A Deconstructive Reading of Luke 15: 8–10

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Introduction

When I was a young girl, I often lost treasures precious to me, such as beads or small pebbles. I was so eager to find them that sometimes I even searched in a closet for them; despite my fear of dark places, I had sympathy for my lost play things. How fearful it was for this bead to be in darkness! The parable of the lost coin reminds me of this element of my childhood; it somehow opens up a feeling of empathy for the "lost."

Living in a global society, no one escapes from the negative side-effects of it. Businesses travel everywhere, including sex trafficking. Trafficking is a human problem in that trafficked women feel that they have lost their identity and value as well as they struggle for survival, and it is justice matter in that poor women who easily become victims of it. This essay seeks an appreciation of the parable of the Lost Coin in Luke's Gospel 15:8-10 to establish a solidarity with trafficked women by deconstructing the forced meaning of the text.

A Deconstructive Approach

Here my use of deconstructive reading is an approach toward intelligent challenging for the stable and any forced meaning of the text. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out in her preface to the English version of *Grammatology*, "the text has no stable identity, stable origin, no stable end. Each act of reading 'the text' is a preface to the next. The reading of a self-possessed preface is no exception to this rule."[1] The deconstructive reading maintains that a text does not manifest one incontestable meaning. In her book, *The Critical Difference*, Barbara Johnson clarifies the term deconstruction in asserting the instability of the meaning of the text:

> Deconstruction is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis' itself, which etymologically means 'to undo' a virtual synonym for 'to de-construct.' The deconstruction of a text does not proceed… but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself.

[1] Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, "Translator's Preface," in *Grammatology* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974), xii.

Thus, this reading acknowledges that textual meanings change according to different readers who have different contexts with different goals in mind.[2]

Furthermore, by borrowing the deconstructive reading strategy, this reading de-centers the authority of traditional interpretations as well as challenges the monopoly of what has come to be the authorized meaning. The de-centering process breaks the binary demarcation[3] in which one of two implies superiority and thus provides the one of two with power. In that sense, the deconstructive reading negates the power given by the one interpretation and promotes the "both/and" nature over the "either/or" nature of discourse.

Very often, the deconstructive reading extends to address issues of power and domination in society and thereby suggests a strong possibility of deconstructing the accumulation of power in discourse.[4] Jacques Derrida wrote that deconstruction should be linked with politics based on an institutional problematic and also seek a responsibility which questions the codes inherited from ethics and politics.[5] In relation to Emmanuel Levinas' emphasis on an ethic that rejects "controlling totality,"[6] a deconstructive reading's ethical responsibility is to pay attention to subjectivity central.[7] In subjectivity, a reader needs to find an interpretation of the text that rejects this totality, which often becomes a tool to control the other. Deconstruction's attention to the marginalized leads readers to stray off the page into the margins and the socio-cultural environment.[8] Following these characteristics of deconstructive reading, one can appropriately contend that "deconstructive reading" focuses on the "other" who is poor or voiceless and powerless.

Following the orientation of the deconstructive reading, the reading of the parable of the Lost Coin critiques the interpretation from the perspective of the women seeking the coin as an autonomous agent. The lost coin, which became invisible to its owner, is a metaphor for Asian women's bodies.[9] They are very often not considered as human

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[2] Danna Nolan Fewell, "Deconstructive Criticism: Achsha and The (E)razed City of Writing," in *Judges & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies, ed. Gale A Yee* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995): 119-145.

[3] The binary demarcation come from the dualistic way of understanding the world. There are examples: male vs. female; reason vs. emotion; East vs. West; soul vs. body, etc.

[4] David Jobling, "Writing the Wrongs of the World: The Deconstruction of the Biblical Text in the Context of Liberation Theologies," *Semeia* 51 (1990): 102.

[5] James K. A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 76.

[6] Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity & Transcendence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 102.

[7] Deconstruction has strong Levinasian orientation. Often, in the work of Derrida, Levinas and Derrida are amalgamated making it hard to distinguish these two justice oriented philosophy. Regarding this issue, see Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, 65-76.

[8] Fewell, "Deconstructive Criticism," 127.

[9] In the postcolonial discourse, often the body of the woman of the Third World itself has been the literal 'text' on which colonization has written some graphic messages. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Hellen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 322.

beings, but rather as sexual commodities. They are also judged according to moral norms and rejected by people, as well as the Church. Thus, this deconstructive reading strategy helps to focus on the marginalized "others," particularly women involved in sex work through trafficking.[10]

A Deconstructive Reading of the Parable

This section deconstructs two levels: the ideal of Luke's Gospel; and that of the parable of the Lost Coin. The applied approach of deconstructing the ideal of the narrative is paying attention to the forced meaning by the redactor through literary devices and thus to any possible slide off of the meaning of the text.

A. Deconstruction of the Ideal of the Gospel of Luke

This reading investigates a spot in the text which could reinforce the oppression of women in sex work. The Gospel of Luke shows a preferential option for the poor in its literary structure and narrative including Lukan terminology. This Gospel favors the disadvantaged and oppressed people in society: the poor, the sick, the handicapped, slaves, lepers, shepherds, tax collectors, and sinners. The five faces of oppression in today's world are 1) exploitation, 2) marginalization, 3) powerlessness, 4) violence, and 5) cultural imperialism.[11] All of these forms of oppression are addressed and the victims of these oppressions are favored in the Gospel of the Luke.

Above all, the narrative of Luke's Gospel speaks of justice and the preferential option for the poor as related to poor women. According to James Malcom Arlandson, Luke's narrative contains at least sixty-seven women, all of them marginalized as either slaves, or the unclean, the degraded, and the expendables. In the narrative framework of this Gospel, women who are poor and powerless are elevated over wealthy, powerful, and privileged men[12] as an expression of the "option for the poor."

Then, the narrator juxtaposes women of low class and men who have power and money so as to increase the drama by making a sharp contrast between the two. And it reinforces or solidifies women's low position, even though it was sheer description of women's usual socio-economic status.

In the narrative of the Third Gospel, the most frequent characters are women who belong to a low class such as widows, sinners, and the sick who are always described positively. The sick are included in the unclean and degraded category because it is

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[10] Gary A. Phillips, "The Ethics of Reading Deconstructively, or Speaking Face-To-Face: The Samaritan Woman Meets Derrida At the Well," in *The New literary Criticism and the New Testament*, edited by Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Edgar V. McKnight (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 102.

[11] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and The Politics of Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 48-63.

[12] James M. Arlandson, *Women*, *Class, and Society in Early Christianity: Models from Luke-Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 126.

assured that they are suffering for some sin. Examples include Peter's mother-in-law (Luke 4:38–9), the hemorrhaging woman (Luke 8:43–48), Mary Magdalene, who was afflicted by demons, (Luke 8:2), and the woman bent over (Luke 13:10–17). All women characters are favored in the narrative of the Gospel of Luke.

However, this narrative for the poor and specifically for poor women has lost parts. How about the other category of sinner besides the poor, the sick, and widows? Luke's Gospel rarely mentions prostitute women. In the narrative of Luke's Gospel, there are only two instances of prostitutes among seventy-two woman characters: one is in the story of the Lost Son (Luke 15:30); and the other is in that of the Sinful woman (7: 36–50). [13] Even in these two cases, the narrative does not show equal compassion for these women. While the narrative shows a negative attitude in the elder son's description of the harlot in 15: 30, the Sinful Woman who poured expensive perfume on the feet of Jesus is favored by the narrator.

In comparing the woman in the parable of the Lost Son with the Sinful Woman, one finds in the former is obviously a prostitute. While the narrator chooses the word, πορνών to designate this woman, the same narrator chooses the word, αμαρτωλός to describe the Sinful Woman (7:39). The word αμαρτωλός does not necessarily designate a prostitute but includes all degraded people. In addition, the redactor uses the word αμαρτωλός twice in the Gospel. One comes from Peter's lips saying to Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful (αμαρτωλός) man. Oh, Lord" (5: 8). The other usage appears in 24:7, in Jesus' saying of his passion, "the son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful (αμαρτωλός) men." Neither of these usages indicates prostitutes.

Following the story of the Sinful Woman, Simon the leper was classified as unclean as was the Sinful Woman. The strategy of the narrative is the contrast between the two: the unclean man and unclean woman. In that society, of the two, unclean women were considered less valuable, but the narrator stresses that the sinful woman was prized more by Jesus, according to the literary structure. This literary framework is a radical departure from the mores of the day. However, while Luke's Gospel expresses the liberating grace of God which pours upon the low and lifts them up, this narrative *neglects and ignores* a category of poor women— prostitutes and perhaps the victims of trafficking.

B. Deconstruction of the Parable of the Lost Coin

A parable is a story within a story. According to C.H. Dodd, the New Testament parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life.[14] The New Testament parable prods the reader to look deeply into its vividness or strangeness; it leaves the

[13] In chapter 7, the sinful woman has been understood as prostitute although there is no specific clue that designates her as a prostitute.

[14] C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Glasgow, London: Collins, 1961), 5.

mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application so that the mind must spend energy figuring it out (Gowler, 2000).[15]

A parable then can be understood as an open-ended story which contains deep metaphorical meaning.[16] The text includes tension between its free-standing meaning and its forced meaning. On the one hand, the written text is autonomous in terms of the meaning intended by the author. On the other hand, the redactor wants to control the readers' understanding of the text, thus reinforcing a particular interpretation. The message that is conveyed through the text is expressed through literary devices.[17]

This role of redactor can be examined further as a literary unit in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel. The parable of the Lost Coin (15:8-10) is unique to Luke and is sandwiched between the parable of the Lost Sheep (15:3–7) and that of the Lost Son (15; 11–32). Compared to these two famous parables, the one of the Lost Coin has received the least attention from readers as well as scholars.

Interpretation can be seen in the arts. For example, while the image of the Good Shepherd that emerged from the parable of the Lost Sheep has been one of the most prominent images of Jesus Christ, the image of a woman in a household has been rarely used as the image of God or Jesus. In religious paintings, there are hundreds of pictures of Jesus who puts a lost sheep on his shoulder. Similarly, the parable of the Lost Son has been one of the most often used topics in religious paintings by famous painters such as Rembrandt van Rijn and Bartolome Esteban Murillo**.**

In contrast, the parable of the Lost Coin has been rarely mentioned until some feminists recently started to explore the meaning of this parable and the feminine image of God. In other words, the parable of the Lost Coin itself could be counted as one of the "lost" parables in academic circles, as well as in the tradition of interpretation in the Church. Thus, the parable of the Lost Coin is in reality the "lost of the lost."

In the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel, one way of controlling readers' understanding of a text is through repetition. The parables of the lost have a repeated structure: lose–find–rejoice–repentance. In the first parable of the Lost Sheep, the shepherd loses one sheep among ninety-nine others (v.3), goes and finds it (v.5), and then rejoices (v.6). In the parable of the Lost Coin, the woman loses one coin (v.8); searches throughout the whole household and finds it (v.9), then joyfully celebrates (v.10). Similarly, in the parable of the Lost Son, the father loses his son when the latter deserts his family (v.13), "finds him" when the repentant son returns (v.21); then, begins to be merry (v.24).

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[15] David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables*? (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 26–30.

[16] Among scholars there is controversy whether the parables should be considered as metaphor, allegory, or example stories. See Jeffrey T. Tucker, *Example Stories: Perspectives on Four Parables in the Gospel of Luke*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 162 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). However, I do not deal with this issue in this essay.

[17] Guy D. Nave, Jr., *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts*, SBL no. 4 (Boston: Brill, 2002), 13.

The redactor reinforces the message of the text through a repeated structure and concludes with the "repentance of the sinner," one of the main themes of the Gospel of Luke. In the Lukan narrative, repentance is understood as part of the plan of God (Dave, 2002).[18] In the parable of the Lost Sheep, the redactor identifies the sheep with a person and closes by saying, "I say to you that there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (v.7). The parable of the Lost Coin concludes in the same way, "I will tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (v.10).

In the three parables of the Lost, the narrative compares the discovery of the lost items (άπολωλός) to the repentance of a sinner. The narrative of the parable does not originally include the theme of repentance. The "repentance of the lost" is an *added* theme of the redactor. It becomes clear that the theme of repentance came from the redactor of Luke's Gospel if the parable of the Lost Sheep is examined in comparison to the story in the other Gospels. While the parable of the Lost Sheep has a parallel in Matt 18: 12-4, the Gospel of Thomas 107, and the Gospel of Truth 31:35-32:17, only in the Gospel of Luke is the parable of the Lost Sheep related to repentance (Dave, 2002).[19] In all the stories of different Gospels, the focus is more on God's caring love for his people.

Following the redactor's forced logic, readers reach the understanding that the lost one is a sinner who needs to repent. In the case of the lost son and lost sheep, this logic does not seem to have any problem. However, the case of the lost coin causes difficulty in accepting this forced meaning. According to the story line, the sheep and the prodigal son voluntarily run away. In the parable of the Lost Son, the son gets his inheritance and leaves the father's house. The case of the Lost Sheep is similar. The shepherd loses a sheep. He goes out to find the animal because of concern: he went out because of the sheep, which becomes "the one that has gotten *itself* completely lost"—This wording shows that the situation of being lost is the sheep's fault.

However, the passive coin is accidentally discarded and abandoned. In the case of the lost coin, the responsibility for the loss is emphatically put on the woman: "If she should lose just one drachma…" (v.8) and "the coin I lost" (v.9). Accordingly, the finite forms of verbs are in the active voice (Beeck, 2003).[20] Unlike the sheep and the son, the coin is simply lost as a passive object/victim, rather than as an *active agent* in the situation. Thus, the logic of repentance does not fit; the coin is an object that cannot repent.

Furthermore, in the reading of these parables, the protagonists are the seeker/finder, not the found object.[21] Usually, readers have a tendency to identify with the main

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[18] Nave, *The Role and Function of Repentance*, 37.

[19] Ibid., 109.

[20] Frans Jozef Van Beeck, "'Lost and Found' in Luke 15: Biblical Interpretation and Self-Involvement," *The Expository Times* 114 (Dec., 2003): 399.

[21] The case of the lost son is different because the lost is a human being. Readers identify with the lost son, and this parable fits perfectly within the category of repentance and joy.

character according to the intention of the text or its literary structure (Moore, 1994).[22] Following the strategy of the redactor, the audience is supposed to identify with the shepherd, or the woman who searches and finally finds the lost object. Then, readers are not the person who repents of her/his sins.

If readers pay attention to the audience to whom Jesus addressed these parable, they easily understand the theme of the parable of the lost cannot be repentance. The three parables of the "lost" start with the narrator's report that "tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to Jesus to hear him(15:1)." Jesus' immediate audience and his readers are, ultimately, supposed to grasp Jesus' point: rejoicing in the repentance of the sinner who has been careless and negligent. It is true for the audience of the narratives (*i.e.* Pharisees and Scribes) that Jesus challenges their complaints about in his "inclusive table fellowship" and further challenges them to accept outsiders—"lost" people (Kozar, 1992).[23]

However, contemporary readers, who are not with Jesus, could fall into the exclusive reading of paying attention to the repentance of the lost if they get overly caught up in the redactor's controlling plan for the text. In this way, readers who follow blindly the redactor's controlling plan misunderstand the parable in two ways, while at the same time, the redactor fails to deliver the message of the virtue of repentance. On the one hand, these readers who do identify themselves with the woman do not feel the need to repent, and in this way avert from the forced meaning. On the other hand, these readers also are alienated from the original meaning of the parable–celebration of inclusiveness. Therefore, it is plausible to maintain that the redactor's controlling device for the forced meaning leads readers to be lost in cogent understanding of the parable of the lost coin.

Closing Remarks

This article has suggested a way of reading the parable of the Lost Coin, paying attention to the lost situation of trafficked women in the context of the global capital society. These trafficked women are voiceless, powerless, and invisible. In order to deepen understanding of the trafficked women and develop a spirit of solidarity with those women, this article has deployed the deconstructive reading strategy.

This deconstructive reading of the parable of the lost coin warns the readers that if they comprehend the story through the redactor's controlling device to force the message of repentance, they will fail to read the story appropriately. Furthermore, the repentance-oriented reading easily deflects readers from the lost situation or objects. In Luke's Gospel, repentance is one of the expressions to describe God's redemptive work. When this theme in Luke is applied to the reading of the parable of the Lost Coin, however, readers who do not identity with the lost coin may not feel any inclusive feeling toward

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[22] Steven D. Moore, *Post Structuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 45.

[23] J. V. Kozar, "Absent Joy: An Investigation of the Narrative Pattern of Repetition and Variation in the Parables of Luke 15," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 8 (1992): 92.

any lost element. In other words, a reader does not necessarily feel solidarity or sympathy with the poor or marginalized as a result. Although the parable itself conveys the message of the joy of inclusiveness, readers may only receive the message as forcing the coin to repent. As Jesus wished to show an inclusive gathering, emphasizing the joy of the shepherd, the woman, and the father who finds the lost sheep, coin, and son, the reader also should emphasize the joy of inclusiveness rather than the importance of repentance.

As an alternative interpretation, if we agree the parable of the Lost Coin holds that the coin is *lost* as a victim, we can say that the trafficked women are lost as victims. Then, just as the coin cannot be blamed for being lost, so also the trafficked women.

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