

Lost and Found Coin: Dalit Feminist Hermeneutical Explorations of Luke 15:8-10

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The parable of the lost coin constantly reminds me of my context in India as a Dalit Christian woman. I find the parable a potential text for empowering Dalit women who live in poverty and who struggle for survival. I discern productive connections between Dalit women and the parable of the lost coin.

Dalit women in India are the least, the last and the lost. Dr. Ambedkar describes the Hindu caste system as a pyramid of earthenware pots set on top of each other. The untouchables are at the bottom while the Sudras are on top of them; then follow the Visyas, the Kshatriyas and finally the Brahmins at the very top. But within each earthenware pot men are at the top of the women. Women of each caste are beneath their men, like crushed and wasted powder. So while at the very bottom are Dalits, below the Dalit men are the Dalit women.¹ The purpose of this work is to voice out the struggles of the lost Dalit women and to discover new strengths from the biblical text. It is hoped that in reviewing the parable of the lost coin from Dalit feminist perspective, we will find help for Dalit women to identify their own potentialities so they can celebrate their lives.

1. Hermeneutical Explorations

The importance of hermeneutics has grown remarkably in recent decades. An English translation of the term 'hermeneutics' traces it to *hermeneuein*, a Greek word meaning 'to interpret.'² Thus, hermeneutics implies explanation, exposition, expression, intelligible reading or even translation. We live out interpretation in our day to day lives as we read, see, understand and explain several things. Hermeneutics plays a significant role from day one when people start learning things. As Felix Wilfred says, "there is no area of human life and expression where hermeneutics is absent or does not play a significant role, whether people are aware of it or not. The interpretation is part and parcel of the society and it affects the society."³ Hermeneutics is part not only of academic life but also of the day to day lives of every human being.

Hermeneutics in the field of theology deals with the interpretation of scripture in the light of one's contextual experience.⁴ In the hermeneutical process, a reader's presuppositions,

¹ Aruna Gnanadason, "Dalit Women - The Dalit of the Dalit," *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, a monograph edited by Arvind P. Nirmal and V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, year not cited).

² G. Isaiah quotes Roy Zuck in "Hermeneutics for Homiletics," in *Union Bible Seminary Journal*, Vol. 2, No.1 (March 2004): 58; Werber G. Jeanrond, "Hermeneutics," *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, edited by R.J. Coggins & J. L. Houlden (London: SCM Press, 1990), 282.

³ Felix Wilfred. *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope: At the Dawn of the Millennium* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 248.

⁴ Moises Silva, "Who Needs Hermeneutics Anyway," *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, edited by Walter C. Kaiser and Moises Silva (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 15; Peter C. Hodgson, *God in History: Shapes of Freedom* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 186.

awareness, beliefs, knowledge, experiences of failures, success, dilemmas, competence, hopes, community expectations, desires, etc. influence consciously or subconsciously the construction of meaning and relevance of the text. In the hermeneutical process a reader may find discrepancies within the text or come to an understanding that certain texts are facts and liberating while others are not.⁵ As the Bible is given the highest place in the life of Christians, it is highly essential to re-interpret biblical texts according to the context in order to bring out its relevant message. In the past the Bible has been misused and abused in various ways to justify exclusion, gender exploitation and other forms of oppression. Hence, inventing new ways of interpreting Christian doctrines and scriptures is an urgent need for Dalit feminist theology.

2. Interconnectedness between Dalit Women and the Bible

Dalit theologians find interconnectedness between the experiences of Dalits and the marginalized in the Bible.⁶ A Maria Arul Raja S.J. states, "It is an irony to think of a Dalit interpretation of the written text of the Bible, when a vast majority of them are kept as illiterates." He acknowledges Dalit hermeneutics as a dialogue between two worlds: "the Dalit world creating its own texts and Biblical texts creating its world are in dialogue with each other."⁷ Dalits are often kept illiterate and biblical teaching has been used to exploit them. Yet it is important to understand that the Bible plays a very significant role in the lives of people; it speaks to people and exists as a living entity in the lives of people. The Bible has been viewed as a transforming agent in the lives of Dalits. Hence, A. Maria Arul Raja proposes the careful re-telling of biblical stories from the perspective of the Dalit community.

Monica Melanchthon states that for a community that was denied access to the scriptures, the Bible becomes good news. It is something unique to Dalits. Dalit Christians found dignity and decorum, equality and equal opportunity, and a sense of worth and confidence in the Bible.⁸ Sathianathan Clarke holds the view that "the Bible was invited to take its place as a sacred object, somewhat resembling the concept of talisman."⁹ For V. Devasahayam, the text, as well as the context, is the site where the battle between the oppressed and the

⁵ Amy-Jill Levine, "Hermeneutics of Suspicion," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, edited by Letty M. Russell and J. Shanon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 140; See Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 174-175.

⁶ K. Jesurathnam affirms that "there are certain points of convergence in the matrixes of both the biblical and Dalit world." He states that "the biblical dictum of a preferential option for the poor and the Dalit struggle for equality are points of convergence." See K. Jesurathnam, "Towards a Dalit Liberative Hermeneutic: Re-reading the Psalms of Lament," in *Bangalore Theological Forum* 34.1 (June 2002) 2-3; K. Jesurathnam, "Towards a Dalit Liberative Hermeneutic: Re-reading the Psalms of Lament" in <http://www.religion-online.org/> accessed on 10 March 2008.

⁷ A. Mari Arul raja, S J. "Perspectives of Dalit Hermeneutics," *Gurukul Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. XVI; Nos. 1-2, January & July (2005): 24; A. Maria Arul Raja, S. J., "Some Reflections on a Dalit Reading of the Bible," in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, edited by V. Devasahayam (Chennai: Gurukul Summer Institute, 1996), 336.

⁸ Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, "Dalits, Bible and Method" in *Society of Bible Literature Publications*, www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=459 (accessed on 2.4.2009).

⁹ Talisman is any object which is bestowed with magical virtue because of its ability to mediate the power of planetary influences and celestial configurations. Sathianathan Clarke, "Viewing the Bible through Eyes and Ears of Subalterns in India" in www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2444 (accessed on 3.4.2010).

oppressor is played out. He says that theologizing through Bible studies will facilitate understanding and acceptance of new ideas. He acknowledges the fact that the Indian Dalit families cherish and value the Bible very much. He emphasizes that the context should be the starting point for reading the Bible.¹⁰ Hence, in this article I intend to re-view the parable of the lost coin from Dalit feminist perspective. The story that is narrated below is a living witness to show the readers how women are lost in their own homes in India. These stories find firm connections with the stories of the Bible.

3. Context of Dalit Women: Story of Nirmala Kumari

There are innumerable examples from all over India of how Dalit women suffer for survival in their own families. As part of my doctoral research, I did a field study in South Andhra Lutheran Church, among 100 women. The following is one of the life stories, which serve as an example of how Dalit Christian women are lost in their own homes.

Kumari, 37, comes from Puttur in Chittore District of Andhra Pradesh. She shared her memories of hunger and want. While sharing her story, her voice faltered and eyes crammed up with tears. She was born into a Christian family. She lost her mother when she was a child and her father was a drunkard. She really had a tough time as a child. She was put in a Mission School where she studied up to 10th class and learnt tailoring. She could not excel in her studies due to problems at home. When she was leaving the hostel, she was given a sewing machine so she could have her own livelihood. But her father sold it to have money for his drinking. Despite her education, she went to work as an agricultural laborer. Her father arranged her marriage to another drunkard who already had an affair and was an aged person. After she gave birth to two children, he left her. When the children were born her husband was unemployed while she used to work as an agricultural labourer, earning a few rupees.

“Even that hard earned money was snatched by my husband. That is why I could not give milk to my child. When my child cried I just warmed some water and mixed it with sugar and gave it to my child to drink. I was living in utter poverty. My husband did not care for me. Later I decided not to go to him anymore. Then my aunt put me as a caretaker in an orphanage. There my children’s studies and other needs are taken care of and I get Rs.1000 pocket money while our food is taken care of. I am happy now. It is good he left me. I am in peace.”

Kumari was lost in her own home. She lost her life, her joy, and her education. She was lost in poverty. Her children were in dire hunger most of the time. But she was found by her aunt. She is in a better position now. She celebrates her life with the orphans where she is working. She says “I am more comfortable now. God has liberated me from my husband who is a drunkard. God also liberated me and my children from poverty. I never regret not being in relationship with my husband. Now I have better opportunities to bring

¹⁰ V. Devasahayam, “Introduction”, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, edited by V. Devasahayam (Chennai: Gurukul Summer Institute, 1996); V. Devasahayam, *Doing Dalit Theology in Biblical Key* (Chennai: ISPCK/Gurukul, 1997), 4. See V. Devasahayam’s brilliant work on *Bible Studies, Outside the Camp: Bible Studies in Dalit Perspective* (Chennai: Gurukul, 1992); Arvind P. Nirmal, *Heuristic Explorations* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1990), 145-146.

up my children in a better way.” It is important for our church in India to give attention to such struggles of women and address these issues in our theological articulations.

4. The Lost and Found Coin: Luke 15:8-10

The parable of the lost coin is a response to a specific complaint against Jesus. The text begins with the statement: “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him” (v. 1). The complaint is: “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (v. 2). Luke 15 is a well known chapter which deals with three parables on the theme of “lost and found”. The parable of the lost coin is placed in the middle of two parables. The first parable (vv. 3-7) deals with the sheep; the second parable (vv. 8-10) the coin; and the third parable (vv. 11-32) the son. It is typical of Luke to equally mention male and female. For examples, Elizabeth and Zechariah (1:5-7), Anna, her father Phanuel, and husband (2:36-38), the widow of Zarephath and Elijah (4:25-38), a mother and her son (7:11-15), a woman who anointed Jesus and a Pharisee (7:36-50), 12 male disciples and “some women” disciples (8:1-3), Jesus’ mother and his brothers (8:19-21), a woman with a flow of blood and Peter; Jairus and his daughter (8:43-56), a woman with infirmity and the ruler of Synagogue (13:10-17).¹¹

As Jesus was criticized by the priestly class and religious leaders, he clarifies his vision, mission and goal. Luke places chapter 15 as an address to so-called sinners – the tax collectors and outcasts – and the so-called righteous ones – the Pharisees and teachers of the law who were complaining. Jesus’ response was both a clarification of his vision and mission and an announcement of the joy of finding the lost ones.¹² The text says that the woman used to have 10 silver coins and she lost one of them. The term lost can mean many things: “omitted,” “misplaced,” “not there,” “not to be found,” or “missing”, etc. The woman was not satisfied with her nine coins. She was very much worried about the missing one. The text does not say where or how the coin was lost. But the woman was set to find it because it was so precious to her.

Different views are expressed on the woman having 10 silver coins. One view suggests that her having 10 silver coins is an indication of her being poor. One silver coin probably represents a sizeable amount of the family savings. It also represents more than a whole day’s wage of a common person in Palestine. Perhaps the 10 silver coins were kept safe in the peasant’s house as a saving for rainy days. Another view suggests that there can be a romantic reason in her searching for it. To have a piece of jewelry with ten silver coins was a mark of being married.¹³ So it must have been so precious to her. Whether in a context of poverty or for its sentimental value, the lost coin was precious for the woman. Out of her own interest she searches for it¹⁴ with intelligence, responsibility, and self-

¹¹ Luke Timothy, *The Gospel of Luke*, Vol. 33 (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 236.

¹² Kim Young, “Searching for the Lost Coin,” *In God’s Image*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1992): 5-9.

¹³ “What is the meaning of the Parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin,” www.gotquestions.org/parable-lost-sheep-coin.html - 20k (accessed on 1.2.2009).

¹⁴ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke*, Revised Edition (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1975), 201-203; John Nolland, *World Biblical Commentary, Luke 9:21-18:34*, Vol. 35 B (Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1993), 776.

confidence. She lights the lamp, sweeps the house and searches for it diligently until she finds it. When she finds it she calls her female friends and female neighbors, and says to them, "Come rejoice with me, since I found the coin that I lost." Thus she celebrates her achievement. The parable comes to a close with Jesus' assertion that "in the same way there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents."

The woman in the parable has worked out a perfect plan to light the lamp so that she can bring brightness to the house, and to sweep the dust off the house so she can see clearly and check the slits. Her perfect plan worked out well and at last she found her precious coin. How was she successful in her goal? How did she implement her own plan? What is the significance of her success in finding the lost coin for Dalit women in India? What was the image Jesus pulls through this parable? These questions are imperative in the context of the Dalit community.

5. Why I chose the second parable

Jesus attempts to communicate the equal dignity of women in several ways. One deliberate and instant attempt is through his parable of the woman who found the lost coin (Lk. 15:8ff.). In this parable Jesus illustrates God in the likeness of a woman.¹⁵ Luke recorded that tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus, hence, the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes against Jesus. Consequently, Jesus related three parables in a row, all of which depicted God being deeply concerned for that which was lost. The second parable deals with the woman with whom Jesus identifies and describes in the image of God. Jesus recognizes and acknowledges the potentialities of a poor peasant woman in finding the lost coin. I am a Dalit woman who was lost and then found, yet deeply distressed to live in the stigma of untouchability when the topic of 'caste' arises in my day to day relationships in our society. I believe that women are lost in their own homes even before they are lost in the church and society. My commitment is to find the lost women. The lost women in their own homes need to be found. In the context of the lost community, I am confident that this parable will enlighten us to identify our own potentialities and strength to find the lost ones in our families, church and the society at large.

6. Insights from the Text

6.1 Display of God in the Female Image

Metaphors are universal and present in everyday life, language, thought and action. Children learn and construct their world through metaphors from the early age. As part of my doctoral dissertation, I conducted personal interviews with women of South Andhra Lutheran Church. I found that childhood metaphors of God as Father, of men as the image of God, and woman as the rib of man have been so embedded in women's minds. Some of the responses drawn from both the personal interviews and group discussions are: 'God is Father,' 'Jesus called God Father,' 'God is he,' 'Jesus is he,' 'Holy Spirit is he,' 'man is created in the image of God,' 'woman is the rib of man,' 'woman is a helper to a man,' 'woman is the cause of sin therefore she is weak,' 'Paul said to women to be silent,' 'Jesus'

¹⁵ Barbara E. Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1996), 185.

disciples are male therefore women need not be ordained,' and 'Jesus said to Mary at the tomb not to touch him, but he asked Thomas to touch him, so woman is a sinner,' 'women have to cover their heads because the Bible teaches so,' 'women should not take communion and step into the altar during menstruation because the Bible says they are unclean during that time' and 'women have to obey their husbands.' These responses are the result of their reading the Bible and the traditional male interpretations. Women face oppression, violence and secondary position particularly on the belief that "God created man in the image of God." Hence, the Image of God has become most problematic for my consciousness in doing theology. The female metaphor that is used for God in the parable is of paramount importance to Dalit Christian women to re-image themselves with new identities which uphold their dignity as women. "God's image and women in God's image" is a demanding theological issue for Dalit feminists to deal with.

In the first parable the shepherd image is given to God who is searching for the lost sheep. The third parable depicts God in the father image who celebrates on the return of a lost son. The second parable portrays God in a female image, as a woman who is searching for a lost coin. Jesus did not refrain from teaching about God in female metaphors. In fact, it would appear that Jesus included this womanly image of God quite intentionally at this point for the scribes and Pharisees were among those who degraded women. Whether Jesus compares the woman in the parable to God or to himself, the point here is that feminine metaphor is given value. The woman has natural potential abilities which she demonstrates in order to accomplish her goal. She is an optimist, with a specific goal, a perfect plan to carry out her goal. She works according to her goal diligently until she accomplishes it, and finally on completion, she announces her achievement to her friends and neighbors through a celebration. She begins and completes. One can find in the text that she begins with the purpose and ends with celebration on her completion. Like the woman in the parable Jesus had a perfect plan to find the lost ones. How many girl children are lost within the Dalit homes is a serious theological question that needs to be addressed in Dalit theological enquiries.

The parable of the lost coin offers a fascinating teaching to theologians and elites. It is rich in resources for reflection and for preaching in new and refreshing ways to enhance human dignity. The recovery of lost and buried images and voices should be the primary task for Dalit feminist theologians. What difference the recovery of lost images makes is an essential inquiry in the community of theologians and religious leaders.

6.2 Lights the Lamp: Implications for Dalit Women

The woman in the text begins with the goal and ends in celebration over her achievement. To accomplish the task she does certain functions. The first was to light the lamp. Why did she light the lamp? Perhaps darkness prevailed in her house. During the time of Jesus, peasants' houses were probably mostly dark, with little ventilation – perhaps through a small door and few high windows.¹⁶ The coin might have been missing in the darkness. Therefore she used her intelligence to search for the lost coin. Her first step was to deal

¹⁶ Bruce J. Malina & Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 370; John Nolland, *World Biblical Commentary*. 775; Barbara Reid, *Choosing the Better Part?*, 187-188.

with the darkness by bringing light into her house. How is the lighting of lamp applicable to the context of Dalit women?

Are there any similarities between the lost Dalit women and the silver coin? Is there any connection between Dalit women and the woman in the parable? The fact remains in the text that both the coin and the woman are in the small house, both are in dark and dusty area, both resemble poverty and both of them need light. Similarly Dalit women live in darkness. What does darkness mean to Dalit women? The life of Dalit women is kept in darkness. The image of God in them is missing. At every walk of their life, darkness, tears, unhappiness, and struggles prevail. Dalit women need the light, the light of the Truth and the Light of the gospel. Their lives need to be brightened. The light of the gospel would enable them to realize the image of God in them and to repent over their acceptance of internalizing their lost status in them.

6.3 Sweeps the House: Significance for Dalit Women

The woman sweeping the house implies that the floor has been filled with dust. She sweeps the floor as she hopes to see the coin sparkle, or hear it tinkle as it gets dragged by the broom.¹⁷

What is the significance of sweeping the house for Dalit women in India? Dalit women are the lost coins in their own families, churches and society. They have lost the image of God as it has been covered by the thickened layer of dust of patriarchy and caste system. They have been branded as impure, dirty, sinners, untouchables, unclean, and outcaste. The Dalit community is made to live outside the villages, particularly near burial grounds. They live in dirty and congested slums. They are made to do the jobs such as cleaning the drainage, toilets, public roads, etc. They are branded as polluted. While church leaders, pastors, church members, politicians, and economists are satisfied with the powerful group of people (represented by the nine silver coins) the woman in the text searches for the lost coin. It is essential to clear the dust of oppressive systems and clear the slits of superiority and inferiority so pervasive in our families, churches and the society. Only then is it possible to find the lost coin.

6.4 Searches Diligently: Challenge for Leaders and Dalit women

The woman in the text lights the lamp, sweeps the house, and searches diligently. The term “diligently” means “industriously,” “carefully,” “actively,” “conscientiously,” “attentively” and so on. She searches diligently until she finds it. She begins the work in search of her lost coin and completes in finding it.

The context of Dalit women is similar to both the woman and the coin – those who are lost under the dust and in the slits, lost in their own families, in their own churches and in their own societies. We need to note here that the woman in the parable is not given any helping hand by her family members, friends or neighbors. Diligent searching is a real challenge in the context of Dalit women as they are constantly discouraged rather than encouraged by members of their families or churches.

¹⁷ William Barclay, 201-203.

6.5 Sinner Repents and Celebration Follows: Implication for Dalit Women

Luke says, "In the same way there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." But the question here is: can the lost coin repent? Is it the coin's mistake to be lost? What does Jesus mean when he mentions the "repentance of one sinner?" What is the intention of Jesus' response to the Jewish religious leaders? Is Jesus addressing the religious leaders to repent or is he addressing the poor peasants? Who has to repent? Perhaps repentance is required of both parties to celebrate in God's Kingdom. Although it is not the mistake of the coin to be lost, it needs to shine in the light, and it needs to tinkle when the dust is swept so that its voice can be heard. It is precious so it needs to be found. Similar question needs to be asked in the context of lost Dalit women. Is it Dalit women's mistake to be lost? Who threw them under the dust? Is it not the mistake of dusty and dirty patriarchy and caste system? Repentance is required of both Dalit women and the dominant people. Dalit women are in need of repentance over their silence for being under the dust. They need to shine in brightness. Their voices need to be heard so that they can be found. The church needs to repent over her satisfaction with being with the privileged. It is the responsibility of the church to light the lamp and clear the dust and slits of patriarchy and caste system.

Instant celebration takes place at the end of the success. The woman invites her friends and neighbors and celebrates the event. Dalit women need celebration in their lives for their successes. Religious leaders and the church should identify and acknowledge their strengths and success. Celebration on finding the lost coin indicates the sharing and dining with each other. As celebrations of sharing and dining with the outcasts led to criticism at the beginning of Luke 15, Jesus made it clear with the dominant group that he rejoices in providing the outcasts their due place in his kingdom. The celebration of the Last Supper is an indication of the grand communion in God's Kingdom. The teaching of Jesus in the parable extends a call to Dalit women to move away from suppression towards celebration in the communion of God's Kingdom.

Conclusion

God created human beings to have life in fullness and joy, yet Dalit women are deprived of life in fullness and joy and they live continuously in pain and suffering. Dalit women are the lost coins in Indian society. Nirmala Kumari's story is an apt example of one who has been lost in her own home. There are numerous examples to show that women are lost in their own homes. It is essential to recover their lost identity and the image of God in them. The parable of the lost coin is powerful and potential in finding and transforming the lives of women. It is important to recover the lost image of God in women and also the lost metaphors to image God. It is an urgent need for the Indian Church and its members, to develop Jesus' model in their mission to the marginalized. By entering into a figurative world of the parable of the lost coin, the Dalit feminist theology invites both male and female believers to expand their inventions of new God images and to recover the lost images of God so that they can carry on their comprehensive divine ministry.

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