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The First Beatitude -

The Interpretation of Wesley and New Testament Exegesis

In this Short Paper I will give first (I) an outline of the interpretation of the First Beatitude by John Wesley, second (II) a short look into the background of the blessing of the poor within the Old Testament and Early Judaism, and, third (III), I will draw some conclusions for our interpretation of the relevant passages in Luke 6,20 and Matthew 5,3.

I. John Wesley and the First Beatitude.

As with almost all Christian tradition the main emphasis in John Wesley's interpretation of the First Beatitude is on the version in the gospel of St. Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount.

But in his Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament, in his explanation of Luke 6,20, Wesley noted clearly the difference between the two versions.

He understands the "Sermon on the Plain" as a repetition of the Sermon on the Mount, which was delivered shortly before. Explaining the line "Happy are ye poor" Wesley remarks: "The word seems here to be taken literally. Ye, who have left all for me". Jesus is specifically addressing his disciples; but not exclusively them, as the following "Woe" to the riches shows.

More explicit is the explanation of the meaning of "the poor in spirit" according to Matthew 5,3. They are those "who are unfeignedly penitent; they who are truly convinced of sin; who see and feel the state they are in by nature, being deeply sensible of their sinfulness, guiltiness, helplessness."

This interpretation sounds like a summary of the exposition of Mt 5,3 in Wesley's first sermon on the Sermon on the Mount (SOSO 21; WJW I, 466-487).

Already in his remarks on the relationship between the eight Beatitudes, Wesley hints at his basic understanding of "poverty of Spirit". Wesley seeks to combine the interpretation which looks upon the Beatitudes as "several stages of the Christian course, the steps which a Christian successively takes in his journey to the promised land", and the interpretation which holds "that all the particulars here set down belong at all times to every Christian". Wesley does not see any inconsistency between them.

"It is undoubtedly true that both 'poverty of spirit' and every other temper which is here mentioned are at all times found in a greater or less degree in every real Christian. And it is equally true that real Christianity always begins in poverty of spirit, and goes on in the order here set down till the 'man of God' is made 'perfect'. We begin at the lowest of these gifts of God; yet so as not to relinquish this when we are called of God to come up higher: but 'whereunto we have already attained' we 'hold fast', while we 'press on' to what is yet before, to the highest blessings of God in Christ Jesus." (I, 1).

Wesley has an interesting theory on how it happened that Jesus spoke about "poverty of spirit".

"It may not improbably be supposed that our Lord, looking on those who were round about him, and observing that not many rich were there, but rather the poor of the world, took occasion from thence to make a transition from temporal to spiritual things."

When Jesus addresses the "poor in spirit" it is quite obvious that he does not speak to them as those who "are poor as to outward circumstances (it being not impossible that some of these may be as far from happiness as a monarch upon his throne) but 'the poor in spirit'; they who, whatever their outward circumstances are, have that disposition of heart which is the first step to all real, substantial happiness, either in this world or that which is to come." (I, 2).

But the most important question is: "Who then are the 'poor in spirit'? Without question, the humble; they who know themselves, who are convinced of sin; whose to whom God hath given that first repentance which is previous to faith in Christ."

In the following sentences Wesley gives a vivid description of what he understands to be

repentance, humility or poverty of the spirit and concludes in stating:

"'Poverty of spirit, then, as it implies the first step we take in running the race which is set before us, is a just sense of our inward and outward sins, and of our guilt and helplessness. This some have monstrously styled the 'virtue of humility'; thus teaching us to be proud of knowing we deserve damnation. But our Lord's expression is quite of another kind; conveying no idea to the hearer but that of mere want, of naked sin, of helpless guilt and misery." (I, 7).

Wesley compares this with Paul's preaching that everyone is under the wrath of God and that a person is justified only by faith without the deeds of the law, - "expressions all tending to the same point, even to 'hide pride from man'; to humble him to the dust, without teaching him to reflect upon his humility as a virtue; to inspire him with that full piercing conviction of his utter sinfulness, guilt, and helplessness, which casts the sinner, stripped of all, lost and undone, on his strong helper, 'Jesus Christ the righteous'." (I, 8)

"One cannot but observe here that Christianity begins just where heathen morality ends: 'poverty of spirit', 'conviction of sin', the 'renouncing ourselves', the 'not having our own righteousness', the very first point in the religion of Jesus Christ, leaving all pagan religion behind." (I,9)

Following the same thought, the "kingdom of heaven", which is promised to the poor in spirit, is the kingdom of God "within us", "even 'righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost'. And what is righteousness but the life of God in the soul, the mind which was in Christ Jesus, the image of God stamped upon the heart, now renewed after the likeness of him that created it? What is it but the love of God because he first loved us, and the love of all mankind for his sake?" (I, 11)

II. The Origins of the Blessing of the Poor in the Old Testament and Early Judaism

It seems to follow that the next step of our investigation should be a closer look into the text of the New Testament itself. But as you all may know, at least at this point it is almost impossible to understand the meaning of the words of the New Testament without having some knowledge of its Old Testament background.

There are two basic tendencies within the Old Testament regarding the role of the poor.

1) The poor are the "object" of oppression and exploitation. Over against this speaks the law and the voices of the early prophets in Israel (Ex 23,6; Dtn 15,1-12; 24,14; Am 2,6f; 4,1; 5,12; 8,4-6; Jer 2,34; 5,28; 22,16; Ez 16,49; 18,12; 22,29). The poor should be the "object" of the care of the king and the community (Ps 72,1-4; 12-14; 82,3f), and they are, indeed, the object of the special care of the Lord himself (Ps 107,41; Jes 10,2; 14,3; 29,19; 47,17).

There should be no poverty at all in Israel (Dtn 15).

2) On the other hand, the poor are the subjects of faithful prayer to God. These are the prayers of those who know their utmost helplessness and who are convinced that there is no hope for them except with the Lord.

They cry to God:

"As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, oh my God." (Ps 14,17).

These words are at the same time both a confession that these people have no power left to help themselves; as well as an expression of their unshakeable confidence in the power of God and his willingness to help them (Cf. Ps 34,6; 35,10; 70,6; 86,1; 109,28).

We may distinguish between those two tendencies; but it would be a mistake to separate them into two different traditions of which the one speaks mainly about economic and social poverty and the other aims only at spiritual poverty.

The fact that there are poor among the people of God represents not only a social problem in the Old Testament. It questions also the people's relationship to God. The poor are God's protégés and clients; they are the poor of Jahweh and therefore their legal rights as well as their humble prayers are in God's hands (cf. Jes 10,2; 14,32; 41,17; 49,13; Hi 34,28; 36,6; Ps 22,25; 34,7).

On the other hand the poor who call to God in many of the Psalms are not just the pious. They are afflicted by illness, enemies, need and sin. That may be one of the reasons why the Hebrew words for poverty (ʿaebjōn/poor; ʿanī/needy; ʿanāw/afflicted/oppressed/humble) in spite of their apparent distinctiveness are in many ways interchangeable and can be combined.

For example, ʿanī/needy is used in connection with the widow and the orphan (Jes 10,2; Sach 7,10), with the hungry, the homeless and the naked (Jes 58,7) as well as in connection with those contrite in spirit (Jes 66,2). Psalm 69,33f puts together the needy, the oppressed and those who seek God.

Not an isolated spiritual attitude or even virtue is meant; rather all these words of prayer describe how people with concrete needs turn to their God confident that he will be the one who will help and rescue them.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied, that in some texts the poor are the pious and the righteous (esp. Ps 34 and 37). It is still an open question whether there is a sociological background to this pattern. Were there groups in Early Judaism which, because of their faithfulness to the law became poor? Or do we find here at least a kind of stereotype of a spiritualized piety of the poor?

This seems to be the case within the community of Qumran where the ʿaebjōnē haesaed (the poor of grace, 1 QH 5,22) or ʿaebjōnē peduteka (the poor of your redemption, 1 QM 11,9) and the ʿanwē ruach (the poor of the spirit, 1 QM 14,7; 1 QH 14,3) describe the people who belong to this group and their special piety. The confession to being nothing but "dust" before God and the conviction of an eschatological election through the grace of God are connected by this self definition.

III. The Meaning of the Blessing of the Poor in Lk 6,20 and Mt 5,3

To bring good news to the poor is, according to Mt 11,5/Lk 7,22b and Lk 4,18, the Gospel of Jesus summarized in one word.

Jesus blesses the poor - of course not because they are poor, but because God is near to those who need him the most. The Kingdom of God belongs to them and the presence of his love and care will fill their needs - which is more than a promise that they will be rich!

In contrast to many exegetes I favour the use of the second person in the Lukan version of the beatitude as the original form which was used by Jesus addressing his audience.

The blessing of the poor is not the Wisdom type of the beatitudes mostly found in the Old Testament and not a general statement about an attitude or virtue. The blessing of the poor is part of the prophetic teaching of Jesus which gains its truth out of the personal encounter with him and his mission.

The poor, whom Jesus addresses, suffer from real poverty; but their status is not only described by their economic situation but also by their longing for help from God through the work of Jesus.

Luke has preserved the wording of the original saying of Jesus but relates it especially to the disciples who left all in order to belong to Jesus. Wesley's explanation fits very well with the Lukan redaction.

Matthew and his tradition gave the first Beatitude a general meaning, confirming it to the Wisdom type of the makarism (third person). In consequence the meaning of "the poor" had to be qualified: They are the poor in spirit. This does not mean that Jesus's saying relates only to "spiritual poverty". The "poor in spirit" are people whose outward situation compels them to expect all from God and whose inward attitude is such to expect really all from God. Poverty in spirit is poverty before God - not only in a spiritual sense but in such a manner that our economic needs and our emotional sufferings are the place where we meet with the saving God.

To know that we need God's help and salvation in every respect is the attitude which is meant by being "poor in spirit". The blessing of the poor in spirit has a deep relationship to the justification of the ungodly, which was rightly seen by Wesley and a long tradition of Protestant interpretation of the First Beatitude. But the blessing of the poor and its Old Testament background may help us

to understand God's salvific activity in its full width which encompasses the whole human existence. Wesley's interpretation of poverty in spirit as repentance therefore is not wrong but may be too narrow and too "active" compared with the original meaning in the New Testament.

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