabaster of ointment. And as she stood behind his feet weeping, she started to wet his feet with her tears and to wipe it off with the hair of her head and she kissed his feet and anointed him with ointment.

The identification of the "woman who was in the city a sinner" leaves open the question if the author refers to her reputation in the eyes of the city or to her objective categorization as such. We see here the significance of our initial discussion on the meaning of the "sinner" category. Whose interpretation of "sinner" is determinative? It is indeed the Pharisee who claims the right to define the boundaries. The sinful woman stands in strong contrast to the host. The reversal that the only truly righteous in this story will bring is based on misled Pharisaical notions of who is justified and who is not. At the same time, Jesus's later act of forgiveness presupposes the woman's sin and guilt. As regards to Luke's syntax, this "tension between two possible readings of 'who was in the city a sinner' heightens the need of clarification."³⁰ The unclarity provides room for a change in perspective, for the sinner theme is already established as unfolding

²⁸ Green argues against the majority of scholars that this scene does in no way support the simple idea of a stereotypically grumpy Pharisee, since Jesus calls Simon by his name and tries to teach him, and Simon seems at least initially open to Jesus's claims; see *Theology of Luke*, 307–308; see also Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness*, 132. Others look at the ensuing conflict as basically inevitable and necessary; see John T. Carroll, "Luke's Portrayal of the Pharisees," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988), 604–605.

²⁹ According to Greene, "The woman arrives apparently before or simultaneously with Jesus," which is possible, given verse 45, *Gospel of Luke*, 309.

³⁰ Szkredka, *Sinners and Sinfulness in Luke*, 147.

redemptive reversal. There have been numerous suggestions to specify the nature of the woman's sinfulness.³¹ In spite of all speculation and the plausible case that prostitution is the most likely option, her exact sin remains unnamed and simply does not appear to be the main point. The woman's actions toward Jesus are highly inappropriate for several reasons. First of all, she allows herself to touch Jesus; secondly, she opens her hair, which, if not a sexual allusion, is at least an expression of indecorous intimacy in a setting like this.³² The obvious needs to be stated, namely, that Jesus accepts the woman's acts. Possibly, the weeping interrupted her intention to anoint Jesus. In light of what follows these may be tears of regret over her sin or tears of joy because of her great gratitude to Jesus.³³ This fundamentally defines the woman's attitude to Jesus; she puts all her hopes in him.

The Pharisee's response is initially an inward one: "Now the Pharisee who invited him, beholding [it], spoke to himself, saying, 'If this one were a prophet, he knew what kind of person the woman who is touching him is, for she is a sinner.'"³⁴ Simon knows the qualifying abilities of a prophet. A prophet would have known who this person is, for „ein Prophet muss einen Menschen durchschauen."³⁵ We can identify Simon's attitude to both Jesus and the woman by referring to the former as "this one" (οὗτος) and talking about the latter merely in terms of what "the kind of person" she is (ἄν τις καὶ ποταπὴ ἢ γυνὴ ἥ τις).³⁶ The host's conclusion provides the context for Jesus's reversal mission around the table. Jesus came to undo faulty concepts of who is counted sinner and who is counted righteous. While the reader knows from the preceding

³¹ Some have been very confident that the woman was a prostitute, see Greene, *Gospel of Luke*, 309; Walter Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* 2nd ed. THNT III (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1966), 170. Others have been more careful with this conclusion, see Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness*, 132–133; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Luke*, NTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 405.

³² Scholars and commentators disagree as to how erotic these actions would have been, see Szkredka, *Sinners and Sinfulness*, 147. One must take into consideration that the woman is weeping, which in and of itself makes erotic allusions in this context highly unlikely. Cf. François Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas (Lk 1, 1–9, 50)*, EKK III/1 (Zürich/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger/Neukirchener Verlag, 1989), 391.

³³ For a moving description of the woman's tears as caused by gratitude and joy rather than regret see Theodor Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Lucas*, 1st and 2nd ed. (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1913), 321–322.

³⁴ Some manuscripts have "the prophet" instead of "(a) prophet". However, as Blight points out, "GNT reads προφήτης '(a) prophet' with an A decision, indicating that the text is certain." See also Bovon, *Evangelium nach Lukas*, 392 (footnote 42). For the view that the Messianic prophet is in view here, see Grundmann, *Evangelium nach Lukas*, 171. What really matters about Simon's reasoning is his conclusion that Jesus simply cannot be a prophet since his behavior is irreconcilable with the Pharisee's expectation. Therefore, in his mind, he can obviously not be the ultimate eschatological prophet either.

³⁵ Grundmann, *Evangelium nach Lukas*, 171.

³⁶ Blight, *Exegetical Summary*, 318.

pericope (Luke 7:18–35) who is expected to be the object of salvation in the story, Simon will now learn about it within his own house.³⁷

Only in Jesus's direct discourse in verse 40 does the reader find out about the Pharisee's name: "And Jesus answered and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.'" There is a striking irony at play here. As Jesus perceives the thoughts of his host, he is proving his assumption about Jesus's fake prophethood wrong. This anticipates the even greater prophetic insight, which Simon does not see coming, as we read in the following verses:

And he says to him, "Teacher, speak." "Two [men] were debtors to a moneylender. One owed him 500 denarii, and the other owed him 50. The two not having anything to pay him, he graciously forgave them both. Who, therefore, will love him more?" Simon answered and said, "I suppose that [it is] he who was forgiven more." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

This parable should have made Simon realize how much Jesus knows about what is going on in his mind. Further, Jesus gives a hint to what he knows about the woman's unexpected status. But Jesus will not just prove that he is a prophet but that he is in fact the forgiver of sins. The parable presents both debtors as "not having anything to pay" to the moneylender (μὴ ἔχόντων αὐτῶν ἀποδοῦναι). The act of remitting debts described with the verb χαρίζομαι, which "is used of forgiving debts and also of forgiving sins"³⁸ implies a favorable and gracious gift.³⁹ As has been discussed earlier, "the connection between 'cancelling debts' and 'forgiving sins' has been cultivated since Jesus's inaugural proclamation of 'release' in 4:18–19."⁴⁰ The use of a rhetorical question invites Simon to engage with what Jesus seeks to communicate. Jesus points Simon to the fact that this situation is as much about the Pharisee as it is about the sinful woman and so the parable is reminiscent of the prophet Nathan's confrontation of David in 2 Samuel 12.⁴¹

Jesus creates the link between the parable and the setting at hand when he "turned to the

³⁷ Greene writes very fittingly that, "Simon is the victim of an irony being played out between Luke and his audience, for we share with Luke the knowledge that Jesus is God's redemptive agent and that his divinely ordained ministry entails a manner of association with 'the sick' and with 'sinners' that others regard as inappropriate (cf. 5:31–32)." *Gospel of Luke*, 310–311.

³⁸ Blight, *Exegetical Summary*, 320.

³⁹ Bauer, *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch*, 1749.

⁴⁰ Greene, *Gospel of Luke*, 311.

⁴¹ Bovon, *Evangelium nach Lukas*, 392.

woman” (στραφεῖς πρὸς τὴν γυναῖκα).⁴² This implies that as Jesus is talking to Simon, he keeps his eyes on her and thereby inviting Simon to observe her actions. The following contrast between the woman and Simon is climactically building up to Jesus’s final reversal:

“Do you see this woman? I came into your house and you did not put water on my feet; she has wet my feet with tears and wiped them off with the hair of her head. You have not kissed me for greeting; she, from the moment I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You have not anointed my head with oil; but she has anointed my feet with oil.”

This begs the question what Simon was expected to offer his guest as a host in first-century Palestine. Several scholars have pointed out that the washing of feet, the kiss of greeting, and the anointing with oil were not necessary components of hospitality but expressed a special regard and honoring toward the guest. There is therefore no reason to consider Simon’s behavior as intentionally dishonoring Jesus; rather, Simon “had not performed any especial acts of hospitality that went beyond the mere demands of the situation.”⁴³ The woman’s actions show a remarkable extension of courtesy beyond what is expected of a host. This marks a significant shift in perspective because now the sinful woman is a better host than Simon, as Green points out: “In effect, this woman fulfills the role expected of Simon, and thus shames Simon as a host who did not honor his guest.” Without properly realizing it, Simon has already been proven wrong in his assumption about his guest’s prophethood. Jesus’s interpretation of the woman’s actions as opposed to the hospitality of the host is the second reversal that will eventually culminate in a Messianic pronouncement of forgiveness.

How does Jesus interpret the host’s actions and the woman’s unusual gestures? He concludes: “On account of this, I tell you, her many sins are forgiven her, since she has loved much. But who has been forgiven little, loves little.” Before Jesus proves his divine right for the forgiveness of sins, he explains the sinner’s actions as expression of gratitude flowing out of a love that evidences her forgiven state. At the same time, Simon now becomes the apparently

⁴² Chong-Hyon Sung, *Vergebung der Sünden: Jesu Praxis der Sündenvergebung nach den Synoptikern und ihre Voraussetzungen im Alten Testament und frühen Judentum*, WUNT II 57 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 229.

⁴³ Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 311. See also Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness*, 135. One scholar describes the host’s behavior as a “negative reciprocity,” which seems to read too much into Simon’s missing actions: Jerome H. Neyrey, “Ceremonies in Luke–Acts: The Case of Meals and Table Fellowship,” in *The Social World of Luke–Acts*, edited by Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991): 386.

“lesser sinner,” which is best understood as an ironic expression. In a sense, the sinner is now redefined by Jesus someone who understands the magnitude of his debts and consequentially how precious forgiveness truly is.⁴⁴ The uninvited guest has a deep knowledge of what it means to be forgiven, while it seems that, „Simon the Pharisee knows *of* forgiveness, yet does not really know what forgiveness *is*.“⁴⁵ One of the great controversies in scholarship on this pericope has been the question how to properly understand the relationship between forgiveness and love in the phrase, “ἀφέωνται αἱ ἁμαρτίαι αὐτῆς αἱ πολλαί, ὅτι ἠγάπησεν πολὺ.”⁴⁶ The most weighty argument that love here is the result rather than the condition of forgiveness is the preceding parable, which has already established that the debtor whose debts have been forgiven will love the moneylender as a result of his graciousness. Therefore, the context of the entire passage must be taken into account.⁴⁷ The woman’s attitude to Jesus gives a key insight into the sinner’s right response to forgiveness: a turn away from sin and an embrace of the will of God with a new desire to love and obey.⁴⁸

Before Simon has enough time to answer anything, Jesus addresses the woman for the first time in the narrative directly: “He said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven you.’ And the ones who were reclining with [them] said among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ He said to the women, ‘Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.’” The people around Jesus know that he claims to be divine when he pronounces the forgiveness of sins.⁴⁹ The background of the parable shows that the woman sinned against God himself (the moneylender in the parable), who is also the only who can extend forgiveness to her (as realized in the person of Jesus). The text

⁴⁴ Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 312–314.

⁴⁵ Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), 150–151 (emphasis added).

⁴⁶ The ‘problem’ is presented by almost all commentators and scholars who have written on Luke 7:36–50. As Bovon, *Evangelium nach Lukas*, 394–395 points out, the reasons for this debate have mainly been dogmatic in nature. He contends that although God’s love is ever at the center of Luke’s message, this particular passage is meant to point out the essential and intimate relationship between God’s love and human response.

⁴⁷ There are also grammatical arguments that make sense of this view. If ὅτι is taken as referring to the preceding λέγω σοι, it takes on the meaning of “as shown/evidenced in her love,” rather than “because of her works.” This argument is spelled out by Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 313, who also points out numerous other New Testament passages that harmonize well with this view.

⁴⁸ Rainer Riesner, *Messias Jesus: Seine Geschichte, seine Botschaft und ihre Überlieferung* (Gießen: Brunnen Verlag, 2019), 186.

⁴⁹ Riesner, *Messias Jesus*, 107, writes about contemporary Messianic expectations: “Sündenvergebung galt im Judentum als das alleinige Vorrecht Gottes und wurde nicht einmal vom Messias erwartet.” See also Adams, *Sinner in Luke*, 146.

raises the question about when exactly the woman was forgiven. The perfect tense of ἀφέωνται indicates that the woman stands as forgiven.⁵⁰ It is very likely that a previous encounter with Jesus occurred, which gives rise to the deliberate action of the forgiven sinner to disregard what the ‘fellow-recliners’ (συνανακείμενοι) think about her and pay homage to Jesus through actions.⁵¹ In this light, the pronouncement of forgiveness functions not merely as reassurance for the woman but also as a public declaration for the audience, who knows about the woman’s reputation. The person who forgives is at the center.⁵² The link between the woman’s faith (πίστις σου), forgiveness of sins (Ἀφέωνται σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι), and salvation (σέσωκέν σε) now reveals to the reader how this episode functions in the Lukan narrative; Adams writes of the “clear link to Jesus’ mission of ‘release’ proclaimed at Nazareth in 4:18–19. The imagery of ‘release’ of the sabbatical year and the Jubilee are here fulfilled in spiritual terms. Her debts/sins, which were many, are released (7:47).”⁵³ The whole encounter is one about an unexpected salvation, realized in the one regarded as outcast. While originally Simon’s perspective (ὅν τίς καὶ ποταπὴ ἡ γυνὴ ἦτις) defined the woman, Jesus effectively states that his perspective on the woman is the one that truly matters.⁵⁴

While Jesus dismisses the woman to go in peace, the sudden ending is as open as the beginning of the story. This presents both Simon, audience, and reader as confronted with a choice.⁵⁵ The encounter with Jesus revealed a grand reversal. The sinner “is forgiven much and

⁵⁰ Sung, *Vergebung der Sünden*, 230, calls this the “passivum messianicum,” linking it to the passivum divinum in the Old Testament. See also Grundmann, *Evangelium nach Lukas*, 173.

⁵¹ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 313.

⁵² Szkredka, *Sinners and Sinfulness*, 149.

⁵³ Adams, *Sinners in Luke*, 147.

⁵⁴ At critical moments in Luke’s narrative like this one it is valuable to recall the author’s purpose as stated in the prologue, namely, to bring assurance to Theophilus and his wider audience. In the reading of this account, we should always be led to ask the question, How would have a certain episode in Jesus’s life reassured a possibly recent convert in the faith? Kilgallen, “Forgiveness of Sins,” 315, brings this pastoral perspective in remembrance when he writes: “Thus that the woman enters the story as one forgiven her sins because of her faith in Jesus and the repentance he asks, suits Luke’s pastoral theology for Theophilus very well. She is..., a figure to confirm to Theophilus who himself is encouraged to remain repentant, believing and forgiven.” We might want to qualify this statement slightly, since it is rather regrettable to speak of an encouragement to “remain forgiven.”

⁵⁵ In the terms of modern literary criticism, the unexpected reversal of roles at play here can be labeled as defamiliarization, which at this point should have already been evoked in the reader’s mind; “Jesus affirms the unfamiliar, and the triangle of relationships between Jesus, Simon the Pharisee, and the woman forces readers to take seed and to identify with the woman’s attitude toward Jesus.” David B. Gowler, *Host, Guest, Enemy, and Friend: Portrays of the Pharisees in Luke–Acts*, ESEC 2 (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 221.

loves much; [the Pharisee] is forgiven little and loves little. Her faith saves; by implication, Simon's lack of faith means the rejection of salvation. She now has honor, Simon is shamed. The outsider has become an insider; Simon, the supposed insider, has become an outsider."⁵⁶ But this is also a surprising plea to the Pharisee: Jesus invites the Pharisee to totally change the perspective on himself and Jesus—he attempts to win him over.⁵⁷ While the salvation of the sinner, through the instrumental cause of faith in God's salvation offered in Jesus, is the primary outcome, the open ending causes questions about Simon's future. In any case, his silence magnifies God's grand reversal. John York puts it well: "Rejection of Jesus means that the religious insider becomes an outsider, and suffers shame before his guests. Acceptance of Jesus means forgiveness for the sinful woman, salvation through her faith in him, and restoration of honor through through Jesus' acceptance of her actions."⁵⁸

Concluding Thoughts

What does Luke 7:36–50 contribute to the author's message of assurance to Theophilus and his subsequent readers? Jesus specifically reverses Simon's understanding that this man cannot be a prophet because of the way he treats the woman; the narrative reveals that this is exactly what vindicates Jesus's role as prophet and Messiah. After this account we know not only of the reversing activity of Jesus but also of his divine right to enact this grand salvific reversal. It is Jesus's definition of ἀμαρτωλός that really counts. Jesus identifies a forgiven state; he interprets the results of bestowed forgiveness. Most importantly, though, Jesus is the very dispenser of this forgiveness and as such also the object of the forgiven sinner's gratitude. When Jesus declares the woman's sins forgiven, he is saying that her relationship to him defines who she is, which can never be overruled by the Pharisee's definition that prevailed at the beginning of our account. Since forgiveness is Jesus's Messianic business, he also entrusts his disciples to proclaim this forgiveness in his name (Luke 24:47). For Theophilus and us as contemporary readers of Luke's Spirit-inspired account, therefore, the pericope at hand is both indicative and imperative. Within the larger framework of fulfillment, Luke 7:36–50 signifies that salvation has been announced and indeed accomplished in Jesus Christ, who in the evangelistic witness is

⁵⁶ John York, *The Last Shall Be First: The Rhetoric of Reversal in Luke* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015) 125–126.

⁵⁷ Szkredka, *Sinners and Sinfulness*, 150.

⁵⁸ John York, *The Last Shall Be First*, 126.

proclaimed as the one who is ushering in a real year of Jubilee for his people (as Luke is going to unfold in the Acts of the Apostles). What Luke conveys here, then, is ultimately a strong appeal to the reader and hearer of his message. How is the reader going to respond when confronted with the forgiver of sins?

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