Limited Good, Envy, the Evil Eye, and Bible Translation

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Abstract: Many biblical passages have been traditionally interpreted from a Western, capitalist point of view. These interpretations fail to take into consideration a concept that is very common in rural cultures around the world today: the concept of limited good. This concept was defined by Foster (“Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good”, 1965) based on his fieldwork in rural Mexico, as well as anthropological data from around the world. Later research conducted by Pilch, Malina, Rohrbaugh, and Witherington revealed that this concept was also prevalent in ancient Palestine, and underlies much of the Scriptures.

This paper summarizes the works of these scholars and their rendering of a Middle Eastern interpretation of the Parable of the Talents. This interpretation of the parable is then contrasted with traditional Western interpretations, like those of Young (Jesus and his Jewish Parables, 1989) and Blomberg (Interpreting the Parables, 1990), and applies the results to the task of Bible translation. An understanding of the concept of limited good and an appropriate Middle Eastern interpretation of biblical passages has great implications for the translation of the Bible into minority languages where the concept of limited good is still commonplace. It can mean the difference between an ineffective translation and one that has the impact the Scriptures would have had on the original audience.

Keywords: limited good, envy, evil, Bible translation, capitalism, parables, Middle Eastern

1. Introduction

One may wonder how the concept of limited good, envy, and the evil eye are related, and what any of these things have to do with Bible translation. As this paper will demonstrate, these three notions are interrelated, they are common in many cultures of the world today, and they were part of the underlying presuppositions of the original audiences of the Scriptures. However, since these notions are uncommon in Western culture, there is a possibility for misinterpretation of certain biblical texts. This, in turn, could lead to ineffective translations when Westerners are involved in translating the Bible into indigenous languages where the belief in the concept of limited good is prevalent.

Section 2 covers a brief synopsis of these three notions and their importance in various parts of the world. Section 3 gives an analysis of the Parable of the Talents in relation to these three notions, contrasting the traditional Western interpretation with a Middle Eastern one, and discussing the implications for minority language Bible translation.

2. The concept of limited good and its byproducts: envy and the evil eye

Many rural communities around the world today, as well as in the ancient Middle East, believe that all good things in the world are limited and already distributed. This is not a universal of all rural communities, but it is widespread and has persisted for thousands of years. The following three subsections will explain this concept of limited good and how the
communities that ascribe to this belief are often characterized by envy and the evil eye.

2.1 Limited good

Anthropologist George M. Foster was the first to define the concept:

[P]easants view their social, economic, and natural universes-their total environment-as one in which all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply, as far as the peasant is concerned. Not only do these and all other 'good things' exist in finite and limited quantities, but in addition there is no way directly within peasant power to increase the available quantities. (1965:296)

This view of the world derives from the reality of their closed community and rural lifestyle. “When the peasant views his economic world as one in which Limited Good prevails, and he can progress only at the expense of another, he is usually very near the truth. Peasant economics, as pointed out by many authors, are not productive. In the average village there is only a finite amount of wealth produced, and no amount of extra hard work will significantly change the figure” (Foster 1965:297). Much depends on the weather (drought versus plentiful rainfall), on how much land one has, and how much the land can produce. No one can control the weather, nor multiply the amount of land available, nor increase the productivity of the land without modern technological advances in agriculture – it is all limited. As a result, many rural communities believe that if natural “good” is limited, all other forms of good must be limited as well, such as honor, health, love, etc. All “the goods of life ha[ve] been distributed…and [cannot] be increased – they [are] decidedly ‘limited’” (Witherington 2010:46). The only way of attaining more of anything is by bartering for it or stealing it from someone else. This means that “an individual or a family can improve a position only at the expense of others. Hence an apparent relative improvement in someone’s position with respect to any ‘Good’ is viewed as a threat to the entire community” (Foster 1965:296-297). If someone gains some “good” and it was not through bartering, someone else must have lost some of the “good” as a result. This leads to envy, distrust, deceit, and sanctions to maintain the balance of good in the community.

While this concept of limited good underlies all the thought processes of a person and defines much of his behavior, it is unlikely he realizes it on a conscious level: “At no point has an informant even remotely suggested that this is his vision of his universe. Yet each Tzintzuntzeno organizes his behavior in a fashion entirely rational when it is viewed as a function of this principle which he cannot enunciate” (Foster 1965:297). As a result, it is likely impossible to converse with someone about their belief in limited good and its implications, as they are unaware that they even have the belief. It is just a given truth for them.
This was the state of the world until very recently. It is largely a closed-system, zero-sum game. Whatever advantage someone has is at the expense of someone else. Thus, economic justice for those in need is almost exclusively a question of distribution...the haves not sharing with the have nots. But over the past two or three centuries we have learned something. Production can be radically altered. The keys are division of labor, technology, and trade. (Kruse 2010)

Examples of good things that can be limited:

- **A mother’s love for her children**: When a mother weans one child and becomes pregnant with another, the first child is said to recognize the presence of its new sibling and to be jealous of him and the love and affection he is receiving from the mother. The mother is believed to have a limited amount of love to give, so when she begins loving a new baby in her womb, there is less love for the first child. This jealousy manifests itself in different ways depending on the culture, but it can include fussiness, crying, clinging to the mother’s skirt, etc. (Foster 1965:299)
- **A wife’s love for her husband**: Just as a mother’s love for her children is limited, her love for her husband is as well. In fact, she only has so much love to give to anyone, so if she loves her children, her husband will receive less love and will become jealous of his children. (Foster 1965:299)
- **Health**: “Blood is equated with life, and good blood, and lots of it, means health.” Therefore, if a person loses blood, their health is threatened because this is seen as “a permanent loss resulting in weakness for as long as the individual lives.” (Foster 1965:300)
- **Honor, machismo, philotimo** (Greek for ‘a love of honor’): “One achieves machismo, it is clear, by depriving others of access to it” (Foster 1965:300-301).
- **Knowledge**: people are reluctant to admit that they learned anything from anyone. They will often say that they thought of it all by themselves, that it just came to them, etc. For someone “[t]o confess that he ‘borrowed’ an idea is to confess that he has taken something not rightfully his…” (Foster 1967:142). “No formal education had ‘taught’ them; rather they learned in a casual way watching other people at work” (Pike 1980:450).

Examples of rural communities around the world that embrace this concept:

- Latin America (Foster 1965:298): Honduras; Costa Rica (Foster 1965:298); Indigenous communities in Mexico, among them the Mixtecos (Monaghan 1999), the Mazatecos (Pike 1980), and the Tzintzuntzenos (Foster 1967)
- Africa: Buganda, Uganda (Foster 1965:299); Egypt (Foster 1965:299); Nigeria (Foster 1965:300)
- The Mediterranean: Italy (Foster 1965:304); Lebanon (Foster 1965:306)
• The Ancient Mediterranean and Middle East (in particular, the world of the Bible) (Malina 1987:362; Witherington 2010:46; Rohrbach 1993:33; Pilch and Malina 1998:122-126):
  o “Although the notion of limited good was formulated by a modern scholar studying modern peasant societies, it has direct relevance to the interpretation of a host of ancient texts, both Greco-Roman and biblical” (Neyrey and Rohrbaugh 2001:468).
  o The writings of Plutarch, Josephus, and Philo reveal a concept of limited good:
    There is a very interesting body of data which views the affairs and fortunes of God and the gods from the same perspective of limited good. Philo, the apostle of monotheism, explains that when polytheism expanded, the honor due the only God was diminished as other gods gained reputation: ‘God’s honor is set at naught by those who deify the mortal.’ In another place, Philo argues that the Roman emperor Gaius was increasingly demanding honor and respect on earth, which constituted a threat to the sovereignty of the Jewish deity: ‘You deem God worthy of nothing in our world here below, no country, no city, but even this tiny area hallowed for Him and sanctified by oracles and divine messages you propose to take away, so that in the circumference of this great earth no trace or reminder should be left of the reverence and honor due to the truly existing veritable God.’ (Pilch and Malina 1998:124-126)
  o Gen 27:30-40: Isaac has only one blessing to give, and he has no blessing left to give to Esau after giving it to Jacob (Neyrey and Rohrbaugh 2001:471).
  o 1 Sam 18:6-7: Saul is envious that David receives more praise when the women of the area sing, “Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands” As a result, he kept a “jealous eye” on David from then on.
  o John 3:26, 30: John’s disciples are envious of Jesus’ success and fear that as more and more people go to him to be baptized, less will come to John and John’s reputation and honor will diminish (Pilch and Malina 1998:125). John acknowledges that this is in fact true (“He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less”), but shows that he is not envious of Jesus as a result. (Neyrey and Rohrbaugh 2001)

Some consequences of the concept of limited good:

When someone in one of these rural communities acquires, or attempts to acquire, more of some type of “good” - whether it be money, food, land, or honor – the rest of the community immediately feels threatened, because this inherently means that someone, perhaps multiple

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people, will lose some of that good since there is only so much to go around. “People who see themselves in ‘threatened’ circumstances, which the Image of Limited Good implies, react normally in one of two ways: maximum cooperation and sometimes communism, burying individual differences and placing sanctions against individualism; or extreme individualism” (Foster 1965:301). There is an undercurrent of anxiety and uncertainty at all times because, at any given moment, someone could steal another person’s “good,” and all need to be on guard.

“Attempted changes in the balance of a peasant village are discouraged by” a variety of informal and unorganized methods, such as “gossip, slander, backbiting, character assassination, witchcraft or the threat of witchcraft, and sometimes actual physical aggression” (Foster 1965:305). Formal community-imposed sanctions may take on the form of norms to “promote maximum community stability,” such as “ritual expenditures [that restore] the status quo” (Foster 1965:303). It is through these more formal methods that the community encourages those who gain more “good” to restore balance in the community. Foster describes a prime example of this in Latin America – the mayordomo system of sponsoring fiestas.

There is good reason why peasant fiestas consume so much wealth in fireworks, candles, music, and food; and why, in peasant communities the rites of baptism, marriage, and death may involve relatively huge expenditures. These practices are a redistributive mechanism which permits a person or family that potentially threatens community stability gracefully to restore the status quo, thereby returning itself to a state of acceptability. (Foster 1965:305)

2.2 Envy

Envy is the most basic consequence of a concept of limited good and the driving factor behind the sanctions, anxiety, aggression and deception commonly found in communities that function under this concept. It “clearly presupposes the perception of limited good,” and “[i]t is the limited nature of the quality, object, or relationship in question and the social status of the possessor that trigger envy.” Because all “good” exists in limited quantities, anyone who possesses “something perceived as singular…stands out or stands above his or her proper social status and/or the group in general.” The one possessing this “good” has clearly obtained it at someone else’s expense, and perhaps at the expense of the entire community. As a result, the person or persons deprived of this “good” are “often seized by the desire to deprive the other person of that possession – often in the name of the group.” (Pilch and Malina 1998:59-60)


2A specific example of the mayordomo system in the Mixtec village of Nuyoo in Southern Mexico is attested to and described with detail in The covenants with earth and rain (Monaghan 1995). See Chapter 3: Gifting and Chapter 13: Gift exchange and privatization in particular.
Monaghan describes the Mixtec community of Nuyoo as having “an undercurrent of suspicion, fed by gossip, envy, half-truths, and sharp dealings.” He further explains that “[a]nthropologists have long considered ‘envy’ vital to the institutional order in Mesoamerica. Fear of envy makes it a powerful, if informal, source of social control.” (1999:131-132) In the Bible, the general perception is that “the few who prosper are ‘wicked.’ Their prosperity must necessarily have been obtained by social oppression and will be punished by Yahweh in the end, so envy is warned against (Job 5:2; Ps. 37:1; 73:3; Prov. 3:31; 23:17; 24:1, 19; 27:4).” Of course, the reality is that not all who prospered were punished by God (e.g. God blessed Isaac to become wealthy), but this likely would have been the viewpoint of many due to their concept of limited good. Examples of envy in the Bible include Gen. 26:14, 30:1, 37:11, and Isa. 11:13. (Pilch and Malina 1998:61)

2.3 The evil eye

There are seven common features of the belief of the evil eye:

- power emanates from the eye (or mouth) and strikes some object or person;
- the stricken object is of value, and its destruction or injury is sudden;
- the one casting the evil eye may not know he has the power;
- the one affected may not be able to identify the source of the power;
- the evil eye can be deflected or its effects modified or cured by particular devices, rituals, and symbols;
- the belief helps to explain or rationalize sickness, misfortune, or loss of possessions such as animals or crops; and
- in at least some functioning of the belief everywhere, envy is a factor. (Wazana 2007:685)

The concept of the evil eye is common in modern-day communities all over the world, both rural and urban. “People may wear charms or amulets, or put various symbols and ornaments on their houses, because they believe that these objects have the power to counteract the evil eye's power.” (Cohen 1995) It is found in Turkey (Cohen 1995), Greece (Cohen 1995; Kalervo Koivisto 2011:472), Ethiopia (Finneran 2003:427), Iran (Finneran 2003:427), Italy (Kalervo Koivisto 2011:472; Pilch 2012:177), Spain (Pilch 2012:177), North Africa (Kalervo Koivisto 2011:472), Indonesia (Kalervo Koivisto 2011:472), and many other regions. It is commonplace in Mesoamerica, and is specifically mentioned in the ethnographies written by Foster (1967:160) and Monaghan (1999:134). The belief can even be found in the United States, primarily among those descended from the aforementioned ethnic groups (Cohen 1995). The belief is so prevalent in today’s world that “approximately 36 percent of [a] total world sample (186 societies) believe in the power of otherwise good persons to inflict harm upon other persons, animals, and things by a mere glance of the eye directed toward them” (Pilch 2012:177).

The concept of the evil eye was also “prevalent throughout the ancient Near East and is frequently mentioned in rabbinic literature” as well as in both the Old and New Testaments (Wazana 2007:685):
The Midrash, a collection of “early Jewish interpretation[s] of or commentar[ies] on a Biblical text” (Dictionary.com 2014) “explicitly connects the apotropaic character of the priestly blessing with the evil eye: ‘When Israel made the Tabernacle the Holy One, blessed be He, He gave them the blessing first, in order that no evil eye might affect them. Accordingly it is written: ‘The Lord bless thee and keep thee’ (Num. 6:24), namely, from the evil eye’ (Num. Rab. 12.4; Pesiq. Rab. 5).” (Wazana 2007:686)

Rashi, “author of the first comprehensive commentaries on the Talmud, Torah, and Tanakh” (New World Encyclopedia 2008), claimed “the census is controlled by the evil eye; and it happened in the days of David (II Sam 24:1-10)’ (Rashi to Exod30:12)” (Wazana 2007:687).

Rashi also understood Balaam to be casting the evil eye on Israel (Wazana 2007:68).


According to Wazana, Ecclesiastes 4:4-8 is yet another reference “to the evil-eye belief complex” (2007:690).


Envy’s “presence [in ancient Israel] is well attested to, given the references to the evil eye” (Pilch and Malina 1998:62):
- Deut. 15:9; 28:54, 56; Prov. 23:6; 28:22; Tob. 4:7, 16; Sir 14:3, 6, 8, 9, 10; 18:18; 31:13; 37:10; Wis 4:12
- Gal 3:1 (author’s translation)
- 1 John 2:16; James 4:1-10

Given the evidence for the existence of the belief in the evil eye in the surrounding cultures, the acknowledgment of it in rabbinc sources, and its strong and persistent hold in Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies, it would be odd indeed if this were not an integral part of the worldview of the ancient Israelites in biblical times, one of various forms of magical powers to be reckoned with. (Wazana 2007:686)

Pilch and Malina make a clear connection between envy and the evil eye for the Israelites as mentioned above. Foster and Monaghan make the same connection with regard to Mesoamerican communities (1967:160 and 1999:134, 139). The two are also linked in Ethiopia (Finneran 2003:427), Italy, and Greece (Kalervo Koivisto 2011:472); “[i]n fact, envy is one common key factor of the evil eye belief in various cultures” (Kalervo Koivisto 2011:472). Therefore, it is clear that the concept of limited good, envy, and the belief in the evil eye are all intertwined. Furthermore, because these issues are all so prevalent in the Bible and modern-day societies around the world, it is an important topic to address in biblical exegesis and translation.
3. Limited good, envy, and the evil eye: implications for biblical exegesis and translation

While the above evidence shows that the concept of limited good is common in communities around the world, there are communities do not hold the belief. It is a foreign concept to those living in Western, capitalistic cultures because it is precisely in those cultures that there lies the ability to improve one's position in life through hard work and means other than taking from someone else.

Over the past two or three centuries we have learned something. Production can be radically altered. The keys are division of labor, technology, and trade. Having each individual produce most of what they consume is a highly inefficient use of labor. No one is efficient at everything...Therefore, we each specialize in the things we do well. We accept payment from others for the services or goods we provide and then use that money to purchase the other things we are not as good as supplying. Because each individual is concentrating on the work in which they are the most productive, the whole society becomes more productive. That means more and better products per a fixed amount of time. But when it comes to the production of tangible goods, we see a truly dramatic transition from the past. Machines that could do the work of thousands of human beings came into being. (Kruse 2010)

Our modern economies are capable of producing far more than ancient or modern-day peasants. As a result, “any application of New Testament texts which fails to take cultural differences seriously can only misrepresent those texts” (Malina 1987:354). Therefore, an understanding of the underlying presuppositions of the world of the Bible and modern peasants will help us avoid “the tendency we all have to project modern ideas and circumstances back into the ancient world of the Bible and its culture, which results in distortion or misinterpretation of the text” (Witherington 2010:43).

Many Biblical passages have been mentioned earlier that use the phrase “evil eye” in the original language. Interlinear versions of three of these passages can be found in Appendix 1, along with English and Spanish versions that translate the term literally. However, these English and Spanish versions are archaic – both are over 400 years old. Modern English and Spanish translations, such as the New International Version/Nueva Versión Internacional and the New Living Translation/Nueva Traducción Internacional, often translate references to the evil eye with “ill will,” “mean-spirited,” “stingy,” or “envy.” Since a person casts the evil eye as a result of envy (which develops from a concept of limited good), these modern translations are better for those living in Western, capitalistic societies in which the concept of limited good is irrelevant. The evil eye does not exist in their culture and those who know about it see it as merely a superstition. In order for the translated Biblical text to have the correct meaning for that particular audience, “evil eye” should be rendered in one of the ways mentioned above or the audience will not understand its relationship to envy. However, this would not be necessary if the
translation were in a language of one of the modern peasant groups that still holds to the concept of limited good. If people in places like Mesoamerica, Turkey, and Africa practice the evil eye, fear envy, and understand good to be limited, it is best to translate these references more literally in their indigenous languages to have the greatest impact in these communities. They see things from a perspective similar to that of the original audiences of the Biblical text, and therefore would not misunderstand the meaning like those in capitalistic societies.

The challenge is that many, if not most, Bible translation facilitators for indigenous languages come from Western, capitalist backgrounds. Without a proper understanding of the biblical background of these passages and of the worldview of the target language group, a translation facilitator may influence a translation to be more oriented towards their own worldview (in which good is unlimited) rather than towards the worldview of the target language group. This could happen unwittingly out of pure ignorance of the topic and a reliance on more modern translations in English or Spanish (or other languages of wider communication) without reference to the original languages. This is not to say that these modern translations are incorrect or lack value. In fact, they are needed to prevent misunderstanding for the cultures for which they were translated. However, if the translation facilitator is unaware of the commonalities between the source and target cultures, he may be influenced by his own worldview in facilitating the indigenous translation without even realizing it.

The specific texts cited above actually use the term “evil eye” in the original Greek and Hebrew, so there is a good chance that facilitators would see those terms and, if familiar with the target culture, realize they should be translated literally into that language. However, there are passages that do not specifically mention the evil eye that still have an underlying understanding of limited good and its natural consequences. These passages present the greatest challenge to Western translation facilitators, because they have traditionally been interpreted according to a Western, capitalistic worldview, rather than according to the way the original audience understood the world to function. English commentaries written by Westerners are by far the most readily available to Bible translators, and many have missed the presuppositions connected to the concept of limited good that undergird so many Biblical passages. The following section offers an alternate interpretation of one such passage that is closer to the original meaning, thereby facilitating a more powerful translation for the target language.

3.1 An illustration: the parables of the talents/pounds

While the primary focus of this section is on the underlying assumption of limited good in the Parable of the Talents and the Parable of the Pounds, this point of biblical background is not the only thing upon which an analysis of these passages should be based. Since a parable is a specific literary form, one must take into consideration other aspects of the interpretation of this genre. Some basics for interpreting parables have been included in Appendix 3.
Traditional Western interpretations of the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) and the Parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:11-27) (and Mark 13:34)\(^3\)

Young’s explanation of this parable is a typical, Western, capitalistic interpretation, even though he says it is necessary to consider the historical and cultural context. He claims that the main point of the parables is that “[t]he servant who has been faithful and trustworthy to be productive will be rewarded while the slothful one will be punished.” He claims that “the illustration draws upon the everyday agricultural life from the land of Israel in the first century which would have been familiar to sharecroppers and farm workers as well as to landowners,” yet he fails to recognize the underlying presuppositions of that same culture, that all “good” in the world is limited, and that production cannot be determined by simply working harder (1989:168).

Blomberg’s interpretation is similar. He describes the first two servants as “positive models” who “will be commended and rewarded when they have faithfully discharged [their] commission” and the third servant is reflective of “the final judgment that all people will undergo as they give account to God for what they have done with their lives.” He concludes that “the lesson to be derived from the evil servant is the dominant one.” While Blomberg recognizes that “[t]he common sense attitude on which this story seems to rely (wise stewardship involves investment) was probably much less self-evident in ancient Palestine,” he still draws the same Western conclusion based on capitalistic values. (1990:214)

Blomberg is correct in that wise stewardship involving investment would have been “much less self-evident in ancient Palestine.” According to the concept of limited good, which the people of ancient Palestine held, “[i]f you wanted more productivity, then you would need more people. Furthermore, since most labor was in agriculture, even in the sophisticated Roman Empire, you needed land. There was a fixed amount of land and only a fixed amount of production you get from each parcel of land. Substantial sustainable increases in production were unthinkable.” (Kruse 2010)

Furthermore, the Torah forbade charging interest to fellow Israelites (though not to foreigners). Productivity and multiplying funds through investment is a Western value that is generated by capitalism and modern technology. All these things are in conflict with the values and norms of the ancient Middle Eastern world.

A Middle Eastern interpretation of the Parable of the Talents and the Parable of the Pounds

Pilch asks an excellent question about this particular set of parallel parables: “Could the same person who said, ‘…lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be the sons of the Most High’ (Luke 6:36), make an about-face on another occasion and praise in parable those who lent with the deliberate intention of gaining interest (Luke 19:11-27)?”

\[^3\]These parables are reproduced in their entirety in Appendix 2.
Indeed, “[t]his parable is not about lending money and gaining interest. Such a practice is considered stealing (Exod. 22:25)…The parable is about God, and how God interacts with human beings.” (2012:233) His conclusion comes out of a Middle Eastern interpretation of the text, taking into consideration the underlying concept of limited good that they had.

Rohrbaugh adds, “This parable is the product of imaginations socialized in the dynamics of an agrarian society, in contrast to those of the capitalist West…The parable appears to be a warning not to those lacking adventurousness or industry, as frequently assumed in the West, but to those who mistreat the poor…[H]aving imaginations socialized in the capitalist West, western interpreters have found it nearly impossible to conjure up images of the agrarian social dynamics to which the story once appealed.” (1993:32)

Pilch and Rohrbaugh agree with Blomberg, Young, and others in that “the parable as it appears in Matthew and Luke is heavily edited” (Pilch 2012:233; Rohrbaugh 1993:32; Blomberg 1990; Young 1989). Luke and Matthew adjusted some of the details in and surrounding Jesus’ original parable to make it fit the context of their book and the point they were trying to emphasize, and as a result, each of their parables has a different emphasis. Pilch offers a possible reconstruction of Jesus’ original parable from Luke’s and Matthew’s versions that the other three commentators would likely agree with:

First, as he is about to embark on a long journey, a master entrusts money to servants, returns, and demands an accounting. Second, some of the servants have increased the entrusted amount and return that augmented sum to the master, who rewards them. Third, one servant confesses that he was frightened and buried the amount entrusted to him in the ground so that he might return it intact to his master. Fourth, the angry master takes the money of the last servant and gives it to the first. (Pilch 2012:233-234)

This reconstruction is “true to its nature as a parable…contain[ing] no application or interpretation. It challenges the first-century listener to reflect on the possible applications in her or his own situation.” (Pilch 2012:234) The details Matthew and Luke add beyond the bare actions listed above “turn the story into a warning about diligence among those awaiting the parousia,” but when you take out those additions, “the story appears to be exactly what one expects of a parable of Jesus.” (Rohrbaugh 1993:33)

On the surface, the parable “appears to be nothing less than praise for a homespun capitalism on the lips of Jesus…it is a treatment that has been particularly dear to the exegetes of our own time, who rarely question this allegedly capitalist motif.” If, however, a peasant in first century Palestine heard this story and it had that meaning, “[c]ould such a story possibly have been good news to a peasant?...If this parable is somehow expected to offer someone good news about the kingdom of God, it is clearly not a peasant.” Especially if God is supposed to be a ruthless master! “[T]o a peasant it would have been nothing less than…a text of terror.” (Rohrbaugh 1993:33) To deduce the original meaning of the parable that Jesus would have been trying to communicate to an ancient Middle Eastern audience of mostly peasants, we must look
at this parable in light of the concept of limited good, envy, and the evil eye.

First, the servants who invested the money and multiplied it greatly “behaved shamefully in peasant eyes.” According to their concept of limited good, “[t]o augment that sum means that someone else was deprived of what was rightfully his. This can’t be good news. Such an interpretation approves the exploitation that peasants experience all the time.” (Pilch 2012:234) The master in the parable obviously desires to become richer, and in order to do so, he “has to accumulate more than [he] originally had. This means that [he] has to take someone else’s share.” However, in communities that believe in limited good, those who have more than enough “are expected to share, to play the role of a patron.” This can be seen in present-day communities such as in Nuyoo where they have the mayordomo system for redistributing wealth one gains to ward off envy, suspicion, and the evil eye. Furthermore, “Jesus condemns saving surplus to satisfy personal interests (Luke 12:13-21). Indeed, such a person is greedy, and it is often possible in Bible translation to replace the word ‘rich’ with ‘greedy.’” (Pilch 2012:235)

Second, “[h]oarding the money or using commodities and/or money to make a profit was an unnatural use of money according to Aristotle (Politics 1.9). Indeed, profit making was considered evil and socially destructive.” (Pilch 2012:235) Rohrbaugh’s description of ancient peasant economics further clarifies this:

The peasant sells commodities to get money in order to buy other needed commodities. The capitalist uses money to buy commodities to sell again at a profit and thereby increase the money. This latter Aristotle considered an unnatural use of money because it implied that money, an inanimate thing, had the power to grow, to multiply. It assumes money is fertile, that it has powers that do not belong to it. (1993:34)

Third, considering the fact that the legal interest rate in Rome was twelve percent at the time, the rate of return is astounding: 100, 500, and 1000 percent! This hyperbole would have confirmed to the original audience that the master really was an evil man, “taking what isn’t [his] and harvesting crops [he] didn’t plant” (Luke 19:21). (Pilch 2012:235 and Rohrbaugh 1993:35)

These factors combined with the concept of limited good explain why “wage laborers in peasant villages are often thought to have entered a pact with the devil for the purpose of increasing both production and wages” (Rohrbaugh 1993:34). If the amount of land is limited and the amount each piece of land can produce is limited, how else could anyone increase productivity and the money gained from that labor? These wage laborers are frequently the victims of envy, the evil eye, community sanctions, and other efforts to restore the balance of good in the community. Therefore, the original audience of Jesus’ parable would have seen the master and the first two servants as the wicked ones, as people who had made a pact with the devil! The perspective that they are good servants and the last servant is wicked is purely the point of view of the wicked master, and this would have been clear to the original audience. “In a limited good world a master getting one thousand percent on his money would be viewed as greedy to the core” (Rohrbaugh 1993:35). Therefore, to conclude that the master is the honorable
one in the story and a reflection of God would be to conclude that God is also greedy to the core, a viewpoint that is inconsistent with the rest of Scripture.

With all of this in mind, the question remains, “[f]or whom could such a story possibly be seen as good news?” If the harsh master is the honorable one and the first two servants who gain incredible amounts on their investments are to be praised, then for the peasants in the audience, this parable “would have confirmed [their] worst fears about the kingdom of God, suggesting that it worked exactly as did [their] daily experience: the strong trample the weak and are rewarded for doing so.” (Rohrbaugh 1993:35) This depiction of the kingdom of God cannot be true, however, because it directly contradicts Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount when he says that God blesses those who are poor, those who mourn, those who are humble, those who hunger and thirst for justice, those who are merciful, those whose hearts are pure (Matt. 5:3-8). These characteristics are in stark contrast with the descriptions of the harsh master and the servants he praises, so the parable cannot mean that their actions are to be emulated.

An alternate version of this parable preserved by the church historian Eusebius is included in Appendix 4. Eusebius clearly does not praise the first two servants. Instead, he praises the one who hid the talent. This one “[h]eld fast to his beliefs despite fearing his master; he behaved honorably with the trust and returned it safe and sound to his Master” without cooperating in his scheme of “taking what isn’t [his] and harvesting crops [he] didn’t plant.” (Pilch 2012:237).

Along the same line, Witherington claims that “[c]ultural norms and customs like the year of Jubilee, the prohibition of interest, care for widows and orphans – not to mention the basic theological notion of creation that the earth and all that is in it belongs to God – were certainly in play in Jesus’s day. They shaped not only the way people thought about money and economic matters, but also their behavior…Jesus speaks out of just such a theological orientation.” (Witherington 2010:48) These ideas are clearly communicated in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7).

With this perspective in mind, and that of the third servant behaving honorably by safeguarding his master’s money without participating in his greedy schemes, it is easy to see that “peasants hearing the story would probably have heaved a sigh of relief that the poor fellow understood what to do and did it well” (Rohrbaugh 1993:37). He has not failed in their eyes the way that Western interpreters tend to think. “[H]e just does not act as the master wishes.” It is very possible that Jesus “is in fact condemning the Master’s viewpoint in the same way his peasant hearers would have quickly done” (Rohrbaugh 1993:38). The few wealthy people in the original audience, who would have understood the master’s viewpoint, would perhaps have felt this condemnation as well.

Rohrbaugh’s conclusion about the meaning of the parable is so profound it must be quoted verbatim:

In sum, then, we may say that the parable is a warning. But to whom? We in the twentieth century have always assumed it was a warning to those not sufficiently venturesome or industrious with what they have been given. We theologize about
responsible stewardship of the gifts of grace, by which we mean, of course, a profitable (capitalistic) investment before the return of the master. Yet Jesus’ peasant hearers would almost certainly have assumed it was a warning to the rich about their exploitation of the weak. Is it possible that they were right? (Rohrbaugh 1993:38)

4. Conclusion

It is evident that limited good, envy, and the evil eye are interrelated and a common characteristic of many ancient and modern rural peoples. This must be taken into consideration in the translation of biblical passages or stories into the indigenous languages of these people groups. This is certainly not the only factor that needs to be considered in the exegesis and translation of a given passage, but it is a crucial one. A traditional, Western interpretation of the Parable of the Talents or similar texts runs the danger of misunderstanding for modern-day peasants who would benefit from a Middle Eastern interpretation. For minority languages where these are commonly held notions, passages with the term “evil eye” in the original Hebrew or Greek text will likely need to be translated literally for maximum impact. For texts like this parable where there is no overt mention of the evil eye or other explicit terms related to the concept of limited good, translation will not hinge on the choice of key terms. Rather, it will hinge on the way that the specific community relates concepts of this nature, and this will vary from Mesoamerica to Indonesia to Africa. It will need to be translated in such a way that this perception is not removed or misrepresented, so that those who share the perceptions of the original audience can understand the meaning more fully. Much research will need to be done for the particular target language in question, as well as for the specific biblical passage being translated, to ensure the translated text communicates clearly and effectively.

Translation best practices need to be followed in every case, and this includes the restriction of adding things to the text that are not there. In situations where more information would need to be added for the target community to comprehend fully the meaning in light of a concept of limited good, oral Bible storytelling may be a solution. In storytelling, it is not necessary to follow the biblical text verbatim. In fact, storytelling provides the flexibility of summarizing or adding biblical background information where necessary. Since many of these rural peoples are oral learners, storytelling will likely be an effective means of spreading the gospel anyway. This may be a key way to accomplish multiple goals in one form: reaching the people through a form that they understand best while providing the necessary background information for a particular text to impact their lives.

Whatever the form the translation takes – be it audio, video, written or stories – it is imperative that translation facilitators be familiar with the biblical background of the text, the cultural background of the target language group, and the discourse features of the target language that would help to encourage an appropriate Middle Eastern interpretation of this parable and other Biblical texts.
Appendix 1 – The "evil eye," interlinear texts

“Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the Lord against thee, and it be sin unto thee.” (KJV)

“Guárdate que no haya en tu corazón perverso pensamiento, diciendo: Cerca está el año séptimo, el de la remisión; y tu ojo sea maligno sobre tu hermano menesteroso para no darle: que él podrá clamar contra ti á Jehová, y se te imputará á pecado.” (RVA)

(www.interlinearbible.org)
“For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness:” (KJV)

“Forque de dentro, del corazón de los hombres, salen los malos pensamientos, los adulterios, las fornicaciones, los homicidios, Los hurtos, las avaricias, las maldades, el engaño, las desvergüenzas, el ojo maligno, las injurias, la soberbia, la insensatez.” (RVA) (www.scripture4all.org)

“He that hasteth to be rich hath an evil eye, and considereth not that poverty shall come upon him.” (KJV)

“Apresúrase á ser rico el hombre de mal ojo; Y no conoce que le ha de venir pobreza.” (RVA) (www.interlinearbible.org)

Appendix 2 – The parables

The Parable of the Talents (called the Parable of the Three Servants in the NLT); Matthew 25:14-30:

14 “Again, the Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. He called together his servants and entrusted his money to them while he was gone. 15 He gave
five bags of silver[a] to one, two bags of silver to another, and one bag of silver to the last—
dividing it in proportion to their abilities. He then left on his trip.
16 “The servant who received the five bags of silver began to invest the money and earned five
more. 17 The servant with two bags of silver also went to work and earned two more. 18 But the
servant who received the one bag of silver dug a hole in the ground and hid the master’s money.
19 “After a long time their master returned from his trip and called them to give an account of
how they had used his money. 20 The servant to whom he had entrusted the five bags of silver
came forward with five more and said, ‘Master, you gave me five bags of silver to invest, and I
have earned five more.’
21 “The master was full of praise. ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been
faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let’s
celebrate together!’
22 “The servant who had received the two bags of silver came forward and said, ‘Master, you
gave me two bags of silver to invest, and I have earned two more.’
23 “The master said, ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in
handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let’s celebrate
together!’
24 “Then the servant with the one bag of silver came and said, ‘Master, I knew you were a harsh
man, harvesting crops you didn’t plant and gathering crops you didn’t cultivate. 25 I was afraid I
would lose your money, so I hid it in the earth. Look, here is your money back.’
26 “But the master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy servant! If you knew I harvested crops I didn’t
plant and gathered crops I didn’t cultivate, 27 why didn’t you deposit my money in the bank? At
least I could have gotten some interest on it.’
28 “Then he ordered, ‘Take the money from this servant, and give it to the one with the ten bags
of silver. 29 To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will
have an abundance. But from those who do nothing, even what little they have will be taken
away. 30 Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and
gnashing of teeth.’

*The Parable of the Pounds* (called the *Parable of the Ten Servants* in the NLT); Luke 19:11-27:

11 The crowd was listening to everything Jesus said. And because he was nearing Jerusalem, he
told them a story to correct the impression that the Kingdom of God would begin right away. 12
He said, “A nobleman was called away to a distant empire to be crowned king and then return.
13 Before he left, he called together ten of his servants and divided among them ten pounds of
silver,[a] saying, ‘Invest this for me while I am gone.’ 14 But his people hated him and sent a
delegation after him to say, ‘We do not want him to be our king.’
15 “After he was crowned king, he returned and called in the servants to whom he had given the
money. He wanted to find out what their profits were. 16 The first servant reported, ‘Master, I
invested your money and made ten times the original amount!’
17 “‘Well done!’ the king exclaimed. ‘You are a good servant. You have been faithful with the
little I entrusted to you, so you will be governor of ten cities as your reward.’
18 ‘The next servant reported, ‘Master, I invested your money and made five times the original amount.’
19 ‘Well done!’ the king said. ‘You will be governor over five cities.’
20 ‘But the third servant brought back only the original amount of money and said, ‘Master, I hid your money and kept it safe. 21 I was afraid because you are a hard man to deal with, taking what isn’t yours and harvesting crops you didn’t plant.’
22 ‘You wicked servant!’ the king roared. ‘Your own words condemn you. If you knew that I’m a hard man who takes what isn’t mine and harvests crops I didn’t plant, 23 why didn’t you deposit my money in the bank? At least I could have gotten some interest on it.’
24 ‘Then, turning to the others standing nearby, the king ordered, ‘Take the money from this servant, and give it to the one who has ten pounds.’
25 ‘But, master,’ they said, ‘he already has ten pounds!’
26 ‘Yes,’ the king replied, ‘and to those who use well what they are given, even more will be given. But from those who do nothing, even what little they have will be taken away. 27 And as for these enemies of mine who didn’t want me to be their king—bring them in and execute them right here in front of me.’”

A parallel parable in Mark 13:34-37:

34 “The coming of the Son of Man can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. When he left home, he gave each of his slaves instructions about the work they were to do, and he told the gatekeeper to watch for his return. 35 You, too, must keep watch! For you don’t know when the master of the household will return—in the evening, at midnight, before dawn, or at daybreak. 36 Don’t let him find you sleeping when he arrives without warning. 37 I say to you what I say to everyone: Watch for him!”

Appendix 3 – Basics of interpreting parables

Parables are used throughout the Old and New Testaments and in rabbinic literature (Young 1989). Jesus’ “masterful use of the parable helps to account for his phenomenal popularity and success. Indeed, he was a master of the agadah. Jesus’ parabolic teachings captured the imagination and the heart of the people. Jesus made extensive use of parables.” (Young 1989:3) As a result, scholars have been researching and interpreting parables for centuries.

A basic outline of the traditional approach to the exegesis of biblical parables includes:

1. “Seek to understand ‘the earthly details of the parables as well as the original hearers did.
2. Note the attitude and spiritual condition of the original hearers.
3. If possible, note the reason which prompted Jesus to employ the parable…
4. State concisely the main point of the parable. Give reasons for your selection.
5. Try to relate the main point of the parable to the basic aspects of Jesus’ teaching…

6. Observe whether any generalizing sayings have come into the parabolic narrative. Their presence adds a hortatory note which may be central or peripheral to the main teaching of the parable.

7. Where most of the details of a parable are explained, try even harder to uncover the main emphasis…Relate the main emphasis to present-day hearers. Remember that their situation may be quite different from those of the original hearers.” (Mickelsen 1963:229)

“The problem of rediscovering the original meaning of Jesus’ parabolic teaching is compounded because the parables can only be understood when viewed in relationship to their historical situation. Once these parables were divorced from their original Jewish milieu they became more difficult for interpreters to understand. They were obscured by being interpreted from the standpoint of a new setting far removed from Jesus by history, language, culture, and an entirely different religious orientation. The parables of Jesus are intimately related to the religious heritage, culture, language, agricultural life and social concerns of the Jewish people during the Second Temple Period.” (Young 1989:2-3)

“It has become a fixed principle of exegesis that the parables of Jesus have undergone revision during the process of transmission. This process has sometimes modified significantly the applications and the main themes of the parables. Fortunately, the interdependence of the synoptic gospels provides the opportunity of comparative study.” (Young 1989:164)

One must “clear away some of the secondary elements that changed the original meaning of the illustration. The synoptic parallels often provide the key to penetrate behind the revisor’s work and rediscover the message of the parable as it appeared in the mutual sources of the gospels.” (Young 1989:164)

Valuable information on the literary and cultural backgrounds of Jesus’ parables can be found in Bailey’s Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes, 1983.

Appendix 4 – A parallel parable

An alternate version of the parable of the talents preserved by Eusebius:

“But since the Gospel [written] in Hebrew characters which has come into our hands entered the threat not against the man who had hid [the talent], but against him who had lived dissolutely —

For he [the master] had three servants:
A one who squandered his master’s substance with harlots and flute girls
   B one who multiplied the gain
      C and one who hid the talent

and accordingly…
   C’ one who was accepted with joy
      B’ another merely rebuked
   A’ and another case into prison
I wonder whether in Matthew the threat which is uttered after the word against the man who did nothing may not refer to him but by epanalepsis to the first who had feasted and drunk with the drunken.” (Pilch 2012:236-237)

Appendix 5 – Other relevant Scripture passages

The following is a list of Bible passages dealing with the concept of limited good, envy, and/or the evil eye. Care should be taken to research the background of each passage and compare it with the culture of the target language group to decide how best to translate them.

Limited good:
- Gen. 27:30-40
- 1 Sam. 18:6-7
- John 3:26, 30

Envy:
- Job 5:2
- Ps. 37:1; 73:3
- Prov. 3:31; 23:17; 24:1, 19; 27:4
- Gen. 26:14, 30:1, 37:11
- Isa. 11:13

Evil eye:
- Proverbs 22:9, 23:6, and 28:22
- Ecclesiastes 4:4-8
- Matt. 6:22-23, 20:15
- Luke 11:33-34
- Mark 7:22
- Deut. 15:9; 28:54, 56
- Prov. 23:6; 28:22
- 1 John 2:16
- James 4:1-10

References


