

## Commentary on Luke 7:37-50

Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck

**7:37.** And behold, a woman in the city, a sinner, when she learned...

γυνή ἣτις ἦν ἐν τῇ πόλει ἀμαρτωλός, καὶ ἐπιγνοῦσα. This is a complex sentence like those found in rabbinical literature: *אשה שבעיר חוטאה כשירעה* = a woman in the city, a sinner, when she learned. ἀμαρτωλός should therefore not be taken as a predicate of ἦν, but as an appositive to γυνή. — γυνή ἀμαρτωλός can refer very generally to a woman whose character fell short of the pharisaic standards.

Cf. *Kethuboth* 72<sup>a</sup> Mishnah: “These are to be divorced without receiving their kethubah [marriage contract *or* settlement]: A wife who transgresses the Law of Moses or [one who transgresses] Jewish practice [דת משה ויהודית]. And what is [regarded as a wife’s transgression against] the Law of Moses? Feeding her husband with untithed food [Num 18:21-32], having intercourse with him during the period of her menstruation [Lev 18:19], not setting apart her dough offering [Num 15:18-21], or making vows and not fulfilling them [Dt 23:21-23]. And what is [deemed to be a wife’s transgression against] Jewish practice? Going out with uncovered head, spinning in the street [and thereby exposing her bare arms], or conversing [flirtatiously] with every man. Abba Saul [c. 150] said: [Such transgressions include] also that of a wife who curses her husband’s parents in his presence. R. Tarfon [c. 100] said: Also one who screams [קולנית]. And who is regarded a screamer? A woman whose voice can be heard by her neighbors when she speaks inside her house.”<sup>1</sup> — Parallel passage: Tosefta, *Kethuboth* 7:6f. — For an explanation of the Mishnah, see JT *Ketubot* 7:6 Gemara;<sup>2</sup> *Kethuboth* 72<sup>a,b</sup>.<sup>3</sup>

However, it appears that γυνή ἀμαρτωλός should be taken more specifically as referring to a prostitute. Even the verb *אִזְנָה*, *אִזְנָה* is used in an absolute sense to mean *to live unchastely* or *to engage in sexual immorality*.

JT *Ta’anit* 1:4 Gemara: “A certain ass-driver appeared before the rabbis [in a dream] and prayed, and rain came. The rabbis sent and brought him and said to him, ‘What is your trade?’ He said to them, ‘I am an ass-driver.’ They said to him, ‘What good deed have you done?’ He said to them, ‘One time I rented my ass to a certain woman, and she was weeping on the way, and I said to her, “What troubles you?” She said to me, “The husband of that woman [me] is in prison [for debt], and I want to see what I can do to free him.” [She wanted to yield to prostitution in order to use the proceeds to get him

<sup>1</sup> Soncino, 448,449.

<sup>2</sup> Neusner, 185,186.

<sup>3</sup> Soncino, 449-453.

out.] So I sold my ass and I gave her the proceeds, and I said to her, “Here is your money, free your husband, but do not sin [ולא תחטיי] [by becoming a prostitute to raise the necessary funds].” They said to him, ‘You are worthy of praying and having your prayers answered.’”<sup>4</sup> — Then follows a second story, similar in content, with the same encouragement to the woman in the story: לא תחטיי. *Shabbath* 55<sup>b</sup>: “R. Samuel b. Nahman [c. 260] said in R. Jonathan’s [c. 220] name: Whoever maintains that Reuben sinned [חטא; rf. Gen 35:22] is merely making an error.”<sup>5</sup> The same assertion is made about David in reference to 2 Samuel 11:4 in *Shabbath* 56<sup>a,6</sup> and about the sons of Eli in reference to 1 Samuel 2:22 in *Yoma* 9<sup>a,7</sup> • Siphre to Leviticus 20:15 (371<sup>a</sup>): “If the man has sinned [חטא; rf. Lev 20:15f], what sin has the animal committed [חטאה]?” For more, see *Pesahim* 113<sup>a</sup> at Matthew 19:22, p. 826.

**7:37b.** A small alabaster bottle of anointing oil.

See at Matthew 26:7.

**7:38a.** Standing behind at his feet.

The feet of those reclining at the table were stretched out behind them on the cushion; see the excursus “An Ancient Jewish Banquet” [*Ein altjüdisches Gastmahl*].

**7:38b.** She kissed his feet.

See at Matthew 26:49, p. 995f. [What follows are two quotes from that section.]

*Sanhedrin* 27<sup>b</sup>: “Thereupon Bar Hama [who was accused of murder] arose and kissed his [R. Papi’s, c. 360] feet [since he had R. Papi to thank for his acquittal], and undertook to pay his poll-tax for him for the rest of his life.”<sup>8</sup> • JT *Pe’ah* 1:1 Gemara: “R. Yannai and R. Jonathan [c. 220] were in session. Someone came and kissed the feet of R. Jonathan [out of thankfulness]. R. Yannai said to him, ‘What is the meaning of this [honor that] he pays you today?’ [Jonathan] said to him, ‘One time he came to complain to me about his son, so that the son would support him. I said to him to go to the synagogue and get some people to rebuke him [and tell him to support his father].’”<sup>9</sup>

**7:41.** A devout man had two debtors.

---

<sup>4</sup> Neusner, 24,25.

<sup>5</sup> Soncino, 256.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>9</sup> Neusner, 20.

A rabbinical parable about a devout man who had two debtors is found in *'Abodah Zarah* 4<sup>a</sup>: “R. Abbahu [c. 300 in Caesarea] commended R. Safra [a Babylonian, c. 320] to the Minim [מינין, “heretics”; here: Christians] as a learned man, and he was thus exempted by them from paying taxes [in Caesarea] for thirteen years. One day, on coming across him, they said to him, ‘It is written: You only have I known [or loved] from all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities [Amos 3:2]. If one is in anger does one vent it on one’s friend?’ But he was silent and could give them no answer; so they wound a scarf round his neck and tortured him. When R. Abbahu came and found him [in that state] he said to them, ‘Why do you torture him?’ Said they, ‘Have you not told us that he is a great man? He cannot explain to us the meaning of this verse!’ Said he, ‘I may have told you [that he was learned] in Tannaitic teaching; did I tell you [he was learned] in Scripture? [Only in the former is Safra an authority.]’ ‘How is it then that you [Palestinians, like R. Abbahu] know it?’ they contended. ‘We,’ he replied, ‘who are frequently with you [Christians], set ourselves the task of studying it thoroughly, but others [like the Babylonians] do not study it as carefully [because there are not any מינין by them].’ Said they, ‘Will you then tell us the meaning?’ ‘I will explain it by a parable,’ he replied. ‘To what may it be compared? To a man who is the creditor of two persons, one of them a friend, the other an enemy; of his friend he will accept payment little by little whereas of his enemy he will exact payment in one sum! [In other words, that is also God’s position toward Israel and the heathens: Israel God punishes gradually in this world until the guilt is atoned for, so that a fuller reward may be theirs in the world to come. But the heathens God lets go about securely in this world, in order to bring upon them the entire punishment in one fell swoop in the world to come.]’”<sup>10</sup>

**7:44.** You have not given [poured] any water on my feet.

Regarding foot washing, see at John 13:5. Regarding the washing of a guest’s feet, see Siphre to Deuteronomy 33:24 §355 (148<sup>a</sup>) at Matthew 6:17, p. 427, note *f*.

**7:45.** You have not given me a kiss.

Regarding kissing, cf. at Matthew 26:49. For more, see Tosefta, *Niddah* 5:15 (646) at Luke 2:47, p. 151.

**7:50.** Go in [to] peace.

On the distinction between “Go בשלום [in peace]” and “Go לשלום [to peace],” see *Berakoth* 64<sup>a</sup> at Luke 2:29, p. 138.

---

<sup>10</sup> Soncino, 14.