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LUCRETIA MOTT: ACTIVE IMAGINATION AND JAMES 1:21

MARK BREDIN

Wayne Rollins comments: “The technique of active imagination has a long-standing relevance for the scriptural interpreter.”¹ Christopher Bryant observes that such an approach to the Bible “helps us to focus our attention on God’s presence within, in the soul’s centre... The way to read Scripture is not only to ponder the meaning of words and to recreate in imagination the scenes described but to listen to the Word, to God himself speaking in the heart.”² Quaker abolitionist and suffragist Lucretia Mott’s (1793-1880) emphasis on self-reflection, meditation, her capacity to recall texts, and her ability to embrace empathy, combined to produce great fruits of Scriptural interpretation, as well as in her life as a social activist.

In this study it is necessary to take into account Priscilla Eppinger’s comments on Lucretia’s use of the Bible to which I will return in the conclusion:

It is rare that her quotations do not match exactly the words of a King James translation... When they do vary, it is most often the case that Mott has deliberately altered the wording to be applicable to her hearers and/or their specific situation or context.³

I examine changes she made to James 1:21 read alongside Wisdom 12:1-2 and 2 Timothy 3:15 in her sermon at Cherry Street Meeting, on November 4th, 1849.⁴ Here we see the outcomes of Lucretia’s studious and careful reflections on the Bible.

SUBVERSIVE IMAGINATION

According to Jung, the unconscious is the repository of the imagination, from which fantasies, visions of the future, new ideas, and insights emerge. He recommended the use of active imagination to draw out the unconscious content.⁵ It was an invitation to discover the inner world of the psyche/soul, to be where God’s presence was

experienced. The process of active imagination for Lucretia is akin to tuning in to experience the inner-light, God's transcendence within.

Imagination functions subversively when understood in this Jungian way; without it the long established "givens" established by the elites prevail because they are accepted as beyond criticism. Walter Brueggemann writes that the givens "will prevail until a counter-'as' is imagined and voiced."⁶ David Bryant reiterates imagining as counter-"as" the givens, but adds "take as" in the sense of actively working towards the counter-"as."⁷ Michael Birkel puts it succinctly: "Imagination opens the way to perceiving how those who bear the burden of injustice feel."⁸

Nancy Isenberg focuses on how central study and meditation were for Lucretia, and that she advocated "that every individual had to look inward, so as to develop his or her immortal mind and engage in self-examination."⁹ In this time she experienced an amplification of the imagination whereby she experienced God showing her "the thoughts and intents of her heart."¹⁰ With repentant heart she grieved, empathized, hoped, and imagined the given status quo *as* something different whereby all flourished.

ELITES, BIBLE, AND PROPHETIC IMAGINATION

Lucretia asks: "What are the abuses and what are the proper uses of the Bible...?" warning that "...we need to be upon our guard lest we fall into the superstition and error and before we are aware, become bigoted in our opinion and denunciatory in our conduct."¹¹ Central to the elites' dominance is their teaching "that the Bible is the word of God..."¹² She comments:

The great error in Christendom is that the Bible is called the word, that is taken as a whole, as a volume of plenary inspiration and in this way it has proved one of the strongest pillars to uphold ecclesiastical power...¹³

She emphasizes "but we no where find the Scriptures called the word of God by themselves."¹⁴

Lucretia critiques the ecclesiastical elite who limited God to the words of the Bible causing many to be immune to any transcendent voice within and, ultimately according to Brueggemann, led to "disregard of neighbor" and "to the disappearance of passion."¹⁵ I would add: "the disappearance of empathy and hope." Brueggemann

writes about the prophetic imagination that freed God from their control and led them to experience God's transcendent presence within, that led to radical action on behalf of the oppressed, and recognition of their culpability in it. He compares the Bible to "the script of psychotherapy. It brings to consciousness all sorts of odd features from our past that we have repressed. In so doing, it shatters our thin present tense and makes available to us all sorts of materials out of which may be faced and chosen alternative present tenses."¹⁶

WISDOM 12:1-2 (AV.)

¹ For thine incorruptible Spirit is in all things. ² Therefore chastenest thou them by little and little that offend, and warnest them by putting them in remembrance wherein they have offended, that leaving their wickedness *they believe on thee*, O Lord.¹⁷

Lucretia in verse 2 replaces "believe on" with "return unto."

Lucretia draws from this text: (1) the divine spirit is in all things; (2) the spirit shows them how they fall short of God's will; (3) Lucretia's substituting of "believe on" with "return unto" suggests belief must be evident in actual changes in a person's life. It emphasizes repentance as movement towards the way God intended us to follow.

The Bible is not the "incorruptible Spirit." This Spirit is deep within challenging each person freeing them from the fetters of the elites. People can dream, hope, and imagine something different from what has been permitted and which has been repressed by the ecclesiastical elites. However, Lucretia acknowledge that this spirit:

...every where is found wherever man is found, darkened to be sure and clouded by very many circumstances.¹⁸

Lucretia acknowledges that the Spirit is hindered by the darkness around. Access to this Spirit demands the discipline of active imagination. The elite control what people thought silencing the imagination within the unconscious. She goads her audience with a question to which the answer is obvious:

Is not the Bible sought from beginning to end for its isolated passages wherewith to prove the most absurd dogmas that ever were palmed off upon a credulous people; dogmas doing violence to the divine gift of reason with which man is so

beautifully endowed; doing violence to all his feelings, his sense of justice and mercy....?¹⁹

In contrast, Lucretia is driven by the Spirit, the transcendent voice within the unconscious repressed by the ecclesiastic elites. It is one that is evoked by the Bible when read with imagination.

JAMES 1:21 (AV.)

Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your soul.

Lucretia paraphrases:

[engrafted word]²⁰ is quick and powerful which showeth the thoughts and intent of the heart, *that engrafted word which is able to save the soul...*²¹

Lucretia paraphrased v.21a using active imagination. She interprets the “incorruptible Spirit” in Wisdom 12:1-2 as the “engrafted word” of James 1:21. The engrafted word more particularly challenges the whole person to grow into the person God had created them to be. Lucretia further replaces “lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness...” with: “showeth the thoughts and intent of the heart.” Instead of James’ second person plural imperative “lay apart,” Lucretia replaces with the indicative third person singular “showeth.” James 1:21a commands listeners themselves to “lay apart” all filthiness and superfluity and naughtiness as preliminary to receiving the engrafted word that has the power to save the soul. Lucretia, instead, has “the engrafted word showeth the thoughts and intent of the heart.” The engrafted word, activated by the imagination, uncovers people’s compliance in oppression.

In short, the engrafted word is the transcendence working from within revealing to people that their securities and peace are founded upon oppression, greed, and most crucially, being immune to God’s real living word within through failure to make time to self-reflect.

THE ENGRAFTED WORD, THE WRITTEN WORD, AND THE FAITH OF JESUS

Lucretia proclaims:

This divine word which we believe to be our sufficient teacher, draws us away from a dependence upon books, or everything that is outward, and leads us onward and upward in the work of progress, towards perfection.²²

Lucretia in times of self-reflection aided through meditation on the Bible evoked that of God within. In her paraphrase of James 1:21 she adds to v.21b: “we find spoken of in the Scripture” emphasizing Lucretia’s devotion to the written word as a tool energizing the engrafted word to show the intents of her heart. Lucretia acknowledged early Friends “have been sustained by Scripture testimony in the view that the word of God is a quickening [i.e. living] spirit...”²³ The Bible is “...a corroboration of the word and not the word itself.”²⁴

Lucretia alludes to 2 Timothy 3:15, when referring to James 1:21, to reinforce that the Bible is not the Word of God, but is connected with Jesus:

We read of one of the ancient Hebrew writers who after being converted to a purer faith, commended the Scriptures as being able to give knowledge of that which is to come, being able to make wise into salvation; giving knowledge of a purer way, but only through the faith of Jesus Christ.²⁵

Paul writes to Timothy:

And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:15).

Lucretia’s reflections on the engrafted word and the incorruptible Spirit of Wisdom 12:1-2 are conditional on “through the faith of Jesus Christ” which are evoked through her reading of 2 Timothy 3:15. Lucretia’s paraphrase of Paul “through the faith *of* Jesus Christ” replaces Paul’s “in” with “of,” and Jesus before Christ, all highlighting the practical nature of faith, i.e. works. Lucretia’s “through the faith of Jesus Christ” might be further paraphrased “through devotion to the Jesus who revealed how God intended human beings to live.” According to James, faith is intimately connected with works: “so faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (NRSV 2:17). In 2:14-16

James emphasizes caring for the poor in such a way that is more than placatory words, but through feeding and clothing them. Lucretia reads 2 Timothy 3:15 through the lens of James. Lucretia herself states:

Faith of Jesus Christ is faith in the truth, faith in God and in man... I live by the faith of the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Well what is this other than a faith similar to that which Jesus held, the faith of the Son of God? How many chosen sons of God who have not loved their lives unto death, who have given themselves for their brethren...that as he Jesus laid down his life for the brethren so do we also lay down our lives for another?²⁶

The essence of these words is that the “faith of Jesus Christ” is about service and self-giving. Those who reflect on the teachings of Jesus stir the engrafted word to show the truth of how far short people fall of following Jesus. We cannot comprehend James’ reference to the engrafted word without assuming the human Jesus and his teaching particularly on the Sermon on the Mount; especially when James’ letter refers to all the teachings found in the Sermon on the Mount.²⁷ Therefore, the engrafted word, for Lucretia, which shows our thoughts and intentions, is connected intimately with the teachings and example of the human Jesus.

In short: (1) Jesus is a model of one who gave his life for others; (2) Faith is truth, and this is exemplified in living that others may live; (3) children of God are those who are prepared to live so others live; (4) as Jesus suffered so we must suffer.

FULFILLMENT AND WHOLENESS

Bryant expresses Jesus in a way that resonates with Lucretia:

Jesus Christ presents us with a clue to the nature of the powerful inner force which is ceaselessly urging us to change, to grow to our full stature as human beings, to become what we truly are, to realize our own truth.²⁸

Lucretia saw the engrafted word as revealing the intentions of her heart, often unpleasant and painful. It enabled her to see that, her own egotistical desires, ambitions, and thoughts, were not integrated with God’s presence within. Spiritual growth was her increased sense of a growing awareness of resisting God by her compliance with slavery.

She felt God's judgment through the engrafted word; it was self-acting and imposed from within her.

Lucretia represents one who anticipates some important insights that Jung brought through his technique of active imagination. Her sense of the engrafted word compared well with Jung's sense of the Self as the sum of the *psyche/soul* that contains the drive toward fulfilment and wholeness. Jung uses Jesus' parable of the mustard seed which will become a great tree, as Christ in us. He writes in a way similar to Lucretia's sense of the engrafted word: "Christ...is the true image of God, after whose likeness our inner man is made...the God image in us reveals itself through 'prudentia, iustia, moderatio, virtus, sapientia et disciplina.'"²⁹

Lucretia's commitment to self-reflection was driven by her experience of God's presence confronting her conscious ego, but also nurtured that presence, the Self (God's presence), and led to an integration between her own egoistic nature and that of God within. She saw Jesus as one whose conscious ego was fully integrated with the Self of the collective unconscious. In practical terms, this did not mean following the Bible or Jesus unimaginatively. Lucretia would welcome Walter Wink's words:

God invites us, in short, not to conform to collective notions of what constitutes Christian behaviour, but to seek the specific shape of our own divine calling in the day-to-day working out of our relationship with God.³⁰

when she herself preaches with timeless words:

Almighty is calling upon both man and woman to open their mouths and judge righteously, to plead the cause of the poor and needy and many there are thus emphatically called to lift-up the voice and declare the truth of God and these will give evidence to the divinity of their mission, just as Jesus did.³¹

CONCLUSION

Lucretia's paraphrase of James 1:21 is inspired and provoked by her readings of Wisdom 12:1-12 and 2 Timothy 3:15. The theology of her Cherry Street address is rooted in the practical example of Jesus and how he lived and what he taught day-to-day. She viewed Jesus as inseparable from the engrafted word and incorruptible spirit

of Wisdom 12:1-2. Jesus was for her divine human, meaning he represented a human being fully self-actualized.

What do we learn about Lucretia from the changes she made to James 1:21, Wisdom 12:1-2 and 2 Timothy 3:15? In my introduction, Eppinger states that Lucretia rarely made changes to the AV. This would imply Lucretia to be a slave to the literal word of the Bible. This study shows this to be far from true. But Eppinger is correct in saying that “such changes related to her audience and social context.” She challenged the elite for making an idol out of the Bible and misusing it to support their agenda.

I conclude with two further points as to why Lucretia made changes:

(1) Lucretia’s changes emerge from her devotion to the Bible as an inspired source that, when read intelligently, could stir the engrafted word to show the truth that people need to repent and bear fruits of repentance. She read with active imagination memorizing huge amounts of the Bible, reflecting on them empathetically and prayerfully. This led to quite profound and significant paraphrases of the Bible.

(2) Lucretia’s use of active imagination, made her open to reading the Bible intertextually. Her rendering of James 1:21 is part of that process. Her paraphrase is created from earlier texts. She engaged with James 1:21, Wisdom 12:1-2 and 2 Timothy 3:15 from the perspective of her own social context for her and her audience, the Bible was the lenses through which they understood and related to the world.³² It was vital to show the Bible to be relevant to her age.

ENDNOTES

1. W. Rollins, *Jung and the Bible* (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & STOCK, 2013) 104.
2. C. Bryant, *The River Within: The Search for God in Depth* (London: DLT, 1978) 86
3. P. E. Eppinger, *Lucretia Mott: Theology is Reform’s Foundation* (PhD. Northwestern University, 2002) 101.
4. C. Densmore, C. Faulkner, N. Hewitt, B. W. Palmer (editors), *Lucretia Mott Speaks: The Essential Speeches and Sermons* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2017) 56-64.
5. Rollins, *Jung*, 103; W. Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination: Texts under Negotiation* (London: SCM, 1993), xiv, notes that imagination has “its roots deep in the human unconscious...”
6. Brueggemann, *Bible*, 15.
7. D. Bryant, *Faith and the Play of Imagination* (Marcon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 1989).

8. M. Birkel, *A Near Sympathy: The Timeless Quaker Wisdom of John Woolman* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 2003) 20.
9. N. Isenberg, “‘To Stand Out in Heresy’: Lucretia Mott, Liberty, and the Hysterical Woman.” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* Vol. CXXZII, No. 1 (January 2003).
10. Densmore, et. al., *Lucretia Mott Speaks*, 58.
11. *Ibid.*, 56.
12. *Ibid.*, 58.
13. *Ibid.*, 58.
14. *Ibid.*, 58.
15. Brueggemann. *The Prophetic Imagination* (Second Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 32.
16. Brueggemann, *Bible*, 39.
17. Densmore, et. al., *Lucretia Mott Speaks*, 58.
18. *Ibid.*, 58.
19. *Ibid.*, 58.
20. It is added for coherence.
21. Words in italics mark out v. 21b. Lucretia’s omission of “receive with meekness” may be due to rhetorical purposes, but it may be due to her dislike of pretentious piety
22. Densmore, et. al., *Lucretia Mott Speaks*, 60.
23. *Ibid.*, 58.
24. *Ibid.*, 58.
25. *Ibid.*, 58.
26. *Ibid.*, 58.
27. E. Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith Without Works Is Dead* (New York: A Crossroad Book, 1985) 75 lists parallels between Sermon on the Mount and James.
28. C. Bryant, *Jung and the Christian Way* (London: DLT, 1983) 46.
29. C.G. Jung , *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self* (Second Edition. London: Routledge, 1991) 38, my translation: “practical understanding, justice, moderation, courage, wisdom and discipline.”
30. W. Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 307.
31. Densmore, et. al., *Lucretia Mott Speaks*, 63.
32. G.A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theory in Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK, 1983) 34.