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Celebrating God's Future: Feminist Reflections on the Eschatology of Jesus

The first part of my paper consists of some reflections on a feminist hermeneutic approach to the eschatology of Jesus. The second part discusses two examples of Jesus-traditions especially relevant to the relation of the human body and the hope for God's Kingdom.

Initially I want to sketch four areas of hermeneutical reflection on the eschatology of Jesus:

1 The method of Social History

I live in a world where 80% poor and supposedly superfluous human beings stand over against a prosperous 20%. The gap is not so wide in Germany, but nevertheless many sense a menacing future. Why do I ask about the eschatology of Jesus? In the Jesus-tradition, I hear the language of hope, a poetics of trust in God, from which I want to learn. This language of hope opens up new horizons for me and others. The methodological basis for my understanding of the eschatology of Jesus needs to be named first: I proceed from social historical questions about the people whose voices are heard in this tradition. At the same time, I look at the world and social context of today. It should be an essential component of scholarly method to reflect on one's own hermeneutic when one treats history. The social-historical question is relevant for the historical material and for the interpreter's context.

2 Demythologizing and the Relevance of Myth

Rudolf Bultmann's demythologising programme of 1941¹ brought liberation from fundamentalist pressure to several generations of Christians. According to Bultmann, the eschatological texts of the New Testament do not have to be

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie. Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung*, München 1941, 27-69. (ET: "New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing," in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert Ogden, Philadelphia 1984, 14-43).

taken literally. They are not to be read as God's timetable for the future. For Bultmann, it was an anachronism to accept and *repristinate*² concepts of mythical eschatology, such as the existence of demons; that is, to accept them literally, to declare them to be binding for believers and to exert pressure with them. This aspect of the demythologizing programme has lost nothing of its liberating power.

Despite these liberating aspects of Bultmann's programme I do not think that we have to demythologize the eschatological traditions. To be sure, the gospels do not narrate an eschatological myth as a continuous end-time drama, but they speak the language of myth. From the point of view of the history of religion, the promise that the *praeis/meek* will inherit the earth (Mt 5:5) is just as mythical as a narrative of a primeval time of creation. I use the word "myth" in a manner not unlike Bultmann's: the New Testament concepts he calls mythical I also call mythical. However, I do not tie them to the need of demythologizing. The truth to which they testify cannot be said differently. Without mythical speech it is impossible to speak of God. The eschatology of the New Testament is a mythology which when viewed from the perspective of history of religion belongs to the polyphony of religion, the truth of which I can understand without taking it literally as fundamentalists do.

I want to honour the mythical eschatology of the evangelists also in its poetic power. Mythical speech does not serve the natural history of antiquity to describe heaven and earth. The images of New Testament mythology are rooted in the First Testament tradition of lament, of praise and promise. That tradition is to be ranked with poetic world literature. Therefore, I deliberately do not define "myth" and "poetry" systematically; rather, I define them pragmatically in relation to the historical material. The eschatology of Jesus should, therefore, be understood as myth and as poetry. Precisely because it is mythical and poetic, the language of this myth and this poetry was directly comprehensible to Jesus' contemporaries and is so still today.

3 Are these texts fundamentally dualistic?

Dualistic paradigms are dominant in the Christian interpretation of the eschatological Jesus tradition: radical distinctions are made between "this world" (*Diesseits*) and "the next" (*Jenseits*), history and the kingdom of God, earth and heaven, body and soul. According to this paradigm, history is conceived

² Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie*, 15f.

in the eschatology of Jesus as a continuous, linear occurrence that rushes to a radical end. "This world", the earth, is transitory and remote from God; only "the next world", the kingdom of God, brings true salvation and redemption. This dualism in the Christian understanding of eschatology has been harshly criticised particularly by Rosemary Radford Ruether,³ and I follow her critique. She criticises the notion of an ultimate future, an end of history, and a linear plan of salvation, calling it Christian imperialism. For her, the notion that the human body is not part of salvation demonstrates an anti-feminine and anti-bodily androcentrism and egocentrism.⁴

It is necessary to ask (with Ruether) whether the eschatology of Jesus may be correctly comprehended within a dualistic understanding.

Any theory of parables is immediately affected by the decision to accept or reject the dualism of "this world" and "the next". In scholarly parable theories today, the world of unemployed day labourers, of women baking bread, and of female and male slaves still has no place in relation to God. The parables are read with a dualistic presupposition.

In my opinion, this dualism begins to be negated when the hands of women baking bread are seen as a place of divine revelation. I regard the parables as revelational speech in which the world of people (and of plants) is itself a place of divine action. God has looked upon the suffering of unemployed day labourers and reveals God's self at the point where human beings break through the logic of this suffering. The earth itself is a place of divine action and of transformation on the way to the kingdom of God. The every day world is transparent to God's wrath and God's grace.

4 Must the eschatology of Jesus be read in terms of linear time?

In his demythologizing programme, Bultmann proceeded with the unquestioned assumption that time and history will always continue in hours, days, years, and millennia. He presupposed a linear model of time. "The mythical eschatology of the New Testament is brought to an end basically by the simple fact that Christ's *parousia* did not take place as soon as the New Testament expected; rather, history continued on and—as every responsible person

³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexismus und die Rede von Gott*, Gütersloh 1985, Kapitel 10. (English: "Eschatology and Feminism," in Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston 1983, 235-58).

⁴ Cf. also Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, Frankfurt 1966, 362 for criticism on the egotism of the hope for immortality. (ET: *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton, New York 1983, 371).

is convinced—will continue on.”⁵ This conception of time is founded in the time of clocks and in the time of conquerors; clocks suggest such a conception and conquerors want to make sure that everything continues as it is. Upon this linear concept of time rests the scholarly theory that the expectation of the coming of the kingdom of God within a foreseeable time frame was an error, and that the “delay of the parousia” brought with it a new concept of eschatology. The end of history passed into the far distance; instead of the kingdom of God, the Church arrived.

The conception of linear time has been critiqued by philosophy and by feminist theory. The result of this critique is that we have had to ask the social historical question: How do the people speaking in the texts experience time and their relation to God? The experience of God’s nearness in space and time is not separable from the people who have that experience and share it with one another. Their eschatological hopes interpret and alter their present and their future. Their experience of time is one of fear and trembling as well as one of joy over God’s nearness; it is the experience of a time of waiting and of hoping for a future that God grants. Those who wait on God in the present live eschatologically: their present is fulfilled and they are full of yearning for the future of God. The concept of the kingdom of God signifies God’s activity: in space and time. A translation of these experiences into the time of clocks and conquerors is a misunderstanding,⁶ for the notion of “nearness” is primarily a description of peoples’ relationship to God, of their present situation and their hope for the future.

Let us move on to consider two textual examples. A feminist analysis interrogates eschatologies on the basis of a critique of the conception of linear chronology and of the dualistic separation of the human body and everyday

⁵ Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie*, 31.

⁶ Kurt Erlemann, *Naherwartung und Parusieverzögerung im Neuen Testament. Ein Beitrag zur Frage religiöser Zeiterfahrung*, Tübingen/Basel 1995, sees this correctly; however, he retains the “abstract, mathematical-chronometrical concept of time” as formative for the collective consciousness of all people since the rise of modernity and the industrial revolution (see, e.g., 424). He does not take into account the philosophical, feminist and liberation theological critiques of this concept of time and consequently does not recognize that even today people have an experience of time of which the experience of time in the Jesus tradition is one form. Thus he does not see that it cannot, therefore, simply be a question of somehow translating the “subjective” experience of time into linear time. Rather, it is necessary to recognize and to obstruct the catastrophe of thought about progress. The concept of linear time, of progress, has come almost to the point of destroying humanity completely.

life from the kingdom of God. I now turn to the thematic area of the synoptic gospels in which the relation of the conception of God to the reality of the human body can clearly be interpreted: eating and drinking in the kingdom of God.⁷ My question is this: How does the expectation of the eschatological banquet of Jesus fit in with the everyday experience of women, men and children? Are peoples' bodies accorded a share in the experience and expectation of God, or is the banquet of God absolutely transcendent, disconnected from the reality of everyday life?

Within the perspective of social history, I make the assumption that, like Jesus himself, the Jewish people, and the people who chose to be Jewish—those whose voice is heard in this tradition—belong to the impoverished, often hungry majority population of the Roman Empire, especially in Syria-Palestine. Further, I proceed from the conviction that women and children are present as a matter of course in the meal-occasions within the Jesus movement and that the feeding-miracles include women and children just as do the eschatological banquets in the kingdom of God.⁸

1. Mk 14:25 par

The title of the exegesis of this text would be: Enjoying wine together. The Jesus logion that is passed on in close connection with the story of Jesus' last meal with his community of disciples is spoken from the perspective of a dying man; never again will he drink wine until that day in which he drinks it anew in the kingdom of God. In the world and in the tradition in which Jesus and his followers lived, to drink wine is to experience joy in community.⁹ This logion binds together leaving the body and the community, and the new beginning of joy in human life in the body and in the community. The dying Jesus mourns the loss which faces him, and he announces in prophetic words a future in which God brings the joy of bodily existence and community into life anew. This logion resists seeking distance from the body and the earth. The wine is wine and Jesus expresses proleptic joy in the new

⁷ On the eschatological banquet in Jewish sources see George F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era. The Age of the Tannaim*, vol. 2, Cambridge 1954, 364f., and J. Priest, "A Note on the Messianic Banquet," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Messiah. Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity*, Minneapolis 1992, 222-38.

⁸ See Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women – Public Meals. Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition*, Peabody, MA 1993.

⁹ Historical material in Gustaf Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte im Palästina*, vol. 4, Gütersloh 1935, reprinted Hildesheim 1964, 388f., 397ff.

community gathered around the meal.¹⁰ Viewed from a social historical perspective the logion tells of the joy as experienced in the community of disciples. The dying Jesus puts an end to the disciples' anxiety and flight and brings them together anew as a community that lives in bodily relation one to another and to the body of Jesus. I understand the account of the Last Supper, the eating of the body of Jesus, in the sense of a mystical – bodily experience of union with Jesus. Considered from the perspective of history of religion, there are three different perspectives on the future in the narrative of the passion of Jesus: 1) Jesus' resurrection, which he announces again and again; 2) the discipleship community, which proclaims the resurrection (cf., e.g., Mk 14:9 par); 3) the kingdom of God. In the community of the believers after the death of Jesus, all these future hopes are realized and at the same time still lie in the future. The resurrected one is present and yet not fully present; the kingdom of God is experienced and at the same time still an object of hope. The community drinks the wine of God's kingdom and hopes for an earth and heaven in which God alone reigns. Future and present are determined by the relationship to God. The dying Jesus leaves the joy of the common meal and knows himself to be held safely in the community of believers and in the future which arises out of this relationship to God. After Jesus' death, the community renews Jesus' hope in the common joy of the meal which at the same time is a presentiment of future joy. This future can only be understood from the relationship to God. The bodily reality of eating and drinking wine in community is the birthplace of the certainty that the dead are present in this community with their bodies, and it provides hope in the name of God for the communal meals celebrated in the future. In terms of social historical interpretation, the eschatology of Jesus obtains its perspective on the future from the present and from the experience of God of those who speak in these texts.

2. *Mt 11:19*

There are many texts in the Jesus-tradition that tell of an abundance of bread and wine in the presence of Jesus. Thus the feeding-miracles of Jesus bring the kingdom of God to people in their present experience.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus were rejected by some of their contemporaries. The Baptist was said to be demon-possessed and Jesus was said to be

¹⁰ Even if the community is explicitly named only in the Matthean parallel, it is implicit even in Mk 14:25. That Jesus will drink wine "anew" means the eschatological renewal of heaven and earth in the sense of e.g. Rev 21:1.

a glutton, a wine-drinker and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. The reproaches against Jesus strike at precisely his praxis as it is represented in Mk 2:13-17 par (eating with tax collectors) and Mk 2:18-22 par (the question about fasting). Mt 11:19 par (and compare Mk 2:19 par) confirms the hypothesis that the feeding miracle tradition draws on experiences of the community of Jesus' followers. Both he and they placed the banquet of God's kingdom at the centre of their praxis. The abundance of bread in the kingdom of God is reflected in these shared meals. This eschatological abundance is the primary criticism of those who rejected Jesus, and they were right. If one looks at the feeding-miracles in light of this criticism, then it is quite conceivable that these miracles could be narrated as an expression of an eschatological, concrete abundance of the kingdom of God that was already being experienced during the lifetime of Jesus.

Since Jesus and the disciples, like the majority of the Jewish people in the first century, belonged to the poor who had to fight for their very survival, one can ask oneself how it could happen that so much food was gathered and distributed in the shared meals. Jesus and his followers relied on the solidarity-praxis of the Jewish people. They could go into every house as messengers of God and only exceptionally did they have to reckon with being thrown out (Mt 10:14 par).¹¹ In Mt 11:19 par, it can be seen that the Jesus movement actually succeeded in bringing together an abundance of bread and wine that was so large that the hungry recognized in it the kingdom of God, while his critics saw the abundance only as an indication that Jesus was a glutton.

In an ground-breaking article, Ivone Gebara¹² proposes that "resurrection ... [should be made] ... a key to the feminist reading of the Bible." She critiques the "concept" of the "Kingdom of God" as one that personalizes God and is authoritarian. "In kingdoms, power is concentrated in the hand of the King." It is he who is responsible for the citizens rather than the many women and men themselves. Gebara understands resurrection as "action for life", which is "profoundly egalitarian", "a transcendence of situations in which death, murder,... and injustice has been present." "It means as well to *revalorize* the body, our personal and social body." If we look at the mythological eschatology of Jesus in term of Gebara's concept of resurrection, we

¹¹ Mk 6:10f and Lk 9:4f can be understood in this way. Mt 10:11 is more cautious; see Paul Hoffmann, *Studien zur Theologie der Logienquelle*, Münster 1972, 273.

¹² Ivone Gebara, "The Face of Transcendence as a Challenge to the Reading of the Bible in Latin America," in: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 1, New York 1993, 172-186.

will discover in it a wild mixture of the concept of “kingdom” and that of “resurrection”. I agree with Ivone Gebara that an authoritarian streak resides in the concept of kingdom: in it, God quickly turns into a figure who dominates humanity from above, and God cannot then be seen to be the experience of resurrection in the midst of life. However, although I see this danger I am deeply moved by the praxis of resurrection in the mythology of the *basilea* (applying now Gebara’s concept to the material that I have already discussed). The relationship among the people who eat together is the location of the experience of God, the birth-process of hope, the beginning of a just future, the beginning of resurrection. I do see that in the language of this myth the table of communion stands in the king’s festive hall. Nonetheless, this myth does open eyes and hearts to the abundance of love. It need not be read as authoritarian if it is read in the light of resurrection-praxis. Besides, the resurrection-myth itself can be understood as authoritarian if it read without understanding of resurrection-praxis. It is only the praxis of relationship in community, the sharing of bread at tables of justice today, which can give back to the mythology of Jesus the power to give life that it had long ago in the Jesus movement.

Der Aufsatz stellt zuerst einige Reflektionen über einen feministisch-hermeneutischen Zugang zur Eschatologie Jesu dar. Bultmann habe mit Recht die eschatologische Sprache Jesu mythologisch genannt; diese Sprache muß als mythologisch bzw. poetisch gelesen werden. Sie ist weder dualistisch noch im Rahmen linearer Zeit zu verstehen. In einem zweiten Teil werden die Stellen Mk 14,25 und Mt 11,19 in ihren Aussagen zur menschlichen Leiblichkeit und zur eschatologischen Hoffnung für das Reich Gottes ausgelegt.

Cet essai commence par quelques réflexions sur une approche herméneutique féministe de l’eschatologie de Jésus. L’optique de Bultmann définissant le langage de Jésus comme mythologique serait tout à fait pertinente; ce langage doit en effet être appréhendé comme mythologique, voire poétique. Il ne peut être envisagé de manière dualiste, ni dans le cadre d’un temps linéaire. La deuxième partie propose une interprétation des propos sur la corporéité humaine et l’espérance en un royaume de Dieu contenus dans Mc 14, 25 et Mt 11, 19.

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