A Womanist Interpretation of the Lukan Parable of the Great Supper (Luke 14:15-24) Using the Amended Parable Theory of Octavia E. Butler

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ABSTRACT

This project develops a theory of reading the parables of Jesus based on the works of African-American feminist novelist Octavia E. Butler (1947–2006) and applies this theory to the Lukan Parable of the Great Supper (Luke 14:1-24) to create a short narrative recontextualized reading of resistance. This project is justified because it advances the scholarship on Octavia E. Butler by extracting from Butler's work a theory of reading biblical parables and adapts this theory and brings it into the discourse on parable theory; and this project advances the body of work on slavery and resistance to slavery in biblical texts by applying this adapted parable theory to the Lukan Parable of the Great Supper to produce a reading of resistance. Furthermore, this project can serve as a resource for African American faith communities to unlearn the allegorical interpretation of biblical parables and to reappropriate scripture.

INTRODUCTION

For African American women and many others, Octavia Butler's recontextualizations of biblical parables aid in the understanding of the biblical text.1 Additionally, her recontextualizations help African American women decode the oppressive reality of their own lives. As womanists, we believe that these stories of our lives have value for theological reflection.2 As an African American Christian womanist, I believe that my reflections lend value to the general discussion of womanist thought.

Furthermore, a womanist hermeneutic, an interpretive procedure that takes seriously the everyday experiences of being African American and female in the diaspora, says that the life and ministry of Jesus is central to the theology of African American Christian women. The parables of Jesus, the primary genre of his teaching in the gospels, compel African American women and hearers to come to a decision about the person and ministry of Jesus. These parables speak on two levels: the aspects of everyday life and the reign of God. The understanding of the relationship between these two levels is reflected in parable theories.3

As Jesus sometimes does with the parables, the African-American feminist novelist Octavia Butler (1947–2006) occasionally cloaks her ideas in metaphorical language and expects a response from her readers.4 Well-versed in the Bible and the particularities of the African-American church, Butler tackles issues in her work that are prevalent in society and in the church, such as slavery, class struggle, and patriarchy. Butler states,

> As a good Baptist kid, I read the Bible first as a series of instructions as to how I should believe and behave, then as bits of verse that I was required to memorize, then as a series of interesting, interconnected stories . . . The stories got me: stories of conflict, betrayal, torture, murder, exile, and incest. I read them avidly. . . . I found these stories fascinating, and when I began writing, I explored these themes in my own stories . . . 5

Butler, with her penchant for science fiction, mirrors other parable authors by writing unusual and fantastical features into her novels. According to the parable theory of Eta Linnemann, unusual features are characteristics that conflict with the daily experiences to which the narrator wishes to speak.6 These unusual features are keys to interpreting the parable. For example, Butler goes forward in time, setting her novels in the year 2024 in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, to warn the readers of the likely consequences of environmental destruction and other such injustices. In *Kindred*, Butler travels to the past, employing the unusual feature of allowing a young white boy to have the power to call a fully grown and mature African American woman back into the antebellum South whenever he feels that his life is in danger. Through this feature, Butler is able to tackle issues of hauntings and resolution of historical wrongs. Further, *Kindred*, as well as *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* are texts of "quiet resistance" as Butler makes African-American women, real and visible heroines who are not silenced, ignored, or powerless.

Thus, like her heroines, I submit that Octavia Butler allowed the world to see her, Octavia Butler, an African-American woman, as one who is not silenced, ignored, or powerless, but as one who should be considered a leading voice, thinker, and innovator of biblical parable theory. Like theologians and biblical scholars John Dominic Crossan, Luise Schottroff, William R. Herzog, and Eta Linnemann, Butler has a great understanding of parable theory. But unlike the others, she takes a unique approach to the parables by recontextualizing biblical parables (as well as decentering the biblical text and centering the African American experience) hence, making the biblical text more accessible and understandable to a broader audience of laity, ordained ministry and those inside and outside of the academy.

I propose in this paper a theory of reading the parables of Jesus based on the works of Butler and discuss how this theory could be applied to the Lukan Parable of the Great Supper (Luke 14:15-24) to create a short narrative recontextualized reading of resistance.

Butler: A Biblical Parable Theorist

William Herzog, offering one of the most radical understandings of the parables of Jesus, interprets the parables as a form of subversive speech. He used the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and class-conscious social critic, as a model for understanding the parables of Jesus. Herzog states,

> … the parables were not earthly stories with heavenly meanings but earthy stories with heavy meanings, weighted down by an awareness of the workings of exploitation in the world of their hearers. … they explored *how human beings could respond to break the spiral of violence and cycle of poverty* (italics mine).7

To Herzog, "The parables generated conversations that enhanced the hearers' ability to decode their oppressive reality."8 Octavia Butler's parable novels, too, explore how oppression serves the interests of the ruling class and how human beings can respond to break the spiral of violence and cycle of poverty.

According to Herzog, to interpret a biblical parable, one must understand the purpose of Jesus' ministry.9 Was Jesus a poet, philosopher, ethicist, theologian, storyteller, rabbi, preacher, or minister?10 The gospel of Luke records Jesus himself saying that the purpose of his ministry was to "set the captives free."11

I believe that the purpose of Jesus' ministry was to proclaim good news to the poor by healing them and helping to set them free from oppressive structures of sin.12 Jesus was a savior, the Messiah. He was a prophetic teacher. His ministry was viewed as a hostile response to the oppression of Jewish people by the Roman Empire.13 Those in authority viewed Jesus as a terrorist.14 During his ministry, he attracted large crowds because he fed the poor, healed the sick and taught about the coming of the reign of God.15

As an interpreter of Jesus' parables of the sower and talents, what was Octavia Butler's understanding of the purpose of Jesus' ministry? Butler's character, Lauren, reflecting on what

she remembers most about her father's preaching, states, in the *Parable of the Talents*,

> My father loved parables – stories that taught, stories that presented ideas and morals in ways that made pictures in people's minds. … Because he believed stories were so important as teaching tools, I learned to pay more attention to them than I might have otherwise.16

I suggest that the above excerpt contains Butler's own understanding of parables and her understanding of their need to have a strong impact on the listener. The listener in this case is the protagonist, Lauren. Butler believed in the power of the parable as a teaching tool. And, Lauren and her father are teachers, like Jesus, seeking to transform all who they encounter.17

Additionally, we must understand that Butler's decision to recontextualize the biblical parables of Jesus and to use the images of the biblical parable of the sower and the parable of the talents as vehicles for delivering her message is indicative that she believed that the purpose of Jesus' ministry was teaching.

Using similar interpretive lenses as Herzog, the German feminist biblical scholar, Luise Schottroff saw parables as consisting of three parts: (1) a parable narrative or story which describes not a particular historical event but a structure (system) such as the structure of political rule or social relationships; (2) an application of the parable which is an invitation to reflect on the content of God's action in the past, present and future (this exegesis is not an "us" versus "them" analysis but an answer to what the parable is saying about our relationship with God and how are we hearing the voice of God); and (3) the implicit response that is expected

from the hearers or readers. The parable is to be so unforgettable that the reader or hearer is forced inevitably to respond in words and deeds.18

Similar to this analysis of parables by Schottroff and Herzog: (1) Butler describes in her parables, as I said earlier, structures such as ante bellum slavery, modern day slavery, inadequate educational systems, environmental abuse, suffering from poverty, patriarchy, hierarchy and abuse by organized religious organizations; (2) Butler states that her parables are cautionary tales or warnings of what may happen and her parables force the reader to reflect on the content of God's action in the past, the present and the future; and (3) Butler expects a response in words and deeds from her readers.

Methodology: The Amended Parable Theory

Missing from Butler's parable theory, unlike that of Schottroff and Herzog's theories, though, is a socio-historical analysis of the biblical parables. One can easily recognize the socio-historical research on antebellum slavery that was necessary for Butler to complete in order for her to write *Kindred*. However, one can only surmise from the content of Butler's Parable novels that Butler did not do a socio-historical analysis of the parables because her novels do not take into account the context of the Jesus movement.19

In addition to a socio-historical analysis, an amended parable theory would: 1) further explore Butler's use of parables and propose the creation of a communal discourse in the academy, church and the rest of the world surrounding parables; 2) would look at the creation of sacred "future" texts;20 3) progress the ideas of the unsacralization of slavery and hidden transcripts with respect to parables.21 Also it would demonstrate how parables can function as texts of resistance when they contain allusions to resistance texts from the First Testament;22 4) look at the centering of the African American experience in one's study of the Bible; and finally 5) focus on recontextualizing parables without allegorizing them.

Application to the Parable of the Great Supper

I suggest that this amended parable theory can be applied to the Lukan Parable of the Great Supper. The result of this application will be a resistance reading as well as a recontextualization of an enslaved African American female living amidst the first century of the Jesus movement with particular attention to her survival and her experience of the Eucharist of the Last Supper. This recontextualization will embody the Womanist concept of survival and the structural sin of sexism in the African American church.

If you remember, in this Lukan parable of the Great Supper, all the invited guests give explicit excuses for not attending the feast. The excuses offered by the invited guests correspond roughly to legitimate exemptions from a call to war.23 Additionally, the slave owner, referred to as "the lord" or "the master" gives a great banquet but invites none of the enslaved to the feast. Traditional interpreters of the parables of Jesus often equate God with this master, this exploitative slave owner.24 From the perspective of the refusal of all invited guests, the allusions to the exemptions from Holy War which are in Deuteronomy and 1 Maccabees, as well as the historical and literary contexts, suggest that the slave owner is not God, but an agent of Roman power, whose invitations can be seen as attempts to dominate and colonize a foreign land and enslave its citizenry. The slave owner in the parable does not invite slaves to the feast because those slaves are already captives of the Roman Empire and there was no need to enslave them or recolonize them again.25 God's reign overturns the "commonplace" when the invited guests in the parable resist and refuse to submit to their oppression and enslavement.

Conclusion

I proposed the notion of Octavia Butler, an African-American woman, as one who is not silenced, ignored, or powerless, but as one who should be considered a leading voice, thinker, and innovator of biblical parable theory. I also proposed a theory of reading the parables of Jesus based on the works of Butler and suggested an application of this theory to the Lukan Parable of the Great Supper (Luke 14:15-24) to create a short narrative recontextualized reading of resistance.

Without doubt, we all must rebel against the traditional history of interpretation of parables. We must unlearn the allegorical way of reading parables. It is imperative that we teach African American scholars, both biblical students and church-goers, the proper way to read biblical parables. If we do this, the parables can then generate conversations on how to stop cycles of poverty, hunger, violence, and modern day slavery in our lives.

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1. A recontextualization is a retelling of a biblical text in a present, future or past context from the perspective of "that person or group, explaining, commenting upon, defending or criticizing what is said in the text." See Luise Schottroff, Preface to Intro to NT Reader, Spring 2002. Fiorenza in her detailed analysis of feminism says that a recontextualization can make the "subordinated and marginalized 'others' visible." Furthermore, she says that if we use "creative imagination," one can celebrate the stories of those nonpersons like women and slaves. See the discussion of "recontextualization" and "retelling" in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Hermeneutics," in The Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 2:783.

2. For the seminal definition of "womanist," see Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xii; Clarice Martin highlights the addition of the variable of race in interpretation in her definition of a womanist biblical hermeneutic, "… gender, race, class, and language issues are all at the forefront of translation (the science of expressing the original meaning as accurately as possible) and interpretation (the process of bringing together the ancient canonical texts with new, changing situations) concerns, …". See Clarice Martin, "Womanist interpretations of the New Testament: the quest for holistic and inclusive translation and interpretation," Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 6 (1990), 42-43. Also, see Raquel St. Clair, "Womanist Biblical Interpretation," in True to Our Native Land, eds. Brian K. Blount, Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin and Emerson B. Powery (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 55-60. For a discussion on the importance of the ministry of Jesus in womanist thought, see Joanne Marie Terrell, Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 108.

3. See Luise Schottroff, The Parables of Jesus, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

4. See Cecilia Tan, "Possible Futures and the Reading of History: A Conversation with the Incomparable Storyteller Octavia Butler," http://ceciliatan.livejournal.com/15404.html, (accessed September 4, 2012). In 1999, Butler

describes herself as “a pessimist if I'm not careful, a feminist always, a Black, a quiet egoist, a former Baptist, and an oil-and-water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty, and drive."

5. Octavia E. Butler, Afterword to “Near of Kin” in Blood Child: and other stories (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1995), 85.

6. Eta Linnemann, Jesus of the Parables, Introduction and Exposition, translated by John Sturdy (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967), 28. See also Iver K. Madsen, Die Parabeln der Evangelien und die heutige Psychologie (Kopenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1936).

7. William R. Herzog II, Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 3.

8. Ibid, 29.

9. Ibid, 14.

10. Ibid, 14-15.

11. Luke 4:18.

12. Fiorenza defines structural sin as the “oppressive and dehumanizing power of the patriarchal interstructuring of sexism, racism, economic exploitation, and militarist colonialism.” See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Feminist Hermeneutics,” in The Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 2:791. Jose Faus states that when the rich refuse to share with the poor, they are guilty of structural sin. See, Jose Faus, “Sin,” in Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 197-200.

13. Daniel Schowalter, “Churches in Context,” in the Oxford History of the Biblical World, Coogan, Michael (ed), 517-528. See also C.K. Barrett, The New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire That Illuminate Christian Origins (London: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), 2, 10, 156, 157.

14. The emperor Tiberius (14-37CE) was cruel to religions outside the Roman mainstream. He deliberately selected Pontius Pilate, who was a murderous and vicious ruler, as procurator of Judea and who was responsible for the administration of capital punishment. Tacitus in his Annals state that Jesus “suffered the extreme penalty … at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate.” See Tacitus, The Annals of Tacitus, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, (Pennsylvania: The Franklin Library. 1982); See also Daniel Schowalter, “Churches in Context,” in the Oxford History of the Biblical World, Coogan, Michael (ed), 517-528; See also Denis C. Duling and Norman Perrin, The New Testament, Proclamation and Parenesis, Myth and History (Orlando: Hartcourt College Publishers, 1994), 48-54, passim. See also Herzog, 9.

15. Amy-Jill Levine, “Visions of Kingdoms,” in The Oxford History of the Biblical World, ed. Coogan, Michael (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 490.

16. Octavia Butler, Parable of the Talents (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998), 19.

17. See also Monica A. Coleman, Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 132-147.

18. Luise Schottroff, The Parables of Jesus, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 103-105.

19. There is however, a reference to disciples in Butler’s notes for a short story she wrote entitled “Doro-Jesus story: short story?” See Octavia E. Butler, et al., Papers of Octavia E. Butler, 1933.

20. Vincent Wimbush, "We Will Make Our Own Future Texts," in True to Our Native Land, eds. Brian K. Blount, Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin and Emerson B. Powery (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 43-53; A “future” text is the opposite of an “ancient” text. It is a text that begins in one’s own world; See also Ishmael Reed, Mumbo Jumbo (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972).

21. Cain Hope Felder defines "sacralization" as the transposing of an ideological concept into a tenet of religious faith to serve the vested interest of a particular ethnic/racial group. See Cain Hope Felder, “Race, Racism, and the Biblical Narratives” in Stony The Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation, edited by Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 128-137; James C. Scott discusses the concept of the oppressed expressing their opinions in a disguised form in his discussion of subordinate politics. He defines the notion of public transcripts as self-portraits of dominant elites as they wish to be seen and the notion of hidden transcripts as the discursive modes of resistance that the oppressed carry out offstage. The third realm of subordinate politics is the politics of disguise and anonymity that lie between the public and the hidden transcript. See James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

22. Abraham Smith, “‘Unmasking the Powers’: Toward a Postcolonial Analysis of 1 Thessalonians” in Paul and the Roman Imperial Order, Richard A. Horsley, ed., 48-49.

23. David L. Tiede, The Harper-Collins Study Bible, NRSV (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 1988-1989. See Deuteronomy 20.5-8 where the acceptable exemptions from participating in a holy war are building a new house, planting a new vineyard, becoming engaged or being afraid; See also 1 Maccabees 3:56.

24. See John R. Donahue, The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 142; Also see Francois Bovon, Luke 2, trans. by Donald S. Deer, edited by

Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 379.

25. Blickenstaff's analysis of the Matthean version is very similar to mine. See Marianne Blickenstaff, 'While the Bridegroom is with them': Marriage, Family, Gender and Violence in the Gospel of Mathew (New York: T&T Clark International, 2005).

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