Good Samaritan and Zacchaeus – A non-Traditional Approach

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Abstract: This paper discusses the real sense of some passages of the Gospel, specially the parable of the Good Samaritan and the episode of Zacchaeus, showing how Exegesis depends on the Semitic distinction between three different "ifs" (certainty, impossibility and doubt) while our Western Languages confound them in only one "if".

Keywords: Good Samaritan. Gospel Exegesis. Semitic Languages. Zacchaeus.

Resumo: o artigo discute o verdadeiro sentido de algumas passagens do Evangelho, particularmente na Parábola do Bom Samaritano e no episódio de Zaqueu, procurando mostrar como a exegese depende da distinção feita nas línguas semitas entre três diferentes "se" (de certeza, impossibilidade e dúvida) enquanto as línguas ocidentais os confundem em um mesmo e único "se".

Keywords: Bom Samaritano. Exegese. Línguas Semitas. Zaqueu.

Confounding Thinking

Distinguishing and confounding, according to Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, are two major functions of thinking and language, or of the "language / thinking system", as the outstanding philosopher of language, Johannes Lohmann[1], suggests (since language and thinking should be considered not as independent elements, but in mutual interaction).

As Julian Marias says, if the only function of thinking were to distinguish and direct the mind to different forms of reality, we wouldn't know how to deal with complex realities in their connections and there are cases in which we are interested exactly in "the common" rather than in the differences[2]. If a bug ("*bicho*" in the original) lands on my shoulder, I am not interested in determinating its precise species among the hundred thousands distinguished by biologists: if it is the coleopterus so or so… it does not matter to me: it is just a bug, an importunous bug and all that I say is: "Shoo, bug, shoo, away".

Actually, in certain situations we need distinguishing; in others, counfounding. Yes, it is certain that every language is, in some measure, confounding; after all, language itself, being abstract, is confounding. But there are levels in that tendency. As we have shown in other articles, roughly speaking, Eastern Languages tend relatively to be more confounding than the Western ones (and it goes without saying that when we say "confounding" we mean no judgment of value).

Lets consider for example the Arabic word *Salam* (or its Hebraic equivalent: *Shalom*), usually translated by "*peace*." Or better yet, for the Semitic semantics - in which consonants are what really count -, consider the tri-consonantal root S-L-M (/ Sh- L-M). "Peace" is only one of the many meanings confounded in S-L-M, that also expresses: unity, (moral or physical) integrity, health, salvation etc.

Confounding Thinking and Biblical Exegesis

This cumulative, confounding character of Semitic Languages is very important to Biblical Exegesis. Outside this context, how to understand, for example, the enigmatic sentence of the apostle Paul who writes in Greek (but still thinks in his Hebraic mother tongue) "Christ is our Peace..."?

When we look in detail to the meaning of "peace," we find new and unexpected aspects in it. St. Paul uses a strong formulation – and, at first sight, somewhat cryptic: he does not say "the Lord's peace" (the peace that belongs to Jesus, or was brought by Jesus), but that Christ Himself is peace: "For He Himself is our peace" – *Autos ger estin he eirene hemon* (Eph. 2:14).

A new meaning shows up when – following a trend of the contemporary exegesis – we turn ourselves to the thoughts and to the Semitic word behind the Greek word used by Paul. This task becomes even more necessary when we read the reason why Christ is called our peace: He "has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14). What sounds strange to our Western ears is, on the contrary, completely natural to a Semite speaker.

As we said, Semitic Languages are frequently "confounding": the same word – or root – accumulates in itself different meanings that, from our Western perspective, require different words. *Shalom* is meant here not exactly as peace, but in its sense of unity, integrity. And in this sense, for a Jew it is totally natural that Christ is our *Shalom*, since He has reestablished the unity, "has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier" (Eph. 2:14). He also abolished the Law, making Himself, from two, one new man: the peace (*Shalom*). In Col. 3:15, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace." Always in this sense of unity, there are no longer Jews and Gentiles, Greek and Barbarian, Man and Woman, Servant and the Free, or even the "virtual walls" that divide a community: we are one in Christ.

Distinguishing Thinking – variety of semitic "ifs" vs. our single "if"

In this study we will not examine the usual confounding aspect of the Semitic languages, but an exceptional case that goes in the opposite way: we will turn our attention to a special case in which Semitic Languages (we will be centered in Arabic Language but all the results apply to Hebraic and Aramaic as well) distinguish, while our language confounds: that is the case of the conjunction "if" and how western "confusion" can disturb the understanding of Jesus's sayings (as a native Aramaic speaker).

Semitic Languages have distinct conjunctions distinguishing three levels of possibilities while we have only one: the conjunction "if"[3], that confoundingly admits three different possibilities:

1) The so to speak "first if" (Arabic *idha*) expresses a certainty (or very high probability) that something will happen: "If it rains in Belem, the traffic will move slowly" (in Amazonic Belem it rains every single day and the sentence really means: "When it rains in Belem…"). Another example: "If your child refuses food, don't feel rejected" – That is an "if" that surely will happen some day: every child refuses food sometime.

2) In the opposite extreme is the "if" (Arabic: *law*) of impossibility (or almost): "If it rains in Sahara...", "If Brazilian politicians were not corrupt…".

3) And there is an "if" of real doubt (maybe, maybe not), as when the pregnant woman says: "We don't know if it is a boy or a girl yet" or when the invite guest says in his mobile phone: "Traffic is a little slow: I don't know if I can arrive at eight."

Naturally, sometimes it is plain to see that we are dealing with the unreal, utopic"if", like in the Peggy March's song: "If I were a princess I'd pass the greatest law in history and it would make you fall in love with me".

But in other cases things are not that clear. In my childhood, Kypling's poem "*If*" was proposed to our generation as a concrete ideal, unreached but not unreachable, very exigent but not impossible:

If

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you
But make allowance for their doubting too,
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;

(…)

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings--nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you;
If all men count with you, but none too much,
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And -which is more- you'll be a Man, my son!

The confounding character of "if" (covering the broad semantic field from the impossible to the certainty) allowed the parody *Kipling Revisitado* by José Paulo Paes:

"Kipling revisited"[4]

> if etc
> if etc
> if etc
> if etc
> if etc
> if etc
> if etc
> you´ll be a theorem, my son!

Our "if" is one word for these three such different semantic situations. Imagine our language having three (or more) different words for the three levels: impossibility, certainty and doubt. In this case, how would the translation of a Semitic speech be affected (and after all the Gospel is a Semitic speech)?

In the following, we will analyse some uses of the Arabic "ifs" (Hebraic / Aramaic), and the most important is the consequences of the translation gap: from three different "ifs" into only one: our confounding "if".

The Arabic (Semitic) particle "*law*": the "if" of impossibility

Let's begin with the "if" of impossibility (or almost impossibility, merely hypothetical, emphatic, desiderative, utopical etc.). It is the "if" of – as grammarians say – the "contrafactual constructions": "If you had been on time, we could have caught that bus". And in the Quran we read:

> "Say, 'If all the sea were ink for my Lord's Words, the sea would indeed be exhausted before my Lord's Words are exhausted! And thus it would be if We were to add to it sea upon sea.'" (18, 109)

If we had an equivalent in English (and notice that the "if" of the beginning of this paragraph is the "if – *law*") to this "if – *law*", it would be very useful in avoiding embarassing situations, being the introduction of communicating bad news like: a serious disease, wedding cheating etc.

An interesting use of the "if - *law*" is in the form "*wa law*" which expresses an "even if" of impossibility. Besides the Quran, Islamic tradition has the *hadith*, the sayings of the Prophet. A famous *hadith* says:

> "Seek knowledge even if you have to go to China"
>
> ('*Utlub al 'ilma* wa law *fis-Sin*) distance that nowadays would sound like, "Seek knowledge even if you have to go to Mars".

And in Arabic proverbs[5], we found:

> *Khara* (crap) is *khara* even if it crosses the Euphrates (al-Fara). (Feghali # 392). Rhymed in the original: *Al-khara khara* wa law *qata´ nahr al-Fara*

> Give your dough to a baker even if (*wa law*) he may
> eat half of it (Freyha # 243). The meaning is: Calling a
> professional is better than any improvisation.

> A dog is a dog even if he wears golden clothes (Jasim
> # 767)

The Quran uses *law* 80 times, as when, for example, the damned in Hellfire say: "If a return were possible for us…" (2, 167). Or "As for those who disbelieve, lo! If all that is in the earth were theirs, and as much again therewith, to ransom them from the doom on the Day of Resurrection, it would not be accepted from them" (5, 36). Or when those who disbelieve say: "O thou (Muhammad) art indeed a madman... Why bringest thou not angels unto us, if thou art of the truthful?..." (15, 6-7).

And surely it was the "if-*law*" of his mother tongue that the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote his famous hymn: ""If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love..." (I Cor 13, 1).

The "if-*idha*"

For the "if –*idha*" (of certainty), let's begin with a remark of the Ph.D. dissertation of Kadi, *Hatta Idha in the Qur'an...*[6]. The meaning of "if - *idha*" is unanimously considered by the grammarians as a word which *contains* a conditional sense, but is not a particle of proper condition (contrary to the Arabic particle "*in*" or others).

Thus, when you say: "*In ta'tini* (jussive) *atika* (jussive)", "If you visit me I will visit you", it is quite possible that you should not visit me and hence I will not visit you (p. 24). But if one uses *idha*, instead of *in*: "*Idha ataytani* (indicative) *atika* (indicative)", "When you visit me I will visit you", there is no question about the fact that you will visit me and hence me you; it is only a question of *when* these actions will take place (p. 24).

"The actions indicated by the *idha* are certain to happen, whereas those indicated by the pure conditional particles are not" (p. 24). Sibawayh (c. 800), the founding father of Arabic Grammar, contrasts the use of *idha* with *in*:

> *Atika idha i<u>h</u>marra al-busru*
> I will visit you when (/if) the dates become red.

but one cannot say, using pure conditional particles such as *in*:

> *Atika in i<u>h</u>marra al-busru*
> I will visit you if the dates become red.

for these fruits will necessarily become red in some point in the future[7].

Dichy, in a lecture on the Arabic conditional, points out that *idha* is used to indicate something that will come to be in some point of the future from a situation now in process, as is known by repetition or habit; or in the formulation of a scientific law:

> "If he comes to Mossul, he will visit us (as always has
> happened)
> *Kana, idha 'ata l-maw<u>s</u>ila yazuruna*

And in al-Ghazali:

$$\text{If every A is B } (alif, ba)\text{, some B is A}[8].$$

Being an "if" of certainty, *idha* is often translated by "when", in the sense of "whenever". In the Quran we read, for example: "Those who say, *when* afflicted with calamity: 'To God We belong…'" (2, 156); "It is prescribed for you *when* death approaches any of you…" (2, 180); "…I answer the prayer of the suppliant *when* he calls on Me..." (2, 186).

Idha and *in* are used in the famous saying of Jesus: "If (*idha*) your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If (*in*) he listens to you..." Mt (18,15). It is certain that some brother will sin against me; it is doubtful if he will accept the correction...

The Gospel revisited

Needless to say that this short presentation of the Semitic "if-forms" is far from being complete and aims only to be a short introduction to the experience of reading the sayings of Jesus from its Semitic "distinguishing" point of view.

In this sense, it is interesting to notice that different Arabic editions of the Gospel not always coincide in using the same "if" (*law*, *idha* or the ifs of the family of *in*) for the same saying. Anyway, it is important to discuss which kind of "if" Jesus employed in each case, in His preaching and conversation.

Lets consider some passages of the Gospel (New American Standard Bible) containing the particle "if" and see how to translate them in order to recover their original sense: what the Gospel speakers really meant? Naturally, this is in some measure a kind of Exegesis-Fiction, since there is no recorded tape with the literal (Aramaic) words of Jesus, the apostles etc.

Lets begin with the most obvious and undoubtful:

1. The "if" of doubt and real possibility – it is the easiest and most frequent. One example is enough: Mt (28,14), when the chief priests gave a large sum of money to the soldiers and told them to say that the disciples of Jesus stole His body etc.: "And if this should come to the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble".

2. The "if-*idha*" of certainty. In several verses it seems clear that Jesus (or other speakers) use this "if":

> What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if
> it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold
> of it and lift it out? (Mt 12,11).

> If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he
> rejoices over it… (Mt 18, 13)

> If a man's brother dies…, his brother should marry the
> wife... (Mk 12, 19)

> If a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a
> pit (Mt 15, 14)

In all these cases, "if" can be replaced by "when" without change of meaning: surely, there will always be sheeps that fall into a pit; sheeps that are found; brothers that die and misguided blinds.

3. The "if-law". There are passages clearly with "if – *law"*:

> If the head of the house had known at what time of the
> night the thief was coming... (Mt 24, 43)
> False Christs will arise..., so as to mislead, if possible,
> even the elect (Mt 24, 24)

In Lk 7, 36 and ff., a pharisee requests Christ to dine with him and when a sinner woman begins to serve Him wetting His feet with tears etc. the pharisee thinks: "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner". Undoubtfully his "if" is a *law* for he has just been convinced that Jesus is a fraud.

4. Which "if"? It is not always clear which variety of "if" has been really used in a passage and it is sometimes an interesting experience to try different Semitic "ifs" in the same verse:

a) The "if" of the devil. When Jesus is tempted by the devil (Mt 4,3 e ss.; Lk 4, 3 e ss.): "If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread", we are accustomed to read this "if" as doubtful ("is He or not…") but it can very well be read as an "if" of almost certainty (*idha*): "Since You are the Son of God…" or even as an "if – *law*" of impossibility…

b) The "if" of the Mount of Olives – The same goes for the "if" of Jesus's prayer: ""My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me…" (Mt 26, 39)

c) "If You can do anything" Mk 9, 14 and ff. An afflicted father challenges Jesus with the "if" of doubt (or would it be the "if" of impossibility?), "If You can do anything…"; Jesus reacts (kind of "Hey, what do you mean by that?") and challenges the father ("If you believe all things are possible") who answered crying: "I do believe; help my unbelief."

Towards a new comprehension of the parable of the Good Samaritan and Zacchaeus

The "if" of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10, 30-37)

> But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And
> who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied and said, "A man
> was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell
> among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him,
> and went away leaving him half dead. "And by chance
> a priest was going down on that road, and when he
> saw him, he passed by on the other side. "Likewise a
> Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him,
> passed by on the other side. "But a Samaritan, who
> was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw
> him, he felt compassion, and came to him and
> bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on
> them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought
> him to an inn and took care of him. "On the next day
> he took out two denarii and gave them to the

innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.' "Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

Who is the hero of this parable? For the usual interpretation, there are no doubts: the hero - the only hero - is the Samaritan[9]. He is in the title we gave to the parable; there are thousands and thousands of hospitals named "Samaritan" or "The Good Samaritan" all around the world and a search in Google (10/10/2008) of the expression "Samaritan Hospital" gave the result of 754.000 sites on the internet! But if you read the parable more carefully you will see that Christ Himself does not necessarily endorse such interpretation. He remains neutral and generic: the hero, whoever he may be, is the one who showed mercy…

And as a matter of fact, the Samaritan is not the only one who shows mercy… Lets consider first, the Innkeeper, whose mercy surpasses the mercy of the Good Samaritan, although he is never celebrated and there is no hospital called "The Good Innkeeper". The Innkeeper has received two denarii for hosting the Samaritan and the victim, and for taking care of the victim until he recovers. The generosity and the heroism of the Innkeeper becomes obvious when we consider that two denarii is by no means proportional to his cost: the "if" said by the Samaritan is *idha*: "surely you'll spend much more money", because two denarii is miserably only about ten dollars! Remember the parable of laborers: a denarius is paid to an unqualified worker for a work day (Mt 20, 1 ff.). And every Innkeeper knows he should never accept fragile promises ("and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you"), especially being an Innkeeper of Judea and a Samaritan promiser! In summary: the Innkeeper rather than the Samaritan seems to be the hero of this story.

But there is a third candidate to this "neighbor" concept. Lets begin remembering that Jesus asks: "Which of *these three* do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands*"* Who are "these three"? The implicit answer of every christian - "Priest, Levite, Samaritan" - is indeed pure nonsense: the Priest and the Levite cannot be the neighbors of that poor man. Curiously, the third "candidate" is one of the robbers. In fact, there is a subtle and very surprising fact in the parable: the victim was left "half dead". Now, everybody knows that no band of robbers - no matter in which culture or time – is expected to leave alive its victim: they just kill their victim to the risk of being recognized. There is no reason for leaving the victim alive except under the hypothesis that one of the robbers (like in the story of Joseph, Genesis 37-50) claims for mercy, "showing mercy toward the victim", in sparing his life. In that case, the great hero of the parable would be this "Good Robber": the Samaritan sacrifices a little time and money; the Innkeeper sacrifices much more time and much more money (at least in terms of risk) and the Robber sacrifices his own safety and life, exposing himself - and all the band members - for future vengeance.

Christ does not say concretely who is the neighbor nor who are "these three" but, prejudices aside, Samaritan-Innkeeper-Robber sounds like a better trio than Priest-Levite-Samaritan.

The "if" of Zacchaeus (Lk 19 1,10)

> He entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man called by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and he was rich. Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was, and was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way. When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house." And he hurried and came down and received Him gladly. When they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

If the Innkeeper has been ignored, Zacchaeus has been misjudged as corrupt officer. Besides the bias against tax collectors the basis for this grotesque mistake is a misunderstanding of the "if" of his saying: "If I have defrauded anyone...".

His "if" has been wrongly interpreted as an *idha* (of certainty), when it should be read as the if-*law* of impossibility. Being rich and a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus is suspected of corruption and when Jesus comes to his home, people say: "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." But, taking the Gospel seriously it is impossible to label Zacchaeus as corrupt. Lets estimate his fortune as being for example 600,000: his giving half of it to the poor leaves him with 300,000 and, if he had defrauded anyone (which never happened) his alleged scheme of corruption never would have surpassed 75,000 (to give back four times to the defrauded). In other words, Zacchaeus has made at least more than 7/8 (525,000) of his money honestly...

Yes, exegets usually point out Lk 19, 8 as a first class conditional sentence, that is not really a condition at all, but it implies that the condition is actually true and could well be translated: "since". And it is argued that Zacchaeus's sentence should be read this way: "if I have defrauded (and it really happened) anyone of anything…". But an exeget like James L. Boyer, having analysed this one and all the first class conditional verses of the New Testament categorically concludes:

> In summary, what does a first class conditional sentence in NT Greek mean? It means precisely the same as the simple condition in English, "If this... then that..." It implies absolutely nothing as to "relation to reality."[10]

In other words: The "if" of Zacchaeus can very well mean: "if I have defrauded (and it never happened) anyone of anything…".

Conjectures suggested by the consideration of the Semitic distinctions in cases in which we – the Western readers of the Gospel - are bounded to confound.

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1. Lohmann (1976)

2. Marías (1999)

3. For the Arabic, Hebraic and Aramaic forms of the "if" of impossibility (arabic: *law*), see: "'If' introducing statement known or believed to be untrue" in O'Leary (2000: p. 276). For the "if" of certainity (Arabic *idha*, Hebraic *hen*), cf.: Stec (1987), According to Stec, some scholars consider *hen* – in the special sense of "if" – an aramaism in biblical Hebraic.

4. Paes (1986: p. 97)

5. From: Freyha (1974), Feghali (1938) and Mahdi (2006).

6. Kadi (1994)

7. Cf. tb: Giolfo (2005: p. 58).

8. Dichy (2007: 2.2 b e c)

9. Any way, in the interpretation of many Fathers of the Church, Christ is the samaritan (Augustine *En. in Ps.* 124, 15; Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 161, 2; Isidore, *Allegoriae quaedam...* Ex NT 205 etc.); and the Innkeeper is Apostle Paul (Augustine, *ibidem;* Caesarius, *ibidem*); or the bishops (Arnobius) etc.

10. Boyer (1981: p. 82)