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Dear Dr. Halama:

Following is my evaluation of the doctoral dissertation of Mr. Ondrej Hron, *Hamartiological Heuristics as a Hermeneutical Key to Justice, Mercy and the Moral Treatment of the Poor in the New Testament*.

This is an excellent dissertation. It is clearly written, intellectually imaginative on many points, and thorough. I strongly recommend that it be awarded a Pass.

There has been a good deal of discussion in Christian circles, especially evangelical Christian circles, whether Scripture teaches that aid to the poor is a matter of charity or a matter of justice. Usually the discussion ends in a stalemate. The contribution of Mr. Hron's dissertation to the discussion is two-fold. He offers a comprehensive survey of the New Testament texts relevant to the issue; and he proposes a strategy for interpreting these texts that enables us to judge what they tell us concerning the issue of charity or justice.

Sometimes one hears it said that whether aid to the poor is a matter of charity or of justice hinges on whether aid to the poor is commanded. If it is commanded, then, so some say, it is a matter of justice. Mr. Hron sees that this will not do, since, for example, Jesus *commands* his followers to forgive, whereas it is agreed by all that forgiveness is not required by justice.

The strategy Hron proposes has several facets, the most important being the following: if failure to aid the poor is presented in some passage as a sin and worthy of punishment, then aid to the poor is presented in that passage as a matter of justice.

Incidentally, Mr. Hron understands me as having proposed *forgiveness* rather than *sin* as a justice-indicator. The role I assigned to forgiveness was different, however. There is a line of thought, popular in many quarters nowadays, which insists that justice has nothing to do with rights – that is, has nothing to do with what are often called *subjective* rights, rights that attach to a subject. I hold that to forgive someone presupposes that one has been wronged – deprived of that to which one had a (subjective) right. And my argument was that the biblical declaration that God forgives, and the biblical injunction that we are to forgive, presupposes that justice is understood in Scripture in terms of rights.

I think the multi-faceted strategy that Mr. Hron proposes represents an important contribution to the discussion. In the opening chapters he seems to me to use rather too much jargon in presenting the strategy (there is much less jargon in chapters 5 and 6). But I think the strategy itself is excellent. That said, I now want to go on to state my disagreement with some of the conclusions at which Mr. Hron arrives by employing his strategy.

First, a general observation about his employment of the sin-test – or as he calls it, the hamartiological-test. One would expect that rather often it will prove impossible to tell whether

Jesus or the New Testament writers regarded failure to obey a command they issued as amounting to sin, or whether they regarded it instead as indicating that the person in question had fallen short of the “new being” that Jesus asks of his followers. Hron himself makes this point.

Now throughout his discussion, Hron regularly works with the dichotomy mercy/justice; and without ever saying that he is doing so, he assumes that if some passage speaks of coming to the aid of the poor as done out of mercy, compassion, sympathy, empathy, pity, or something of that sort, then it is being presented as not a matter of justice – even though it might not be at all clear whether the passage presents failure to aid the poor as a matter of sin. I think that this inference, if done out of mercy, then not a matter of justice, is a mistaken inference.

For one thing, the interpretative alternative that Hron wants to discuss is much better characterized as *charity* versus justice, or as *benevolence* versus justice, than as mercy versus justice. The issue is whether aid to the poor is presented as a matter of benevolence or as a matter of justice. The reason the issue cannot be characterized as *mercy* versus justice is that mercy, compassion, sympathy, empathy, and so forth, are *motivators* of action, whereas justice, obviously, is not a motivator of action but a certain normative social relationship. Mercy and justice are not antonyms.

The direct relevance of this point is that empathy, mercy, etc., may be what motivates one to treat someone justly. Indeed, my view is that empathy, sympathy, mercy, etc., are the most powerful motivators to justice – or at least, the most powerful motivators to undo injustice. So the fact that aid to the poor is presented in some passage as motivated by mercy or sympathy tells us nothing, so far forth, as to whether it is presented as a matter of benevolence or as a matter of justice.

This leads me directly into my second point of critique. I agree with Hron in his interpretation of most of the passages he considers. On some of the most important, however, I disagree. I shall confine myself to speaking about just three of these.

Hron’s interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Since the Samaritan is said by Jesus to act out of sympathy, Hron concludes that it would not have been a sin on the part of the Samaritan to pass by the bloodied man, and that, consequently, the Samaritan’s deed is presented as an act of charity rather than of justice. Here we get a clear application of the point made just above: Hron assumes that if something is done out of sympathy (mercy), then it is not a matter of justice. Now apart from the fact that, for the reasons given just above, this inference is faulty, I find his interpretation of this passage exceedingly implausible. Could it really have been Jesus’ view that the priest and the Levite, in passing by the injured man, had not sinned? They had violated one of the two commands on which the whole Torah hangs!

Hron’s interpretation of the parable of the sheep and the goats. Let me quote what Hron says: “this passage initially appears to assume a justice obligation status for its mandates. Nevertheless, just as the general reward of eternal life is not specific enough to classify these mandates as issues of mercy, the warning of eternal punishment is commonly understood, among evangelicals, to extend to the broader righteousness of being a genuinely believing follower of the Messiah. In this way, this passage’s obedience is seen as analogous to possessing the living faith of James 2:14-17” (100-101). I don’t know whether this is the common evangelical interpretation; but if so, it seems to me to be based on nothing whatsoever in the passage. And Hron does not show, by careful exegesis that it is a plausible interpretation; instead he just appeals to “the common evangelical interpretation.”

Hron’s interpretation of the parable about the rich man and Lazarus. Hron agrees that it is clearly justice that is in view here. However, he severely limits the scope of the parable’s

application by saying that it explicitly applies only to “those who are very rich and live indulgently out of a great surplus” (178), adding, if I understand him, that the non-wealthy might consider whether the parable nonetheless provides them with a model for their charity. Now I myself am not wealthy; but neither am I impoverished. Is Hron seriously suggesting that if there were a beggar on my doorstep, and I ignored him, that this would be a shortfall of desirable charity on my part, but not a sin? Is he seriously suggesting that I would not be treating this beggar unjustly? If so, that seems to me a most implausible interpretation. Surely Jesus is not suggesting that his point applies only to the extremely wealthy.

In short, I think that Hron’s own proposed strategy yields quite different interpretations of a number of central texts.

My third main point of critique is the following. I mentioned that I think that the general strategy that Hron employs makes an important contribution to the discussion. But I am unhappy with the fact that he employs the strategy in a very non-contextual fashion. Each time, he assembles a number of quotations and implicitly asks us to consider those in isolation. But contextless interpretation of biblical texts seems to me to be one of the most serious defects in the discussion among evangelicals about poverty and the message of Scripture. Let me highlight just two consequences, among many. In the first place, since Hron works only with the New Testament text, the New Testament is not interpreted in the light of the Old Testament but almost as if there were no Old Testament. Yet certainly Jesus understood himself as in continuity with the Old Testament; and that is also how the gospel writers understood him. Second, to work with contextless passages is almost unavoidably to interpret those passages literally, when in fact they may not have been meant literally. In my view this is especially fateful when we interpret Jesus’s sermon on the mount. Pluck out your eye if it offend you, lend to anybody who asks, turn the other cheek, go the second mile, put up no resistance to evildoers – I think that when these are read in context, it becomes highly likely that Jesus is here speaking in hyperbolic metaphors.

Fourth, I think that when we have before us all the passages that Hron assembles, and ask ourselves what sort of aid to the poor is presented as a matter of justice and what sort of aid is presented as a matter of supra-just benevolence or charity, it becomes a real challenge to figure out the pattern. I judge that the collection for the impoverished in Jerusalem is presented as a matter of benevolence; but I infer from the parable about Lazarus and the rich man that tripping over the impoverished neighbor on my doorstep when I am not myself impoverished is not regarded as a matter of benevolence. Neither, I think, is coming to the aid of a mugged man lying in the ditch presented as a matter of benevolence. So what is the pattern? Partly, I think, it is the pattern of the near versus the far. Justice begins at home. What the full pattern is, however, I am not able to say. But neither does Hron say – even though this is the topic of his dissertation. On p. 171 (and elsewhere) he identifies four kinds of aid to the poor as constituting justice; but it is hard to see any general pattern separating these four kinds of aid from those that do not, on Hron’s view, involve justice. So my question remains: when is aid to the poor a matter of justice and when is it a matter of charity? Where is the line to be drawn, and why there? I don’t think Hron answers this question.

Fifth, throughout his dissertation, Hron works with the distinction between justice as needs based versus justice as ownership based. This is not a distinction that one regularly finds in discussions about justice, and I don’t understand it. I don’t understand what an ownership based understanding of justice is. Hron alludes to an explanation on p. 14. But what he says falls far short of offering a clear explanation of the difference he has in mind. So I just don’t

know what Hron means when he says that the New Testament data he has assembled show that an ownership based understanding of justice is being employed.

Last, all of this pertains, obviously, to Hron's appraisal, on p. 184-5, of my own claim that there are three fundamental sustenance rights and duties that we human beings have. He agrees that the New Testament teaches the first, that we have a duty to avoid depriving people of sustenance. About the second, that we have a duty to help protect the vulnerable from sustenance deprivation, he says that it is not well attested within the NT data. Here especially I think Hron's discussion suffers from the fact that the OT is set off to the side. Over and over in the OT, justice is connected with the fate of the vulnerable; and the poor are regularly cited as among the vulnerable, along with widows, orphans, and aliens. About the third duty, to sustain the victims of deprivation, Hron says that only "the unique instance of the mandate contained in the parable of Lazarus" can be cited in favor of the contention that this is a matter of justice rather than charity. But I have already argued that it is implausible to interpret this parable as pertaining only to the extremely wealthy. It pertains to me – someone neither extremely wealthy nor impoverished.

These comments will come across, I dare say, as highly critical. But let me say again that this is an excellent dissertation; the strategy of interpretation that Hron proposes makes an important contribution to the discussion. My criticisms are all to the effect that I judge that Hron has not employed his strategy as well as he might have, and that, when better employed, it yields rather different conclusions from those that he himself draws. The fact that I have offered these rather detailed criticisms is a testimony to the fact that I regard him as a worthy discussion partner.

One last point. Though I infer that Hron is not a native speaker of English, he obviously does know English very well. But he sometimes falls into infelicities, and sometimes introduces neologisms. Just one example of an infelicity: on p. 11 he writes, "to recursively impact notions of....." The phrase, "to recursively impact" is very infelicitous – though I concede that one might be able to find an academic whose native language is English writing those very words. On the same page there is an example of a neologism. Hron writes, "provides some utile background....." English might have contained the word "utile." But in fact it does not. (I might be contradicted here by one or two obscure passages cited in the Oxford English Dictionary; I haven't checked.)

There aren't many such infelicities and neologisms. But before Hron sends off a revised version of his dissertation for publication, he should have a native speaker of English read it over.

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