THE BEATITUDES IN THE LIGHT OF ANCIENT IDEALS

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THE interpretation of the Beatitudes is a perennial problem. The multitude of views which have been expressed may be roughly classified in two groups: (1) those which accept the spiritualizing interpretation of Matthew as correct, and (2) those which prefer to take literally the more material version of Luke. It would be interesting to know the division of opinion at this moment. I stand open to correction, but I believe that opinion is inclining to the view that Luke's form, "Blessed are you poor, . . . blessed are you who hunger now, . . . blessed are you who weep now, . . ." best represents the words of Jesus, and that he meant what these words imply in view of the widely held apocalyptic eschatology of the time, that is that a new age was soon to dawn in which the poor should receive their deserts and the rich theirs. I wish to discuss a line of approach to the problem which has been little exploited but which, I believe, has distinct value, the approach thru ancient history. Within the available limits I can only outline the argument.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the lands about the eastern end of the Mediterranean were in a very real sense a cultural unity. Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Hebrews differed sharply in their laws and customs at many points. They passed thru a long course of evolution. Yet there was a great body of tradition common to all and persisting thru millennia of change. Many students of ancient

history will take this statement, if they accept it at all, with reservations. May I indicate my definition of it in the use I make of it? Jesus can be understood only in the light of contemporary Jewish belief and practise. Judaism can be understood only in the light of its antecedents, and its antecedents include the whole history of the Eastern Mediterranean world. "These things were not done in a corner." Jesus' attitude toward the poor and unfortunate, therefore, must be placed against this vast background if we would truly understand it.

When one turns to the documents of ancient civilization, he finds abundant confirmation of the Gospel saying, "The poor you have always with you." But even in the oldest records, among the Sumerians three thousand years before Jesus' time, he discovers that oppression and poverty were not regarded as normal or right. Uru-kagina, at present 'the first reformer of history,' appears as the champion of the poor, the widow, the orphan, and all the weak, who, he tells us, had suffered oppression "since ancient days, from the beginning."[1] During the celebration which Gudea organized for the dedication of his temple, E-ninnu, when for seven days he put the laws of Ninu and Ningirsu actually into effect, for this brief but notable period,

> "the maid was as good as her mistress, and master and slave walked together as friends. The powerful and the humble man lay down side by side . . . The rich man did not wrong the orphan and the strong man did not oppress the widow. The laws of Ninu and Ningirsu were observed, justice was bright in the sunlight, and the sun-god trampled iniquity under foot."[2]

This passage may serve to characterize the ideals to which the monarchs of the Tigris-Euphrates valley, Semite as well as Sumerian, did at least lip-service for two thousand years. Hammurapi legalized social distinctions which were fully accepted during our medieval period and which modern courts

[1] F. Thureau-Dangin, *Die Sumerischen und Akkadischen Königsinschriften* (Vorderasiatische Bibliothek, I, 1), Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1907, pp. 45—57.

[2] *Op. cit.*, pp. 69, 75, 89-95, 103, 139.

unconsciously follow in judging the poor and the rich, yet he ruled, so he claimed, in the interest of righteousness; to quote his words,

"that the strong might not oppress the weak, that they should give justice to the orphan and the widow."[3]

The Kassite rulers of Babylon were perhaps unfamiliar with the ancient Sumerian tradition that a ruler was to be a father to his people. The insatiate ambition for foreign conquest which possessed the Assyrian monarchs drove such modest and kindly obligations into the background. Yet a courtier of Ashur-bani-pal wrote to him describing what his good administration had accomplished for the country in these flattering words:

"Days of right, years of righteousness, abundant showers of rain ... My lord the king leaves alive him whom his sins had handed over to death. Thou hast set free those who for many years sat in captivity, those who for many days were sick are become well. The hungry are satisfied, the emaciated are become fat, the naked are clothed with garments."[4]

Evidently the poor as well as the rich, the unfortunate as well as the fortunate, were supposed to profit by the rule of a successful monarch. Just how much this actually meant one may judge from the fact that Kaiser Wilhelm II three days after his accession echoed these ancient ideals in a proclamation in which he vowed before God "to be a succorer of the poor and oppressed, a faithful guardian of the right."[5] Yet the Assyrian's claim, like that of the modern European warlord, witnesses to the general acceptance of a portrait of the ideal ruler in which one permanent trait was the relief of poverty and distress and the protection of the weak from the rapacity of the strong.

Western Semites of the first millennium B. C. had not forgotten these 'primitive' notions. Inscriptions from two at least

[3] R. F. Harper, *The Code of Hammurabi, King of Babylon.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1904, p. 99, correcting "oppose" to "oppress," *ḫa-ba-lim.*

[4] Schrader-Zimmern-Winckler, *Die Keilinschriften und das Alte Testament*, 3. ed., Berlin: Reuther und Reichard, 1903, pp. 380 f.

[5] Quoted in the *Forum*, Aug. 1926, p. 281.

of the kings of Ya'di, or Samal (?), recovered at Zenjirli, prove that there were monarchs of smaller kingdoms who accepted the same ideal and claimed to put it into practise almost at the time when Elijah was championing the cause of Naboth and Amos was crying out against the oppression of the poor.[6]

When one turns to Egyptian literature, he is struck by a certain sentiment of aristocracy which pervades it. Law and order were beloved above all else in Egypt. The social ideal was a static condition in which all things remained as they had been from the beginning. Especially dreadful was any change in the social status of the rich and the poor. The apocalyptic woes described by Ipuwer and Neferrohu emphasize this one feature above all others. The best proof of the terrible condition of the land was the fact that the rich had become poor and the poor rich. "Behold," says Neferrohu, "I show thee the land upside down. . . . . I show thee the undermost uppermost. . . . . The poor man will make his hoard. . . . . The pauper eats offering-bread."[7] In this particular, Egyptian apocalyptic exactly contradicts that of the Hebrews.

Otherwise the social ideals of the Egyptians were much like those of the Hebrews. Every man was to receive justice, and under a good ruler none was to hunger, none to be oppressed. One of the claims most frequently made by Egyptian nobles and kings in their tomb inscriptions is that they have protected the poor and helpless and fed the hungry. Nearly two thousand

[6] A. T. Olmstead, *History of Assyria*, New York—London: Scribner, 1923, pp. 184 ff.; cf. also G. A. Cooke, *A Text-book of North-Semitic Inscriptions*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903, pp. 159–85. Clermont-Ganneau (*Recueil d'archéologie orientale*, Vol. IV, Paris: Leroux, 1901, pp. 187–92, 298–319) restored and interpreted a Sinaitic inscription so as to imply that an institution similar to the Hebrew sabbatical year existed among the Nabateans, a year in which the poor had the right to reap the fields. But his interpretation has not been accepted by other scholars, nor has other evidence for such a Nabatean institution been discovered. See Cooke, *op. cit.* pp. 260 f.

[7] A. H. Gardiner, "New Literary Works from Ancient Egypt," in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, I (1914), p. 105; cf. the similar sentiments of Ipuwer, A. H. Gardiner, *Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage*, Leiden, 1909, p. 11. See also McCown, *Harvard Theological Review*, XVIII (1925), pp. 374 f., 385.

years before Christ Ameni, prince of the Oryx nome, caused to be carved on the walls of his Beni-Hasan tomb the following declaration:

"There was no citizen's daughter whom I misused, there was no widow whom I afflicted, there was no peasant whom I repulsed (evicted?) . . . There was none wretched in my community, there was none hungry in my time."[8]

The Eloquent Peasant tells the High Steward, Rensi:

"Thou art a father for the orphan, a husband for the widow, a brother for her that is put away, an apron for him that is motherless."[9]

Not only the literature of social protest, such as the *Complaint of the Eloquent Peasant*, but also the products of conventional morality such as the *'Admonitions'* of various kings, viziers, and scribes, repeat the ideals of the early model prince of Beni-Hasan.

Most remarkable of all and strikingly similar to the sentiments in Jewish literature are those that are discovered in the 'religion of the poor' which arose in the decadent days following the failure of Ikhnaton's reformation. On a stone set up by two poor workmen in the necropolis at Thebes Amon-Re is addressed thus:

"Amon-Re, Lord of Karnak,
The great god within Thebes;
The august god who hears prayer,
Who comes at the voice of the distressed humble one,
Who gives breath to him that is wretched."[10]

In a long hymn from a Cairo papyrus Amon-Re is addressed as he,

"Who hears the prayers of him who is in captivity,
who is kindly of heart when one calls upon him,
who saves the timid from the haughty,
who separates the weak from the strong."[11]

[8] J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906, Vol. I, § 523.

[9] *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, IX, p. 9, A. H. Gardiner.

[10] J. H. Breasted, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, New York: Scribner, 1912, p. 350; B. Gunn, "The Religion of the Poor in Ancient Egypt," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, III (1916), p. 83.

[11] Breasted, *op. cit.*, p. 347.

Amon is the 'vizier of the poor man,' he defends him in court against his rich oppressors and against judges who, under guise of court fees exact bribes. The god, who cared for the worm and the gnat might well be expected to look with solicitude upon the 'silent,' the 'poor,' the 'humble,' the 'timid,' and be ready to save them from the haughty, the rich, and the powerful.[12]

The evidence which I have thus briefly suggested by a few typical quotations shows that, whatever their shortcomings in practice, the two ancient civilizations to which the Hebrews owed most, the Semitic and the Egyptian, possessed a persistent tradition as to social justice. Poverty was not the will of the gods, divine favor was on the side of the poor man and against the rich, divine laws had been made for the protection of the poor and oppressed, and it was the duty of the divinely appointed ruler to put these laws into effect. This idealism was strongest during the adolescence of ancient oriental civilization, in the third millennium B. C., but it persisted into its cynical and decadent old age, even far into the first millennium before the beginning of our era.

It remained for the Hebrews to revive and perpetuate the ancient idealistic traditions of the civilizations which they inherited and to develop those ideals to a new precision and inclusiveness. If the *Admonitions of Amen-em-ope*, coming from the time of the Empire, could be copied into the Book of Proverbs, then surely the ideals of the social prophets of Egypt and much more the tradition of divine justice which was the common property of both Semites and Egyptians for over two thousand years may be regarded as directly continued by the prophets of Israel. There is no need to review the evidence as to the ideals of social justice that ruled the thinking of the best of the lawgivers, prophets, and psalmists of the Hebrews. Postexilic Jewish literature and particularly the apocalypses of the first century B. C. echo with the poignant and angry complaints of the oppressed poor. One may instance the Similitudes of Enoch, the section of Ethiopic Enoch (91—105) that describes with

[12] Breasted, *op. cit.*, pp. 353, 356.

beatitudes and woes the 'two ways,' the fragment from the "Damascus Covenanters," the Psalms of Solomon, and the Assumption of Moses.

There was, in the circle from which these documents came, what may be truly described as a highly developed class-consciousness, a thoroly bolshevistic hatred of the political authorities and the *bourgeoisie*. As in the Egyptian 'religion of the poor,' God was believed to favor the needy (*dallîm*, *'ebyônîm*), the oppressed, or miserable (*'aniyyîm*), the lower classes (?), or the beggars (*miskenîm*), the humble (*'anâwîm*), the quiet in the land (*riq'ê 'ereṣ*, Ps. 35 20), but to hate the rich, the proud, the haughty.[13] It was entirely in keeping with the ancient Semitic conception of divine justice that the heavenly Son of man, the divinely appointed Elect One, should be assigned the task of overthrowing the kings, the mighty, and them that possess the earth, as the Similitudes of Enoch repeatedly assure us.[14] The "Covenanters of Damascus" believed that they who would give heed to the Messiah were to be the "poor of the flock." They should escape in the day of visitation, while the rest would be handed over to the sword when the Messiah came.[15] Wealth and wickedness, poverty and piety, seem to belong together.

Sharp as is the distinction between the rich and the poor, strong as is the feeling of solidarity on the part of the poor, the humble, the oppressed, it does not appear to me that there is sufficient evidence to prove that there was a 'brotherhood' of the poor, as Isidore Loeb supposed, or a sect or party of the oppressed Levites who wrote the Psalms that sing God's care for the poor, as Renan and Graetz maintained.[16] I doubt

[13] Cf. Alfred Rahlfs, עני *und* עניים *in den Psalmen*, Göttingen: Dieterich, 1892; A. Causse, *Les "Pauvres" d'Israël (prophètes, psalmistes, messianistes)*, Strasbourg-Paris: Istra, 1922; art. "Poor," in Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible*, IV, pp. 19 f., by S. R. Driver.

[14] I En. 46 4 ff.; 48 8 ff.; 62 1–16.

[15] "Fragments of a Zadokite Work" 9 10, R. H. Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913, Vol. II, p. 816.

[16] Causse, *op. cit.*, p. 86; A. Lods, "Les 'Pauvres' d'Israël d'après un ouvrage récent," in *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 1922, a review of the work of Causse, pp. 5, 13 of the offprint.

if it is proper to use the term "party of the poor." Moreover not all of the Psalms and very few of the apocalypses convey the idea that the Jewish nation as a whole was poor, humble, and oppressed, and, therefore, as a whole eventually would be elevated and enriched. As I see it, the apocalypses that foretell the ultimate overthrow of the rich and powerful and the elevation and vindication of the poor and humble are the product of the bitter sufferings and the undaunted hopes of a considerable section of the Jewish population, an unorganized group that differed in many particulars as to the methods and practical results of God's expected intervention, but were one in the faith that he was certain eventually to right the wrongs of the world. Like the springs and pools that appear here and there in the course of a subterranean stream, these documents represent the welling up again of the ancient faith in the basic justice of the universe.

The refreshing stream of love for social justice was never entirely lost from Judaism. It shows itself in different ways at different periods, but it is still present. And that very fact tends to lessen the force of the arguments for a "party of the poor" in the Psalms and apocalypses. As Katz has shown, "the religious principles of justice and righteousness advocated by the prophets were duly and zealously upheld by the scribes and rabbis and by them duly incorporated into the Talmudic codes."[17] The rabbinic interpretations of the Torah were calculated to sharpen and render more effective its provisions for the protection of the poor. They provided legislation on behalf of skilled and unskilled laborers, Jewish and non-Jewish slaves, minors, women, debtors, and tenants, and ordered for each Jewish community a committee to collect and distribute poor-relief, beside enforcing the Old Testament regulations with regard to the gleanings of fields and vineyards and the giving of a tithe every third year to the poor. The rabbis attempted to adjust their standards to developing commerce and industry, but they tried to prevent profiteering and even to exclude the

[17] Mordecai Katz, *Protection of the Weak in the Talmud* (Columbia Univ. Oriental Series, XXIV), New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1925, p. 84.

middleman. They did not protest against economic injustice in the impassioned language of the prophets, but they do show a sincere desire to protect the poor and the helpless from the rapacity of the rich and the strong.

There is still difference of opinion as to the messianic consciousness and the eschatological views of Jesus. But, whatever his method of applying apocalyptic eschatology, there is, I think, no longer any doubt that he used it, there is no longer any ground for serious doubt that he stood in direct succession not only to the Hebrew prophets, but also to the Jewish apocalyptists. He used their language and their ideas. One is almost compelled to believe that at least some of the apocalyptic literature mentioned above was known to him and his hearers. What he says, therefore, must be interpreted in the light of these documents. They in turn must be interpreted in the light of the ancient traditions of Babylon and Egypt as well as of Israel. When one puts together all these multitudinous elements which must enter into the solution of the problem of interpreting Jesus, the preponderance of evidence seems to me to point clearly in one direction. A distinct tradition as to divine justice and protection for the poor and the weak is traceable thru three thousand years of history. Are we to suppose that Jesus suddenly steps aside from it, that he restricts the hope of the poor to even narrower limits than the Jewish apocalyptists had done, that he is less sensitive to social wrong and economic injustice than the patesis of Sumer or the social prophets of Egypt or the rabbis of the Talmud?

Against this larger background some interpretations that have been put upon the Beatitudes are clearly seen to be mistaken. This is certainly true of the 'spiritualizing interpretations,' first and foremost among which stands Matthew's version. It is instructive to discover that C. F. Burney, tho he decides that Matthew usually preserved better than Luke an exact translation of the words of Jesus, concludes that in the first and third Beatitudes the probable rhythm of the Aramaic favors the omission of *τῷ πνεύματι* and *τὴν δικαιοσύνην*, with Luke.[18]

[18] *The Poetry of our Lord*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925, pp. 166f.

Indeed nearly all recent commentators on the Beatitudes agree that Luke represents the original words of Jesus.[19] But many argue that Matthew more correctly reproduces the idea of Jesus, that the word *'aniyyîm* in the long course of Jewish history had gathered connotations which are not represented in simple πτωχός. "It compressed a complicated Hebrew train of thot in a Greek word which would be misunderstood if literally interpreted."[20] This is doubtless true. But πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι translates *'anâwîm*, not *'aniyyîm*, and while the latter means "oppressed poor" by both derivation and usage, is it right to insist that it must always mean the "godly oppressed?" Moreover there is no evidence that Jesus used *'ânî*. Burney prefers *miskên*.[21] In any case the smaller background of the Psalms, which sometimes seem to imply that poverty and piety are identical, must be seen in the light of the wider tradition, common to all the ancient Orient and reflected especially in the prophets, which maintained that God favors the poor not because they are pious but because he loves justice. If they are both poor and pious, so much the better perhaps, but the few who combine both qualities must not be allowed to obscure the much larger number whose only claim on God's thot was the injustice from which they suffered.

To be sure Jesus was not a leader of the proletariat against the economic exploitation of Rome. His basic interest was religious; his remedy for the ills of society was a moral and religious regeneration. He believed that God stood ready to reward humility, teachableness, and aspiration, as the Beatitudes of Matthew insist, but that was not his only theme, as repeated references to the evils of wealth prove. And that was not the

[19] So C. W. Votaw in Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. V, pp. 17 f.: Alfred Plummer, *St. Luke* in *International Critical Commentary*, 6 ed., New York: Scribner, 1908, p. 179; C. G. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels*, London: Macmillan, 1909, Vol. II, p. 477; J. Weiss in *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments*, hersgg. von W. Bousset und W. Heitmüller, 3. Aufl., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht, 1917, Band I, S. 252.

[20] W. C. Allen, *St. Matthew* in *International Critical Commentary*, New York: Scribner, 1907, p. 39.

[21] *Op. cit.*, p. 166, following, I suppose, the Syriac versions.

theme of the Beatitudes, if Luke's form best represents the original, and if we may trust the ancient and consistent tradition that is to be discovered in the Near East. Jesus would hardly depart from this tradition so far as to maintain the obvious falsehood that poverty, hunger, and sorrow were happy states, nor would he declare that these conditions, however inescapable for many and however capable of transmutation in the alembic of fortitude and faith, were the necessary and sole preparation for the kingdom of God. Such asceticism does not belong to Judaism or to Jesus. Neither was Jesus addressing himself to a particular sect or group, for none such existed. Still less was he speaking only to his own disciples proclaiming that the kingdom of God belonged to them as poor disciples. Neither in Matthew nor Luke does the context require such a restriction of his audience. Rather he was thinking of that great multitude who thru long generations had waited for the restoration of all things.

In the atmosphere of the ancient Orient with its century-long tradition as to divine justice, the Beatitudes and the complementary Woes of Luke's Gospel are thoroly authentic. They fit easily and completely into the picture. The contacts of Jesus with the rich, Zacchaeus, for example, prove that he did not harbor the class-conscious hatred of the prosperous which stains some of the apocalypses, even as he rose above their narrow particularism. But other passages in the records of both Mark and the Second Source show how strongly he felt as to the evils of wealth. The wrongs and injustices that flowed from the oppression and pride of the rich and powerful must cease when God reigned on earth. Then would come to an end the immemorial injustice which Uru-kagina had attempted to overcome; the oppression and exploitation which the Egyptian moralists had decried and the Hebrew prophets and Jewish apocalyptists had denounced would cease. How far the eschatological elements in Jesus' thot affect the permanent value of his hopes and how his ideals are to be applied to the problems of our civilization are questions that lie beyond the scope of this paper. But in any case our modern 'practical interpretation' of Jesus' sayings must be based upon the 'scientific exegesis'

and clear comprehension of what he actually meant. Toward this the comparison of the ideals of the ancient world makes a distinct contribution.[23]

[23] Julius Boehmer, "Die erste Seligpreisung," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 45 (1926), pp. 298–304, presents a suggestive and satisfactory interpretation of the first beatitude in the form in which the Gospel of Matthew has handed it down, but his arguments do not seem to me to touch the claim of the Lukan form to priority.