

The Broken Jar

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New Madison First Universalist Church

Theme: Tragic happenings are not always remedied by the swift hand of an apocalyptic God.
Text: The Gospel of Thomas, Saying 97

The Gospel of Thomas is a Christian gospel that was not found in a generally complete condition until 1945. It was uncovered with several other texts at Nag Hammadi in northern Egypt. It is what we call a sayings gospel. It contains only sayings attributed to Jesus and no narrative describing where and under what conditions the sayings were delivered.

Thomas 97: "The [Father's] imperial rule is like a woman who was carrying a [jar] full of meal. While she was walking along [a] distant road, the handle of the jar broke and the meal spilled behind her [along] the road. She didn't know it; she hadn't noticed a problem. When she reached her house, she put the jar down and discovered it was empty." ¹

This text was voted pink by the Jesus Seminar, Jesus probably said it or something much like it. The parable is not found in other gospels.

So this is a parable that does not have a happy ending. The woman has no flour meal to make bread. First century people know what will probably happen next. This woman will starve. Why didn't a good Samaritan come along or perhaps a long lost father who would kill the fatted calf and ask her to come home and live at the family farm? Why indeed? But in this story there is no happy ending here.

Maybe her friends will take notice of her plight and give her some grain or perhaps she can sue the maker of the pot and recover her loss, plus, of course, a bit extra for the lawyer. Unfortunately, we have to deal with what is here and not with what we wish could happen. We have to consider the parable itself. This story is found in Thomas between the parable of the leaven and the parable of the Assassin. All are about the father's imperial rule, the kingdom of God.

It is a pretty common sight still today in the mid east to see a woman carrying a jar of meal on her head. But if the handle broke off and meal began to spill out wouldn't she notice? I seems pretty obvious to us that she would feel the meal dribbling down her back or notice that the jar was getting lighter. But she didn't notice and the story is emphatic about that. It tells us twice. "She didn't know it; she hadn't noticed a problem." Okay, so we have an incompetent woman, perhaps she is married to the incompetent shepherd I spoke about elsewhere, the one who left 99 sheep in the wilderness to look for one that got lost.

Why would this parable have such an unhappy ending? When we think of the parables attributed to Jesus we are often faced with parallels from Jewish tradition.

The stories set up contrasts and challenge conventional thinking about how God operates. Are there any Jewish stories that parallel this one?

"In the judgment of some of the [Jesus Seminar] Fellows, the parable of the empty jar is a parody of the story of Elijah and the widow."²

From: 1 Kings 17:8-16 NIV

8 Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying,

9 "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you."

10 So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink."

11 As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."

12 But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

13 Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son.

14 For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth."

15 She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days.

16 The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

But that had a happy ending. Oh yes, contrasts, parables very often contrast their story line with traditional religious stories. The Jewish Bible story showed the power of God, through a miracle, to take care of God's spokesman and the family of the one who helped him. This parable says maybe life isn't always like that.

According to Joachim Jeremias, "It is a warning against false security."³ It sounds like Jeremias is saying, the smug assurance that God will take care of God's people and leave others to suffer is a thread that has continued from early Jewish thought to today's Christian thought. It may not be a good idea to count on God to solve all your problems and to protect you from all your mistakes. Sometimes you will have to live with your disasters.

"Jesus' parable subverts the tradition that God is powerfully present and at work in the world; he substitutes for it the mystery of God's ostensible absence. Again Jesus achieves his purpose by comic inversion."⁴

So this parable of the broken jar is poking fun but in a deadly serious way. God does not restore the jar or the grain. There is no miraculous feeding of the woman,

let alone a hungry prophet, no boundless meal until the next activity of God saves the day.

“The basic narrative is clear. There is no divine intervention. She goes home empty-handed. The empire is identified not with apocalyptic intervention but with the paradox of divine emptiness.”

“This presence of the empire – not able to be observed but in your presence, spread out upon the earth but not seen – emphasizes the paradox that the empire is present in absence. There is a divine intervention in the empire, but it cannot be observed.”⁵

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This is exactly what the parable is about, a paradox. The audience to the parable when hearing the story about a jar of grain would be clued to a story about God, and would expect a miraculous amount of grain. But NOOO, Jesus pulls a fast one again and makes it have a mundane ending, even a tragic one. This woman may face starvation. There was no miraculous intercession from God. How will she survive? Who will help her? That may be a lesson of some importance. Who will help her if there is no miracle from God? Do we have a feeling of pity or perhaps compassion for this woman?

“The [Father’s] imperial rule is like a woman who ...” We have heard before about the common wisdom that women were unclean and of much less value than men in God’s sight and yet this story begins with the statement that God’s kingdom is like a woman. Not just any woman but one who makes mistakes. The Father’s imperial rule is not a place where all is clean and bright and everybody is well fed but possibly it is like an unclean and inattentive person. In other words the world that woman lived in was messy and very much like the world we all know.

Like the parable of the leaven that precedes this parable, it deals with the unclean, for yeast is known as a corrupting influence, this story is about the less than clean, a woman. The Thomas version of the leaven story says the empire of God is like leaven that a woman took... But Matthew and Luke versions say the empire of the God is like a woman that took leaven... In either case we have something that is outside of the purity code, not quite right, unclean, messy.

Traditionally, indeed the way I was taught to think about Jesus, was that he spoke of a time to come when God would punish all the bad folks and reward the good ones. The Kingdom of God was out there somewhere in the future and good people should pray for it and bad folks should fear it. That style of thinking began with the Jewish expectation for a Messiah, an anointed one, who would be a powerful king and would lead Israel into a position of world power and domination. Christianity took this a step further by saying Jesus was the long expected Messiah and when he returned to Earth on the clouds he would make things right. “... and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory.” Matt 24:30b We say a Jesus who spoke like this is an apocalyptic prophet.

Albert Schweitzer, before he was a doctor in Africa, wrote a book, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, and he came up with idea that Jesus taught apocalyptic ideas. That was the general belief until the last generation of New Testament scholars, the Bob Funks and Dom Crossans, began to disagree with it. When I was in seminary, the idea that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet was still widely accepted. There are still die-hard conservative scholars that support the apocalyptic Jesus idea. Most supporters of an apocalyptic Jesus do not discuss the parables much, if at all. Some of the parables, like this one, do not have an ending where good things happen to good people when they have suffered misfortune.

I do not think Jesus was apocalyptic for two major reasons. One, if he was predicting the soon to come end of the world, he was wrong. He missed it. Or we missed it. And the second reason, many of his parables, like the Broken Jar, advocate a point of view that is quite contrary to apocalyptic thinking. The teller of this story is the one who says the empire of the father is there in the midst of the audience of the parable. It is not something that is coming soon but is already present.

Of course there are other interpreters with ideas about what this parable means. Richard Valantasis is a scholar, not a member of the Jesus Seminar, who says, "This woman's plight describes the life of people who live their lives in the world: they carry jars they think are full, but discover, even after much activity. that they are empty. Unrecognized emptiness characterizes the life lived in the world whose resources (thought to be carefully stored) leak away fruitlessly." ⁶ So this could be a story about a disillusioned person, much like the parable of the farmer who stored up crops for a future he did not have. It sets up a case for a sermon about the need to change priorities. Too often parables and actually most of the scriptures are interpreted and used to build a case for the new religion and the Christian Church. The one who told this parable did not know the church of Constantine was coming and certainly could not have predicted what we call the church today.

There are, of course metaphysical interpretations and allegorical interpretations but they are all reaching for what is not evident in the parable. The empire of God is involved with common things. The empire is not present to shelter us from hardship or miraculously deliver us from our own mistakes and misdeeds. The empire is represented by the empty jar and the inattentive woman.

A message for us: Look for the empire of the father around us. It is spread over the land but people do not see it. Mistakes will be made, we will sometimes fail and self-reliance can be an important attribute at those times. But sometimes we will need help from others since our jar is not only broken but is empty of what is needed. Like the man going to Jericho who was robbed, we may be offered help from an unattractive source. And as we open ourselves to help from others in the empire of God, we can develop sensitivity to what other folks are going through. We can become more compassionate. We do not leave it up to God to take of the unfortunate, we do it. We can help others when we see someone who has an unexpected broken jar.

¹ Funk, Robert, Hoover, Roy, and The Jesus Seminar, The Five Gospels, 1993, Santa Rosa, CA, Polebridge Press, p.523

² Ibid, p.524

³ Jeremias, Joachim, The Parables of Jesus, London, SCM Press LTD, 1963, p.175n

⁴ Funk, Robert, Honest to Jesus, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, p.157

⁵ Scott, Bernard Brandon, Re-Imagine the World, Santa Rosa, CA Polebridge Press, 2001, p.46

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⁶ Valantasis, Richard, The Gospel of Thomas, London, Routledge, 1997, p.178