

Only to the Lost Sheep or To All the Nations: Social Location Constructing Elites and Marginals in the Matthean Gospel

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The two Matthean texts used in the title of this paper—"only to the lost sheep" and "to all the nations" evoke one of the areas of Matthean scholarship in which there has been vigorous scholarly debate, namely, whether these two designations within the gospel are constructing elites and marginals within the Matthean text as well as whether they are indicative of elites and marginals within the Matthean community. This paper will not be an analysis of these texts as such or of the groups which they may possibly represent within the Matthean community in terms of "Elites and Marginals", the theme of the Matthean Section at the Society for Biblical Literature Conference in 1999 at which the paper was first presented. Rather, because of my interest in hermeneutics and social location as significant influences within the field of textual interpretation in which all biblical scholars are involved, I wish to take a more meta-critical or analytical approach. I will examine some of the ways in which those hermeneutics and locations function to construct elites and marginals within the Matthean community, within contemporary cultures shaped by the rhetorical effect of biblical scholarship, and perhaps even within the scholarly field itself. In doing this, I am very aware that I do not stand outside such an analysis, undertaking it in an objective, value-neutral way but am engaged at the very

heart of it with other biblical colleagues. I offer this paper as fruit of my own exploration of and reflection upon the art of biblical scholarship in the hope that it may raise significant questions among scholars and challenge members of the academic community.

In a 1993 Society for Biblical Literature paper, Dennis Duling traced the emergence of "marginality" as a sociological category, beginning with Robert E. Park's 1928 article "Human Migration and the Marginal Man" (Duling 1993, 6420-671). Duling outlined, in dialogue with the sociological literature, three types of marginality: first, the early category of Parks and Stonequist, namely "the Marginal Man" or the person between cultures or cultural worlds; second, involuntary marginality of the "poor and expendable" of a culture or society; and third, voluntary marginality, based on a conscious choice to live outside the norms and structures of a given social system (642-648). In the remainder of his article he uses a macrosocial perspective to study involuntary marginality in the Matthean gospel and a microsocial perspective which reveals evidence of voluntary marginality. He concludes by characterising the author of Matthew as "Marginal Man", standing between the elites and the involuntary marginals; between the new and the old, on the boundary between Greek and Jewish culture and education, between gentile mission and Jewish focus (662-663). While many studies construct the Matthean community according to marginals and elites, Duling's article is the most methodologically explicit. In this paper, I will make use of his categories of marginality to examine the types of marginality suggested in a number of recent

Matthean studies as descriptive of that community. The thesis tested in this paper is that the social location and ideological perspectives of contemporary Matthean scholars, whether explicit or implicit in their work, function to create marginals and elites perhaps unintended by both the Matthean and the contemporary author/s.

In his 1994 study of the Matthean community, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, Anthony Saldarini described the group producing the Matthean gospel as "an active deviant association and sect....a new subgroup of the Jewish community which is in conflict with the majority leadership" (Saldarini 1994: 84, 86). His study demonstrates one dynamic involved in the creation of elites and marginals. Using the sociological category of 'deviance' in his reconstructive work, he points out how "a powerful or majority group makes or enforces the rules which define what is normal in society, and those individuals or groups who do not conform with the rules are labeled and stigmatized as deviant" (108). He goes on to demonstrate that "the formation of such a voluntary association requires adjustment to a new situation, the need to assign new community functions and status rankings, and the creation of new community goals" (112).

Saldarini himself does not use the category of "marginality" but it is clear from even the brief summary of his key position above that his reconstruction of the Matthean community places the entire group within the category of "voluntary marginality" which Duling describes as "individuals and groups who consciously and by choice live outside

the normative statuses, roles, and offices of society" (1993: 648). The society whose normative statuses, roles and offices are being challenged is the parent Jewish community within which the Matthean Jewish-Christian or Christian-Jewish group is rendered deviant. Saldarini's study is methodologically astute and provides a significant corrective to the position which places the Matthean group outside Judaism and within a Jewish-Christian polemic. It is limited, however, in that it treats the group as monolithic in its deviance and/or marginality in a way which takes no account of any deviance or marginality within the group itself.

Saldarini says of the final shaping of the gospel story that "the Gospel of Matthew presupposes the widely held position that the final author exercised strong compositional and creative control over the documents and traditions at his disposal. ...[t]hus the story of Jesus in Matthew reflects the experience of Matthew's group and its social situation" (5). That story as reflected in Saldarini's analysis is the one told by the scribal households, that 3-5% of the group with access to both educational and material resources necessary for the production of a public document. What Saldarini has failed to take into account is the predominance of the aural/oral culture and the influence that a storyteller's audience may have had on the shaping of the story which was still being accessed aurally by the greatest percentage of the Matthean group (Alexander 1990: 221-247). His work has marginalised or silenced, therefore, the voices of those whom Duling calls the "involuntary marginals"—slaves, the peasants and urban poor, the unclean, and women. Their shaping of the story: the healings, especially

those of women, perhaps the beatitudes, some of the parables and their interpretations, even the claim of Jesus as Messiah with the particular meaning that these groups would have brought to this claim—these are silenced or marginalised by the scribal voice. If, as Saldarini suggests, the story reflects the experience of the Matthean group, then attention needs to be given to the experience of the approximately 90-95% of that group who are not scribal and whose voices can only be heard by attention to the gaps or fissures in the narrative, the underside of the story which creates the tension characteristic of the Matthean narrative.

Saldarini claims that in his work "hermeneutical priority is given to indigenous Jewish thought, practices, conflicts, and history in the eastern Mediterranean rather than to later second-century Christian theological concerns" (Saldarini, 1994, 4). In this way he has challenged those readings which are shaped by a later Christian consciousness and which marginalise the Jewish voices and the Jewish components of the Matthean community. This is the very positive contribution which his work has made. His reading for Jewish scribal coherence has, however, in its turn marginalised all the alternative voices of the community. One can only speculate whether greater attention to his own elite male Western scribal location, various aspects of which he shares with his colleagues in Matthean studies, would have enabled him to be more attentive to the deviance and marginality within the Matthean group that was deviant within end of the first century Judaism.

Before turning to an alternative position, I would like to draw attention to the most recent extensive reconstruction of the Matthean community, that of David Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (1998). Like Saldarini, Sim reads for macro-coherence. He similarly characterises the Matthean community as Christian Jewish and sets it over against Pauline Gentile Christianity. Both categories are constructed solely from a scribal perspective and one would have to say in the case of Sim, explicitly from a male scribal perspective. He acknowledges this in his introduction by noting twice that circumcision as indicative of membership in a Jewish community was for men only (1998: 13, 17), but then fails to do any further investigation of what difference a recognition of the presence, activity and even the beliefs and practices of women may have made to his construction of the community. In this he establishes a male elite as constitutive of the entire community as does Saldarini. Neither draw on the extensive research of women scholars such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Ross Kraemer, Amy-Jill Levine, Janice Capel Anderson and myself who reconstruct formative Judaism and early Christianity in general and the Matthean community in particular as inclusive of women. Saldarini and Sim have, therefore, not only constructed elites and marginals within the Matthean context but also within Jewish, Matthean and early Christian scholarship. A reading for comprehensive coherence, therefore, without significant attention to one's own social location and hermeneutical perspective/s and their effect on reading, results in reading with the elites of the Matthean community and continuing the marginalisation of the voices of the major component of the community in their

diversity.

The appearance of Janice Capel Anderson's 1983 *Semeia* article "Matthew: Gender and Reading" (3-27) provided the first significant challenge to a reading of the Matthean text which silenced and marginalised the character group, women. Her methodological approach was narrative critical accompanied by a study of the symbolic function of gender, and so her work drew attention to the female characters of the Matthean story and pointed to their involuntary marginalisation within the narrative. Her methodological approach did not, however, lead to any socio-historical claims in relation to the Matthean community.

This shift of focus from the narrative to the women of the Matthean world was carried out in the concluding chapter of my 1991 work, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel according to Matthew*. This work used the feminist liberation category of 'inclusion' as focal point of the study. While it pointed to the many ways in which female characters and women's traditions and traditioning were marginalised in the narrative in a way that would be consistent with Duling's "involuntary marginalisation", it suggested a reconstruction of the Matthean community and its storytelling which allowed for the inclusion of women within the life of the community, its traditioning process and its storytelling which pointed to difference as characteristic within the Matthean group.

The model, therefore, of a number of different house churches, some of

which would have been structured according to collegial principles but situated within a society that was fundamentally patriarchal, provides us with an understanding of the Matthean church in which the gospel and women's place within it can be adequately explained. The androcentric world view and its attendant acceptance of patriarchy which was seen to be almost constitutive of the gospel's narrative world can be explained in terms of the cultural world in which the Matthean church existed and the appropriation within some of the house churches of the structures and values belonging to that world. On the other hand, the alternative vision of a discipleship of women which is carefully developed in the text points towards the implementation of subversive egalitarian practices within at least some of the Matthean house churches. These practices, however, seem to have been in conflict or tension not only with the surrounding culture and the belief system of some of the house churches, but also with certain patriarchalizing tendencies which were gaining support perhaps even within those house churches whose structures were more egalitarian (Wainwright 1991:343-344).

As a result of this analysis, it was concluded that "anomaly", on the one hand, which Malina suggests as "typical of early Christian movement groups" and which "best accounts for the survival and growth of those groups" (1986: 39) or ambiguity (Wainwright 1991:351-352), on the other, must be significant hermeneutical factors

shaping contemporary readings of the Matthean gospel if we are to allow the voices of its variety of communities or house churches to be heard. Such an approach seeks to hear both the elite or dominant narrative as well as that of the marginal voices, the story from the underside. It is this type of reading which I have sought to develop in *Shall We Look for Another?* (1998). I sought to reconstruct and be attentive to different interpretations of Jesus shaped by the different types of households or house communities within the Matthean group. On analysis, it has emerged that the three types of households which I constructed correspond with Duling's three types of marginality. The scribal community, responsible for the dominant narrative, Duling constructs as the "Marginal Man" or his category one of marginalisation. Those readers who belong to the poor and non-literate, the majority of the community, are Duling's category two or "involuntary marginals". What I call the more egalitarian households, could be considered category three or "voluntary marginals". I suggest that each group shapes the gospel storytelling and hence each must be considered in any reconstruction of the Matthean community and its reading of its sacred story of Jesus.

Despite a feminist hermeneutic informed by principles of liberation and inclusion and seeking to be attentive to "racial, socio-economic or cultural situations" (Wainwright 1991: 2) and to difference (Wainwright 1998: 1-5), it is still possible, by way of contemporary scholarship, to create elites and marginals in readings of the Matthean text shaped by the focus of each particular scholar. Amy-Jill Levine's article "Discharging Responsibility: Matthean Jesus, Biblical Law, and Hemorrhaging

Woman" (1996: 379-397) provides a searing critique of scholarship on Matthew 9:18-26, and in particular of my own reading of that text. What I wish to demonstrate here is that a feminist approach such as taken by myself, by Janice Capel Anderson and by Levine herself in the *Women's Bible Commentary* (1992: 252-262), which sought to be attentive to the marginalisation of the woman with the haemorrhage, based on her gender, did not take sufficient account of the Jewishness of the woman and of the gospel. Levine critiques two levels of marginalisation in the interpretations of the text—the characterization of the woman as "marginal because she is female" and a reading of women as "marginalized in Matthew's Jewish environment because of its interpretation of the biblical Law" (1996: 380). Her critique stands within the Jewish challenge to Christian supercessionist analyses which are seen to vilify and marginalise first century Judaism and various character groupings within it, failing to recognise it as a prophetic movement within Formative or Emerging Judaism.

Levine reads "Matthew's literary artistry" to indicate that "the good and bad, the saved and the damned, are not categorized according to social status, gender, or ethnic group. Leaders as well as followers may find themselves in the *Ekklesia* of disciples, provided those leaders appropriately perform their duty to serve others. Jews as well as Gentiles are welcome in the Matthean church, as are men and women. The issue is not who one is; the point for Matthew is what one does" (1996: 396). In this final analysis, therefore, Levine collapses categories such as elites and marginals in her closing interpretation.

Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz, reading the story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28 "with a spirit of dispossession" which she assumes "the Canaanite woman had when she approached Jesus" (1997:69), challenges the complicity with imperialism which she locates even in Levine's analysis. From her position of a Mexican-American woman, a woman without borders or frontiers, located in a context of involuntary marginalisation, Guardiola-Sáenz studies the text which recounts the story of the Canaanite woman. She provides a paradigm for hearing the voices of the most marginalised, "not as the Other", the one constructed by the centre as different, but with a "culture and identity" of their own (70). Her hermeneutic is one of "protest and reclamation" (71) and her methodology is cultural studies and a claim to the "borderless" nature of texts (71-72). She explains her reading strategy and then raises questions which challenge many contemporary constructions of the Canaanite woman's marginality:

My reading as a real reader of the Canaanite woman's story is an act of re-appropriation of the text, a move to re-write the story from the reverse of history. My reading is a story re-told by the defeated, re-written from the inter-space of the post-colonial reader. This re-casting of the story is also a way of speaking from the borderless biblical text that has been inscribed in culture for centuries. From this angle I now question: What if the Canaanite woman was aware of her dispossession? What if she was not begging Jesus but defying him? What if I really recast the story? Would that attempt change the history of exploitation and destruction that the ideology of

chosenness has endorsed? (74)

Guardiola-Sáenz's social location and her hermeneutic of protest and reclamation leads her to read the text from a new position and in a way which challenges the construction of elites and marginals that have been located in the text.

Such a postcolonial reading is further developed by Musa Dube in her more extensive analysis *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (2000). She too takes as her focus study Matthew 15:21-28 and she critically analyses the work of both male and female Matthean scholars under the banner of "decolonizing white Western readings" (157-195). Her conclusions elaborate even further the foundational claim of this paper. As a result of her study of male Western interpretations of this text, she draws attention to the social location of contemporary biblical studies generally:

The social location of biblical studies in the Western metropolitan centers, which also represent the imperialist centers, is instrumental in the bracketing of imperialism as a systematic social evil that takes up organized forms of textual constructions and that depends on literary practitioners who maintain the power relations they propound. Similarly, their gender, race, and class privilege accounts for the lack of any problematizing of the power relations propounded by the story (Dube 2000:169).

Her analysis of the work of Anderson, Levine and Wainwright, all of whom have been cited above in relation to their differently nuanced feminist approaches, results in the

claim that recognition of patriarchy does not necessarily lead to an analysis of power relations and imperialist structures and practices in both texts and contexts of reading. Dube therefore underlines the need to decolonize the text as well as to depatriarchalize it (184). Her final challenge to Western feminist biblical scholars is this:

Through postcolonial theories, Western biblical feminist readers can become conscious of their social location and their relation to historical and recent empires in order to begin reading for decolonization. This would entail problematizing the role of Western intellectuals and theorizing the geographical location of the West as an imperial center of power and how it has affected and still affects Other worlds through its economic and political systems as well as its cultural texts (184).

We have come full circle. Saldarini's findings which centred the Jewishness of the gospel are critiqued by one of the most marginal of gospel characters and the reading which results when her marginality is problematised and her voice, her story is allowed to be heard, not in its marginality but in the unique contribution it makes to the unfolding story of Jesus. Levine's inclusive reading and my feminist readings are critiqued because of their failure to give voice to difference—inclusion may, in fact create its own marginals and elites.

There are of course many more studies which I could have examined, many more constructions of elites and marginals that have emerged in Matthean scholarship. This

may be an appropriate point, however, to allow Gurdiola-Sáenz's questions and Dube's conclusions to direct us into the concluding reflections of this paper—some of the implications for the work of biblical scholarship in relation to our construction of elites and marginals in the dialectic between our social location as biblical scholars and our interpretation of the biblical text. It is this dialectic which will inform these conclusions.

Conclusions

One of the most obvious ways in which marginality can be obscured is to read for coherence. Such a reading fails to take account of anomaly and ambiguity. This is particularly problematic in the Matthean gospel which is characterised by tension, anomaly and ambiguity in the text itself. Some of the most obvious examples surround mission ["sent only to the lost sheep" or "make disciples of all nations"] and leadership [binding and loosing which is predicated of both Peter and the community]. Particular attention needs to be given, therefore, to tension and ambiguity in the text in order not to silence further the least powerful voices.

Giving attention to these voices in the text will enable the counter-story or the story from the underside to emerge. Coherence reads the dominant story line, generally that of scribal authorship, but the counter-coherent story, the voice from the underside provides the perspective of the marginalised. Paul Armstrong names such a reading the heeding of "resistances" and goes on to say that "[r]eaders unmindful of resistances to their hypotheses will rigidly and monotonously replicate their presuppositions instead of

refining, revising, or extending them" (Armstrong 1990: 136).

This highlights the dialectic between text and context or text and reader in every interpretive undertaking. And such a claim results from what has been shown above, namely, that it is only a hermeneutical stance which is aware of and, indeed, reads for those marginalised that will enable their almost silenced voice in the text to emerge in fuller resonances. And this, in turn, challenges us as readers/interpreters to be aware of our own hermeneutical position and social location and the ways these may limit our reading of the Matthean text as well as the ways they shape our creation of elites and marginals in that reading. The challenge to analyse the imperial power dynamics in Western contexts of reading and interpretation because of failure to heed imperial constructs in the text is one which is applicable to the majority of Matthean and even biblical scholars.

For many readers today, it will be their political contexts, their positions of advocacy on behalf of the marginalised which will enable them to hear the alternate or marginalised voices in the text. Such readings give rise to conflicts in interpretation which if brought into productive dialogue can not only enrich the interpretation of the Matthean text but also shape a reception of this text which constructs plurality in contemporary communities and challenges all oppressive constructions of power. It is this plurality, a plurality which arises from attention to the voice of the marginalised rather than the voice of the elite only which raises questions regarding our public accountability for the

interpretations of biblical texts. This is a question not often addressed in our scholarly meetings and yet if we take seriously the challenges of rhetorical criticism and its attention to the effect of textual readings in the community of reception then it may be essential for us to address this issue together and in vigorous dialogue. This paper has made clear that our interpretation of the Matthean gospel shapes consciousness not only within ecclesial communities but also the academy and society. Together we are responsible with others in our communities of interpretation for the shaping of the twenty-first century in the hope that our biblical interpretations will not contribute to the further marginalisation of the poor, the outcasts, the voiceless, and the colonised of our world.

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