Dowling, Elizabeth V.

Taking Away the Pound: Women, Theology and the Parable of the Pounds in the Gospel of Luke

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Dowling’s Taking Away the Pound is insightful, imaginative, and a joy to read. Deploying a “feminist hermeneutical framework” that taps several methods and foregrounds a commitment to exposing discourses that demean or devalue women, Dowling proposes using the Parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:11–27) as a lens through which to view the characterization of women in Luke (3–11). She argues that, in large part, the Gospel silences women and reinscribes patriarchal values and structures. Her study is therefore aligned with more recent work on women in the Gospel by Schüssler Fiorenza, Schaberg, D’Angelo, Melzer-Keller, Tetlow, Reid, and others. Indeed, the volume should be received primarily as a contribution to scholarship on constructions of women and gender ideology in Luke and not on the Parable of the Pounds or on Lukan parables more generally.

Chapter 1 includes thorough reviews of scholarly literature on the Parable of the Pounds and on the characterization of women in Luke. With respect to the parable, Dowling finds that a majority of commentators argue that the nobleman represents either Jesus or God. Not surprisingly, these scholars therefore view the slaves’ actions from the nobleman’s perspective: the first two are praised for having invested and received substantial returns on their master’s capital, while the third slave is reprimanded for having refused to
comply with the master’s orders. For disciples and/or readers, the first two slaves model the appropriate response. A minority read the parable as a “text of terror” that reflects the harsh reality faced by many under the exploitative, extractive political economy of early Roman Palestine. For these scholars, the nobleman, who is portrayed as a ruthless, oppressive tyrant, represents (and may call to mind) any number of Roman Palestine’s wealthy, ruling elite. The first two slaves then become willing accomplices in exploitation and assist their master in coralling more than his fair share of capital and resources. The third slave, on the other hand, becomes the story’s hero both for exposing the master for what he is and for refusing to perpetuate economic exploitation. It is this latter, minority reading that Dowling finds attractive and with which she aligns her own interpretation of the parable. With respect to the characterization of women, Dowling observes that early studies often praised the Gospel for elevating women’s status. More recent studies, however, read Luke as subordinating women and reinforcing traditional elite-male gender ideologies. Again, it is the latter body of literature with which Dowling aligns her own work.

Chapters 2 and 3 offer a reading of the Parable of the Pounds and explore its theological context in the Gospel, within which the parable will serve as a metaphor for analyzing portrayals of women. Because the nobleman is portrayed as “corrupt and tyrannical” (84), Dowling argues that he simply cannot be aligned with Jesus or God, as a majority of commentators have argued. Indeed, this figure is the very antithesis of the Lukan Jesus, who has come not to tyrannize or “lord it over” others but to bring good news to the poor and release to the captives (4:18–19). She links the third slave with Jesus, who also exposes unjust policies and practices and for which he too has his “pound” (i.e., his life) taken from him. If read within its wider narrative context, the parable clearly honors the third slave; it is his actions, rather than those of the first two slaves, that disciples and/or readers are to emulate. At this point, Dowling asks: To what extent do women characters in Luke also “lose their pound”—if pound is defined more broadly as “what one has that can potentially be taken away by an oppressive other” (117)?

In chapters 4 and 5 Dowling proceeds to a chronological analysis of women’s characterization in the Gospel. She finds in the infancy narrative a highly ambivalent portrayal: on the one hand, Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna play “significant roles in the drama,” “act independently,” and “speak out”; on the other hand, “[w]hen they take the initiative to speak in the ‘male world’ and challenge an ideal of public female silence,” their voices are marginalized or trivialized (140–41). In the remainder of the Gospel, Dowling finds that, while “there are examples of women’s actions being affirmed by Jesus and some of the women are portrayed as models of faith,” women are accorded direct speech far less frequently than in the infancy narrative, and, even when a woman does speak, “on none of these occasions is the woman affirmed for her speech” (185).
Interestingly, it is only in certain parables of Jesus where one finds unambiguously positive portraits of women, for here “women are portrayed as initiating speech and they have their words recorded without being corrected, without ‘losing out’” (185).

Chapter 6 and the conclusion offer the reader a summary and assessment as well as a few implications of the study for Luke’s readers today. Dowling concludes that, although women characters occasionally “gain” when portrayed as exercising agency, discerning divine presence and purpose, or responding to Jesus’ message in faith, more often than not they, like the third slave in 19:11–27, have their “pound” taken away. In what ways do women characters “lose their pound”? First, when women speak in the presence of men, they are often disbelieved, discredited, corrected, or rebuked. Second, the narrator often either refuses to grant speaking roles to women or presents their words in the form of indirect discourse. Finally, women are marginalized and vilified by their frequent association with malevolent spirits or demon possession. Consequently, “the cumulative rhetorical effect,” writes Dowling, “of all these strategies by the Lukan author is to reinforce the patriarchal ideal that women’s speech is not authoritative in a public setting and that the appropriate role in such a setting is a silent one” (198). Yet, while “the dominant rhetoric of the narrative functions to silence or marginalize women’s public speech,” the Gospel also contains “seeds of resistant voices” that “[enable] a counter-reading which ultimately acclaims the women who do speak out in public” (213). According to Dowling, these seeds may be found in the third slave’s courageous actions, which both expose the exploitative practices of the nobleman and deny him further profit at the expense of an oppressed peasantry; in a widow’s dogged persistence before an “unjust judge” (18:1–8); and in Jesus’ repeated contestation of imperial values and practices. Indeed, that Jesus is raised from the dead demonstrates that God ultimately vindicates and acclaims those who confront unjust social structures and practices.

Dowling’s readings of the Parable of the Pounds and women’s characterization in Luke are highly attractive. Moreover, her reviews of the literature on the parable and on Lukan women are among the best. The two chapters devoted to detailed analyses of episodes featuring women are very well done and will find their way into my introductory course on the New Testament writings.

A few critiques, however, are in order. Most important, Dowling’s insistence on having deciphered “the rhetoric of the text” (e.g., 71, 185) and uncovered the author’s “narrative strategies” (e.g., 118, 212) threatens to undermine her laudable commitment to women’s liberation and to breaking patterns of oppression (4). For Dowling, it appears that there really is an elite-male gender ideology in the text, one deliberately inserted by the author of Luke-Acts to restrict women’s roles in early Christian communities. Claims to having deciphered “the rhetoric of the text” devalue other reading experiences and perpetuate
hermeneutical hierarchies in which some interpretations bear more authority than others. Such claims have persisted far too long in the academy and inhibit efforts at liberation and inclusion. A simple acknowledgement that her reading represents but a single construction or experience of an ancient text would help her project immensely.

Furthermore, Dowling’s readers may wonder if her metaphors of “gaining” and “losing” are applied a bit too loosely. For instance, she repeatedly asserts that the third slave in the parable “literally has his pound taken away from him,” which is deemed thievery and unfair. Yet the pound was not his to begin with; the nobleman merely takes back what is his. However, Dowling links this loss with the loss of life incurred by Jesus and John as well as with losses of agency and dignity sustained by women who speak out in public. Jesus, John, and many women in Luke, she claims, “lose their pound.” But, are these losses really comparable? Dowling also states that Lukan women “gain” when they are portrayed as taking initiative, exhibiting leadership qualities, or responding to God in faith. Yet in her reading of the Parable of the Pounds, “gain” is defined exclusively in negative terms: all of those who “gain” (i.e., the nobleman and the first two slaves) do so at others’ expense and with their own advantage in mind.

Finally, Dowling professes a commitment to reading the Parable of the Pounds in its narrative context, yet she ignores the narrator’s prefatory remark in verse 11, which encourages readers to align the nobleman with Jesus, the slaves with disciples and/or readers, and the nobleman’s enemies with those who opposed (or continue to oppose) Jesus’ message. Admittedly, the allegory suggested by the narrator is profoundly unsettling and unattractive, but readers should not at all be surprised to find early Christian writers attributing the authoritarianism, favoritism, and callous brutality of the imperial elite to the resurrected Jesus or to God. In fact, we find similar attributions all throughout the early Christian writings. I would prefer to acknowledge the implied allegory as one early yet ultimately unhelpful reading of the parable, especially in view of the foci of Jesus’ ministry (4:18–19) and personal commitments to social justice, and only then offer an alternative, subversive rereading similar to Dowling’s. While Dowling’s reading is very appealing, it is a stretch, even if working within a modernist framework, to claim that it represents “the rhetoric of the text.”