

The Cost to be Reconciled

Uncovering the Scandal of the Gospel through Luke 15:11-32

Stephen Siemens

Research Essay

Queens School of Religion

Dr. Richard Ascough

Dr. John Young

March 4, 2013

Outline

I. Introduction

II. Context and Exegesis

Background on Luke Chapter 15

The Selfish Prodigal

Repentance or Pretense? The Saving-Face Plan

Self/*ess* Prodigal: a Father's Response

The Selfish *non*-Prodigal: O Brother Where Art Thou?

Self/*ess* Prodigal: a Father's Response (Take II)

Boys Will Be Boys: Reflecting on the Brothers

III. Critical Assessment

I. Introduction

Historically the parable recorded in Luke 15:11-32 has focused primarily on the “prodigal” or “lost” younger son. The father and the elder brother have been marginalized as evidenced by Bible headings over the parable for over 1400 years: the Vulgate has read *De filio prodigo*, leaving sixteenth century English Bible headings with “the parable of the prodigal son” (and *Le fils prodigue* in French); the German title, *Der verlorene Sohn*, the “Lost Son” demonstrates greater linkage to the two preceding parables in Luke 15, but none the less retains the dominance of the prodigal.¹ Only in the latter half of the twentieth century did scholars begin to recognize the necessity of the whole cast of characters.²

Encountering this text without middle-eastern cultural cues has also left much to be desired. Though narrowing, a gap still persists between middle-eastern contextual theology, i.e., the work of Kenneth Bailey (see Works Cited) and the western historical-critical approach. Though western scholars now assume many of Bailey’s contributions, they still contest him at significant interpretative junctures.

The focus in this parable has primarily been on “rightness” and “wrongness,” or rule breaking, and not broken relationships. The result has been pendular in application: it has either been directed towards “big time sinners” (as depicted in the younger son) on one hand and

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to St. Luke X-XXIV* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 1083; Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 72; precipitating the Bible headings was how the Church fathers saw the prodigal as the “Gentile Christian” and the older brother as the “law-keeping Jews” who had been rejected by God, and whose numbers were diminishing; Kenneth E. Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992), 181; Hultgren states that the traditional title is “so fixed in usage that it would be virtually impossible to supplant with another” (*Parables*, 72).

² This is demonstrated by more encompassing titles: the parable of “The Two Sons” by Manson in 1950, Helmut Theilicke’s title, “The Waiting Father” in 1959 (Hultgren, *Parables* 72). In 1954 Joachim Jeremias designated this parable as “The parable of the Father’s Love” (*The Parables of Jesus* [New York: Scribner’s, 1963], 28). Scholarship on parables shifted drastically in (roughly) the 1960’s. Previous to this was Julicher and Dodd’s work, a reaction against the allegorization that virtually went unchallenged from the church fathers and on. They emphasized that parables only make one point, leaving little latitude to introduce the significance of all three characters; see Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 22-68.

inveterate legalist (through the older son) on the other, leaving the “common Christians” finding a tenuous correlation in-between these two realities. A new hermeneutic focusing on relationship is needed to make an indiscriminate application to the reader, regardless of their present faith journey (or where they are on the spectrum between these two extremes).³

This parable thus has been used to illustrate the “freeness of God’s grace,”⁴ where the reader allegorically aligns themselves with the prodigal; but more often than not the expositors, teachers and commentators of this parable—working from the historical-critical approach rather than the middle-eastern contextual and thus lacking the tools to locate it in its first century socio-historical context—have failed to see simultaneously a demonstration of the cost of God’s grace, where the significance of the defiant older brother and even more importantly the self-emptying love displayed by the father, towards both sons (law-breaker and law-keeper) can truly be appreciated.

This parable continues to function within the allegorical tradition, with a reading that spiritualizes the “younger brother” and “older brother” as two types of sin (or “sinners”), both breaking relationship to their father and both in need of grace and forgiveness, etc.⁵ More recently this approach to the parable illustrates the cost of being reconciled with contributing authors such as Keller (2008), Hultgren (2000), Nouwen (1994), and Geddert (1995).

³ Additionally, in interpreting this parable, ethnicity has either played a dominant role (i.e. a pre-Holocaust reading where an anti-Semitic hermeneutic supplants the older brother [the Jews] by the welcome of the younger brother [the Gentiles or Christians]) or has had little or no bearing at all: this parable has been used for pastoral significance, illuminating repentance, sin, celebration, welcome, grace, cost, etc. without conspicuous Jew/ Gentile relations in purview.

⁴ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 25.

⁵ Though a significant lens in which to read this parable, this “pastoral approach” is often ethnically neutral, i.e., it may highlight the themes of a “spiritual” exile or exodus but it does not attempt to connect these themes to the literal first century Jewish expectations around exile or exodus. N.T. Wright’s ethnographic “exile to exodus” reading, however, does demonstrate well the significance of this parable for the nation of Israel in the first century: the exile is over; the long awaiting kingdom of God is here (though it looks scandalously different than expected), where Israel centered around Jesus with Gentile inclusion is the new exodus. This reading gives a latitudinal theological angle, with Luke 15 read alongside Acts 15 (the Jerusalem council) where the questions and assumptions around Gentile inclusion within first century Judaism is critical; see N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God Vol. 2* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 123-144.

In this essay the significance of all three characters in the parable will be emphasized. I will demonstrate the inseparable link between middle-eastern contextual and (primarily western) historical-critical readings of the text, facilitating dialogue between these different axes of interpretation, starting points, trajectories, assumptions, and questions. I will mediate between Bailey and others, keeping the emphasis on the text itself. I will point out where Bailey's contributions have received widespread support and the places where many disagree.

The essay will underscore the significance of what this parable, a story about a flesh and blood father and his two sons, meant to Jesus' original listeners and implications for Christian readers today. I will find in this story an interpretive application that affirms God's immeasurable grace, meaning "yes" to the historic emphasis on the forgiveness of the younger son, but that this grace stems from a costly act to offer reconciliation to *both* sons. Ultimately, though, the reader will discover that this parable powerfully demonstrates the scandal of the Gospel, namely, that reconciling broken relationships and extending forgiveness has a tremendous cost—with an invitation to paradigmatic participation with the true prodigal of all, the father of this parable, whose characteristics are found in the story teller himself.

II. Context and Exegesis

Background on Luke Chapter 15

The kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurates in Luke's Gospel clearly displays the year of the Lord's favour (4:18-19). With tenacity and compassion Jesus is "seeking and saving what was lost" (19:10), dining with sinners, and is not to be dissuaded by those who do not share in his joy. In this Gospel there have already been celebrations, parties and banquets (13:28-30; 14:15-35), and warnings against fraternal feuding over inheritance (12:13-21).⁶

⁶ Outside of Lucan parables Matthew offers a parable about two sons (Matt 21:28-32).

More particularly though we have seen Jesus being accused of keeping the wrong table company in 5:29-31, again in 7:29-30, and on this third occasion, Jesus gives this famous parable as his defense for doing what he does; “It was axiomatic in the ancient world that table fellowship, like hospitality, symbolized spiritual unity.”⁷

The opening verses capture the framework of the parables given in chapter 15. Tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to hear him—linking them to the group that accepted Jesus’ challenge at the banquet in the previous chapter “let the one who has ears to hear listen”—in contrast to the Pharisees and the Scribes grumbling.⁸ They were grumbling against Jesus’ disciples in 5:30, they “observed Jesus suspiciously” in 6:7 and 14:1, and in 11:53 they “formed a deep grudge against him.” Here their grumbling had reached another level, suggesting a “public remonstrance as well as a private grumble, especially recalling the complaints of the wilderness generation against Moses and Aaron.”⁹ In noting that Jesus “welcomed” sinners and ate with them, Luke uses *prosdechomai*, a term used with great positivity throughout his Gospel, often referring to the expectation of God’s visitation.¹⁰

Jesus’ response to the grumbling religious leaders was to tell a parable about a father¹¹ who had two sons. All three characters are mentioned in the opening line of the parable and each is mentioned twice by the second verse, illustrating how the spotlight was never intended to

⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke Vol. 2* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 99.

⁸ For emphasis on hearing as a sign of conversion in Luke’s Gospel, see 5:1, 15; 6:17, 27, 47, 49; 7:29; 8:8-18, 21; 9:35; 10:16, 24, 39; 11:28, 31 (ibid, 235).

⁹ See Exod 15:24; 16:2, 7-8; 17:3; Num 14:2, 36; 16:11; Deut 1:27, cf. also 1 Cor 10:10) (ibid).

¹⁰ Ibid; see 2:25, 28; 12:36; 23:5; Acts 24:15; Paul uses *prosdechomai* to welcome someone as a “brother or “sister in the Lord” (Rom 16:2, Phil 2:29); Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of the Middle East* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 29.

¹¹ The primary image of God in Luke’s travel narrative up until this point has been of a father (11:1-13; 12:22-24) and will continue in this parable. Though in this parable, “against the backdrop of the Roman world, wherein the characteristic attributes of the father as the paterfamilias are remembered especially in terms of authoritarianism and legal control, the picture Luke paints is remarkable for its counter emphasis on care and compassion.” Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 579.

shine brightest on the prodigal.¹² It is also noteworthy that each character is “identified by a relational designation—‘father,’ ‘son,’ ‘brother’—and all designations are interrelated through possessive pronouns—such as ‘*his* father’ (v. 11) and ‘*your* brother’ (v. 27). The very identity of each character is unthinkable without the others.”¹³

The Selfish Prodigal

After the listener is introduced to the characters, the middle-eastern mind thinks of rank: father, elder, youngest, and is surprised to hear that the lowest ranking member speaks first, but more surprising is his request: wishing his father was dead: “Any middle-eastern son who requests his inheritance from a healthy father is understood to want his father to die.”¹⁴

Just as today, estates in the ancient world normally passed at death, as this was the assumption in Roman law¹⁵ and Jewish law (Num 27:8-11, 36:7-9 and Deut. 21:15-17). With the latter, however, there was a prohibition not to divide one’s inheritance before death as can be seen in Wisdom of Ben Sirach 33:20-22, a passage that ties the giving of property while the father is still alive with his sense of honour.¹⁶ Some western authors have assumed that the

¹² Thus this parable is not two separate stories or the clever work of Luke’s redaction as Fitzmyer, Marshall, and Bailey have demonstrated (Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1085); I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIGTC); Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 604-605; Bailey, *Lost*, 112.

¹³ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 157.

¹⁴ Bailey, *Lost*, 109. For Hultgren, “it is tantamount to wishing that the father were dead” (*Parables*, 73). For Scott this request “effectively announces his father’s death” Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear then the parable: a commentary on the parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 113. Green however states that Bailey is overstating the son’s asking for inheritance as synonymous as “wishing his death.” Rather, it shows how the son is dead to the family—the request signifies rejection of family (Green, *Luke*, 580). Bock also agrees that wishing his father’s death is not certain, but what is certain is a clear severing of relationship (Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51-24:53* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996], 1310).

¹⁵ Hultgren, *Parables*, 73.

¹⁶ “Never, as long as you live, give anyone power over you—whether son, wife, brother, or friend. Don’t give your property to anyone; you might change your mind and have to ask for it back. As long as you have breath in your body, don’t let anyone lead your life for you. It is better that your children be dependent on you than the other way around. Keep control over all that you do; don’t let anything stain your reputation. Wait until the last moment of your life when you are breathing your last, and then divide your property among your heirs.”

prohibition found in Sirach means the practise “must have been common enough,”¹⁷ but Bailey disagrees, noting that such a request has been unheard of in any era of middle-eastern history.¹⁸

What is clear is that all the texts advise the father not to distribute his estate, but never how to respond when it is demanded from him: “the case of the *son requesting* the inheritance is not discussed. It is too unthinkable to contemplate.”¹⁹ Rather than meet the son’s requests with a slap across the face in the parable the father grants it.²⁰ Customs permitted the father to allow heirs to possess the estate while he was alive but they could not dispose of the property until his death. In the interim the father can spend the income generated from the estate however he chooses. Thus, one can note how the father acts as if he was still in possession of the property for the rest of the parable.²¹ The text implies that the younger son enticed his father for the right of possession, and more shockingly he was also successful in disposition—breaking these customs would be highly dishonourable to the father. The Mishnah allows for the son to find a purchaser for the land, to solidify the sale price, but can only sell once his father dies.²² The younger son in the parable, however, is clearly under the age of 18,²³ meaning his father is in the “prime of his life,” and it would be highly unlikely for a willing buyer to wait until his father dies to get the land. The nail in the coffin to this “death wish” is the fact that the younger son will soon be leaving his father, abdicating obligation to care for him in old age—an act diametrically opposed

¹⁷ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1087.

¹⁸ “Ben Sirach’s words are best understood as a reflection of the community standards rather than the words of a moralist trying to reform community errors” (Bailey, *Lost*, 113). Bailey also quotes Eastern Christian commentators to back up this claim. Scott notes that there are other places within the Mishnah that also make this point: “Our Rabbis taught: three cry out and are not answered. *viz.*, he who has money and lends it without witnesses;... he who transfers his property to his children in his children in his lifetime” (*Hear*, 110).

¹⁹ Bailey, *Lost*, 114, emphasis in original.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

²¹ We see him commanding servants in v. 22, ordering the slaughter of the fattened calf in v. 23 and reminding his son of “all that I have is yours” in v. 29; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1087; Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 373.

²² Such legislation is intended as a safeguard for a father who is in his old age; Bailey, *Lost*, 118.

²³ The younger son is most likely not older than 17, and unmarried, as the age of marriage was 18-20; Jeremias, *Parables*, 129.

to honouring his father or mother and breaking the fifth commandment (Exod 20:12 and Deut 5:16).

Though a silent character for now, it is worth noting that the older brother has simultaneously been gifted with his share of the inheritance, a double portion (Deut 21:17). The father was not obliged to divide his inheritance with the elder son at this time, but clearly did so (vv.12, 31).²⁴ All money not spent or invested in capital would go to the final inheritance—which might point out why the older son is infuriated later on—the party is essentially spending money that would otherwise be his in time.

After only two and half verses, this parable is scandalously stretching the listener’s imagination as the legal customs of the day have been turned upside down. The text itself corroborates this reality: in v. 11 the son requests the inheritance, more literally, “property” or “substance” (*ousia*)²⁵ that will eventually “fall to him.”²⁶ The corresponding action of the father in v. 12, however, is not to divide his *ousia*, but his *bios* among them, which illustrates the true cost of his decision: he is severing his very life. For Bailey the best translation of *bios* is “life,” not “livelihood,”²⁷ as *bios* demonstrates the link between land and life in the Middle East.²⁸ Scott

²⁴ Hultgren, *Parables*, 73.

²⁵ Fitzmyer notes where “substance,” “property” *ousia*, has also been associated with inheritance in Tob 14:13, 3 Macc 3:28 (*Luke*, 1087); additionally there is a rough parallel story in 3rd Cen. A.D. in the works of Diogenes Laertius where the younger son takes the “smaller portion, which was money” from the family property (*ousia*) financing his travels (Hultgren, *Parables*, 74); note the conspicuous absence of *kleronomia* in this parable. *Kleronomia* is used for “inheritance” some 14 times in the NT, four of which by Luke; for our purposes, note its usage in 12:13 and 20:14; Bailey, *Cross*, 43.

²⁶ The phrase “that falls to me” is used similarly in the LXX in receiving inheritance (Tob 3:17, 6:12), and used in other pre-Christian secular Greek texts; Hultgren, *Parables*, 71. Fitzmyer also notes Macc 10:30 (*Luke* 1087).

²⁷ See 8:14 where life itself is highlighted (Bailey, *Lost*, 119). Other authors see *bios* and *ousia* used interchangeably: for Hultgren *bios* is synonymous with “property” which would have included real-estate and cash (*Parables*, 74). Greg Forbes affirms Bailey’s take on *bios* as best translated as “life” as Luke 8:43 “she spent her whole *life*” corroborates this claim (contrasted with Mark 5:26; “Repentance and Conflict in the Parable of the Lost Son [Luke 15:11-32],” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42, no. 2 [1999]: 215).

²⁸ Bailey, *Lost*, 111-117. Bailey uses the musical *Oklahoma* for a close parallel in the west: “We know we belong to the land, and the land we belong to is grand” (ibid, 119-120). The singer is not in possession of the land, rather they belong to it, and their identity is inextricably bound to it; this viewpoint is found in the OT where “Naboth will die, but he will not sell the land of his fathers, even to the king” (ibid).

picks up on the wordplay and summarizes: “life and death is a major thematic in this parable. The son’s division of the property kills the father.”²⁹

With temerity (to say the least) the son “un-son’s”³⁰ himself and “de-fathers”—“kills”—his father. He has chosen voluntary bastard-hood, more money than he knows what to do with³¹ and will soon be on the run.³² It is key to note that though the younger son explicitly cuts ties with his father (and implicitly brother, family and community) it will be his elder brother later on who will cut ties to both their father—with an acrimonious punch—and his younger brother. Far from being his “brother’s keeper” he will “un-brother” his brother and “un-father” his father.

The younger son sells quickly because his own safety is in jeopardy. “Someone in the community buys. But the community at large is horrified! The prodigal is selling his own soul and insulting his father publicly by making public what has happened between them. The hostility of the community dictates his haste.”³³ More specifically, he leaves to avoid *qetsatsah*, the “cutting off” ceremony, whereby relatives bring parched corn and nuts, placing them in a jar and breaking the jar in front of the community shouting “so-and-so is cut off from his inheritance.”³⁴ The Jerusalem Talmud indicates that this is to be done if he sells land to a Gentile.³⁵ The way to annul this process, to “re-join” family and community is to purchase the land back. But in our story the village reaction will be harsh indeed, since the prodigal lost all of

²⁹ Scott, *Hear*, 111.

³⁰ I am indebted to Volf’s creative wording here (*Exclusion*, 158).

³¹ It is quite clear that his family is wealthy as few could afford fattened calves (v. 23) and pay for professional entertainers (v. 25); Bailey, *Lost*, 120.

³² “Not long afterward” is used 17 times by Luke, indicating a fairly imprecise way to measure time (21:9; Acts 1:5; 12:18; 14:28; 15:2; 17:4, 12; 19:11, 23, 24; 20:12; 21:39, 26:19, 26; 27:14, 20; 28:2; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1087. “After gathering everything together” could be translated as “turned the whole of his share into cash” – a near identical phrase occurs in the works of Plutarch (Cato Min. 6.7) that, without questions, means “having converted an inheritance into silver” (Hultgren, *Parables*, 71).

³³ Bailey, *Lost*, 121; Sirach 26:5 states that “slander by a whole town is a terror worse than death.”

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Ket 2:10; Kidd 1:5.

his money to Gentiles. If this ceremony did not happen before he left, surely it will happen if he ever returned, thus he must do well in the foreign land.³⁶

The “distant country”³⁷ would be outside of Palestine. The size of the diaspora at that time is thought to be approximately 4 million, while the Jews in Palestine would have not exceeded 500,000.³⁸ Beyond geographical distance, the prodigal leaving village life and making his way to the great cities abroad in the “distant country” is illustrative of psychological distance as well, from both, father, and community.³⁹ It is

a drastic cutting loose from the way of living, thinking, and acting that has been handed down to him from generation to generation as a sacred legacy. More than disrespect, it is a betrayal of the treasured values of family and community. The distant country is the world in which everything considered holy at home is disregarded.⁴⁰

Western readers have almost always glossed over the significance of Jesus leaving out any information on the elder brother as this is a point that only the middle-eastern contextual reading can pick up. By the older brother being conspicuously absent or quiet demonstrates that something is already horribly wrong. He should be mediating this family rupture. His role as the eldest is reconciler; the listeners of the parable know that when there is a breach in relationship the one to mediate the dispute by the oldest son(s) in the family. But he is grossly abdicating his responsibility. “As soon as his brother makes the outlandish request for his inheritance, the older son is expected to be galvanized into action... his silence announces to all that the older son has

³⁶ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* (1980 Reprint combined edition), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 167-68.

³⁷ See also 19:2; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1088.

³⁸ Jeremias, *Parables*, 129; the practice of partial disposition could be more excusable if the son was preparing for marriage or emigration to a better life as there is precedent in the Mishnah, but he obviously is not doing either; John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34* (WBC; Thomas Nelson, 1993), 782.

³⁹ Hultren, *Parables*, 75.

⁴⁰ Henry J. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. (New York: Image Books, 1994), 36. Bailey agrees with this sense of “cutting loose,” as *apedemesen*, “he traveled away from his own people,” is used only here by Luke (*Cross*, 53).

a poor relationship with both his brother and father... an older son who will take but will not give.”⁴¹ At this point the reader “understands the prodigal by what he does, the father by what he gives, and the older son by what he does not do.”⁴²

While living in the distant country the younger son “scatters”⁴³ his possessions in “riotous living.” For 1800 years (with one exception) the Syriac and Arabic New Testament versions of this text have never attached immorality with “riotous living.” Rather it has consistently been translated as “expensive,” “luxurious,” or “spendthrift living.”⁴⁴ The West, on the other hand inexorably hears immorality, and for Bailey, this is problematic; for if we have read into “riotous living” “lax in morals, licentious, profligate, debauched,”⁴⁵ etc. we side with the older brother and go against the narrator, as the text itself is neutral.

Fitzmyer’s work, however, suggests that the text is not as neutral as Bailey would lead his readers to believe, noting that *asotos*, “loose living,” is also used to describe the “profligate conduct”⁴⁶ of a prostitute in Proverbs 7:10-12, which, in the LXX reads: “Then out came a woman to meet him, dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent. She is loud and defiant (*asotos*), her feet never stay at home; now in the street, now in the squares, at every corner she lurks.” This connection of *asotos* to a prostitute who is never-at-home is an interesting one, as the older brother later on (v. 30) will also make this same connection between “loose living,” prostitutes, and the clandestine far-from-home actions of his younger brother.

⁴¹ Bailey, *Lost*, 122.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Scatterer “corresponds” to that of “gathering together” (*synagein*) in the previous verse; Johnson, *Luke*, 236. In Mary’s song the proud have been scattered (*diaskorpizō*) in 1:51, and the rich manager has likewise scattered (*diaskorpizō*) his master’s possession in 16:1 (Marshal, *Luke*, 608).

⁴⁴ Bailey, *Lost*, 123.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1088.

The spotlight remains on the prodigal with all odds against him,⁴⁷ and furthermore the text implies that he is a victim of famine. Though his options are getting bleak, the prodigal's return home will no doubt be the most shameful moment of his life; ashamed before his father and his lack of economic viability before his brother, and if the community did not carry out *qetsatsah* when he left, they would do so upon his return.⁴⁸

To avoid the shame associated with returning home the prodigal does *anything*⁴⁹ to survive, and as such he “joins” or more literally “glues” (*kollaomai*) himself to a citizen⁵⁰ and finds himself feeding pigs.⁵¹ The encounter with the Garasene Demoniac previous to the parable

⁴⁷ Counter to Bailey, Scott argues that the listener of the story is eager that the prodigal does well, keeping in mind the mytheme of two son stories frequently found in the Scriptures, i.e., Cain and Able, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob and Joseph and his brothers (and Benjamin and his brothers). By mytheme Scott means a “folklore motif of elder and younger sons in which each play stereotyped roles. The elder is ‘scrubbed clean,’ the younger is ‘dirty’ but the father loves the younger more” (*Hear*, 112). Referencing the Patriarchs Scott notes how the “Younger sons frequently leave the house of their father to find their wealth; there is something slightly scandalous or off-color in their stories; and they are the favorites” (ibid). This has implications for how the listeners of Jesus’ parable would expect the story to play out. “The mytheme of elder-and-younger-brother stories encourages an audience to expect the younger to be something of a rogue and a favorite” (ibid, 113). Bailey interacts with Scott’s work around the mytheme, though he sees the parallels to the patriarchs and to our parable as weak, i.e., the prodigal did not have to “trick” his father as Jacob did, Joseph was at least loyal to his father, etc. Even if the audience of the parable assumes the younger is the favorite, the question for Bailey, then, is this: “what is the father going to do with this kind of favorite son?” (*Lost*, 118-119). Additionally for Bailey, if the audience expected a favorite son, they will be asking if father demonstrates “similar love to his nonfavorite older son” (ibid). This aspect finds affinity with Scott’s insistence on the scandal of this parable: that the older son is not rejected, rather he inherits all (*Hear*, 125).

⁴⁸ Bailey, *Lost*, 125; “Village society is ruthless with a man who is down,” and cites the wandering beggar, Bartamaues, whose name means “the son of filth” (Mark 10:46-52), and also the young boys who ridicule Elisha (2 Kgs 2:23-24); Bailey, *Cross*, 54-55,

⁴⁹ For Albert J. Harrill, previous commentary has been “axiomatic” on the significance of the son “hiring himself out” to a citizen of that country. But the *paramone* type labour carries a fine nuance, namely, “the son is driven to seek *any* employment.” *Paramone* labour has an element of a fixed time to “remain with” the employer, whereas the day laborers in Matt 20:1-16 have no stipulations to remain. “The son indentured himself to the citizen in a nonspecific way: the degradation of the task eventually received demonstrates the youth’s obligation to do *anything*”; (Harrill, “The Indentured Labor of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:15),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, no. 4 [1996]: 175).

⁵⁰ The verb *kollaomai* is used 12 times in the New Testament and seven times by Luke (10:11; 15:15; Acts 5:13; 8:29; 9:26; 10:28; 17:34; Bailey, *Cross*, 56; Marshall notes the LXX usage of *kollaomai* “is sometimes used to depict exclusive religious devotion to God (e.g., Deut 6:13; 10:20, 2 Kgs 18:6; Ps 63:8; 119:31) and to portray sexual intimacy; e.g., 1 Kgs 11:2; 1 Esdr 4:29; Sir 19:2, Matt 19:5; 1 Cor 6:16)” (see Christopher D. Marshall, “Offending, restoration, and the law-abiding community: restorative justice in the New Testament and in the New Zealand experience,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27, no. 2 [2007]: 27).

⁵¹ Bailey states how the citizen employed a common middle-eastern tactic “to get rid someone.” The citizen in the far country “most likely doesn’t want the prodigal at all and tries to get rid of him by offering him a job he is confident the beggar will refuse” (*Cross*, 57). Since the prodigal’s dress and speech would reveal he was a Jew, and if he had any honour left, he would refuse such a job. But to the listeners’ surprise, he takes it (ibid).

expressed how a herd of pigs represents something flagrantly unclean for Jews (8:32), a sentiment expressed throughout Torah and the Prophets.⁵² Contact with Samaritans and pigs alike were clearly condemned by the Jews.⁵³ Additionally eating pork became “the test of fidelity”⁵⁴ from the time of the Maccabees.⁵⁵

Feeding pigs is one taboo if you’re a Jew, it is another to wish you could eat their food. Bailey receives widespread support⁵⁶ in identifying the “pods” as not synonymous with St. John’s bread (the cousin to the carob bean, which the human body digests easily) but rather the carb bean itself which the human body cannot digest and sustain itself on.⁵⁷ Interestingly enough the Rabbis’ had a famous saying on repentance at the time of Jesus: “When the Israelites are reduced to carob pods, then they repent.”⁵⁸ Ironically, the son is eating repentance, as he “would gladly fill”⁵⁹ his stomach.” “Gladly” is strong word meaning, “desire,” “lust,” “craving,” “longing” and “sexual desire.”⁶⁰ Degradation has unraveled past the imagination, as the prodigal not only has been feeding pigs, wanting their food, but now he wishes he was a pig; “The prodigal, a Jew, is reduced to *wishing he were a pig*. The pigs can eat until they are satisfied. He cannot.”⁶¹ Scott indicates how the description of poverty in terms of food introduces maternal care, inviting the mother in the parable.⁶²

⁵² Lev 11:7; Deut 14:8; 1 Macc 1:47; Isa 65:4, 66:17; 2 Macc 6:18, 7:1.

⁵³ “He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like to one that eats the flesh of swine.” An interesting doublet as this parable comes right after the Good Samaritan. Also, it is found in the Mishnah, “Cursed be the man who raises pigs, and cursed be the man who teaches his son Greek wisdom” (Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1088).

⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵⁵ 1 Macc 1:47; 2 Macc 6:18; 7:1; the distain and fear of eating pork and/ or unclean meat continues to be a substantial issue for the early church: note Peter’s dream in Acts 10, the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, and Paul’s rebuke to Peter in Gal 2.

⁵⁶ Nolland, *Luke*, 783.

⁵⁷ Bailey, *Poet*, 171-172.

⁵⁸ Scott, *Hear*, 115.

⁵⁹ Longed to have his stomach “filled” is used ironically in 6:21 and 9:17 (Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1088).

⁶⁰ Bailey notes Jesus’ use of it at the last supper, “With *desire* I have *desired* to eat this Passover” (22:15; *Cross*, 58).

⁶¹ Bailey, *Lost*, 129, emphasis in original.

⁶² “Nourishment is associated with female, maternal metaphors, and the family-system repertoire has cast the family in the especially male terms of property, inheritance, and the legal code. The mother, the unspoken binary of the

For Bailey, Jesus is essentially challenging the religious leaders' assumption on his lax position on sin. Just because he is dining with sinners does not mean he condones sin. To the contrary, he takes sin seriously and up until this point in the story the younger son's downward spiraling journey has affirmed the Pharisaical view of sin, as Jesus has used incredible precision in terms of many Jewish taboos.⁶³ This parable was launched because Jesus was accused of eating with sinners. Here we have come full circle (though more evocative): as the prodigal—the Jewish poster child of a sinner—is eating detestable food.

Repentance or Pretense? The Saving-Face Plan

The son's plot ravelling out of control in the foreign country seems to come to a standstill. Quite literally he will die of hunger if he does not return home. Thus "coming to his senses" he asks, "how many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread,⁶⁴ but I am dying here with hunger!⁶⁵ I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him; father, I have sinned⁶⁶ against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."

This section, around repentance or lack thereof is the axis by which Bailey's trilogy reading turns. To see the prodigal as not repenting is the largest disconnect between eastern and western readings, or at least Bailey and the western interpreters. For Bailey, the key to

father, is here implied in the son's starvation" (Scott, *Hear*, 111). Forbes finds the implicit maternal link less convincing, but rather the starvation is to contrast the fattened calf and communal celebration around food later on (*Conflict*, 217). For a culturally sensitive explanation of why there is no mention of the mother or sister(s)? in the story, see Carol Schersten LeHurd, "Rediscovering the Lost Women in Luke 15," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24, no. 2 (1994): 66-76.

⁶³ Geddert systematically outlines how the prodigal technically did not break any commands throughout all of his actions. All he did was sever relationship. See Tim Geddert, "The Parable of the Prodigal: Priorities," *Direction* 24, no. 1 (1995): 28-36.

⁶⁴ "More than enough" – the verb *perisseuein* is "used in a sense of abounding" in 9:17 and 12:15 (Johnson, *Luke*, 237).

⁶⁵ Forbes notes that "perishing," *apollôma*, (since this is the present tense) forms a link to the preceding parables (15:4, 7) and confirms the necessity of a trilogy reading (*Conflict*, 217).

⁶⁶ His sin is twofold: by feeding pigs and attaching himself to a citizen he "abrogated Judaism" his religion and loss of inheritance means he cannot have anything to sustain his father in his old age, and "that which belongs to family now belongs to foreigners" (Scott, *Hear*, 116).

understand the significance of 15:17, the son “coming to himself,” is found in a trilogy reading of the parable, taking note of the trajectory in the parable of the lost sheep 15:2-7 and Psalm 23.⁶⁷ Essentially the first two parables illustrate how both the sheep and the coin have no ability to be found on their own; thus, the prodigal is also understood in this fashion.⁶⁸ Additionally, Jesus is introducing a new understanding of repentance to the grumbling religious leaders listening to him, namely, *accepting* that you are lost.

For over 1800 years the Syriac and Arabic versions of Luke 15 have “never used language in this text that implies repentance.”⁶⁹ More recently there are western voices that agree,⁷⁰ but most have kept the traditional western take on the text.⁷¹ The soliloquy in the Gentile

⁶⁷ Bailey traces the progression of Shepherd and flock imagery throughout the Old Testament. Beginning with Psalm 23 it is God who brings David back, causes him to repent (*shub*). In Jeremiah 23 the shepherds have lost their flock and only God himself can solve the problem (“I will bring them back,” Jer 23:3); lastly in Ezekiel 34 the critique on the shepherds moves from an inability to shepherd to accusations of acting predatorily. They have “devoured the flock,” and again, God promises several times that he himself will have to be the shepherd (vv. 11, 15-16). For a fourth rendition of the Shepherd imagery found in the Scriptures, Jesus is implying that he is fulfilling Yahweh’s promise to come and shepherd *himself* to save the flock as the religious leaders have failed to do so; see Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jacob and the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel’s Story* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 66-85.

⁶⁸ Utilizing the trilogy lens, Johnson reaches the opposite conclusion: “The repentance from sin which was the moral attached to the first two parables is now thematic” (*Luke*, 237).

⁶⁹ Bailey, *Cross*, 59.

⁷⁰ Hultgren asks that if the son is repenting, then why not use the conventional terms for repentance (*metanoia*, *metanoëō*) used some 25 times in Luke Acts, especially considering it would fit this narrative. Augustine did not see repentance here either (*Parables*, 76). Scott posits that “if the aphorism of the carob bean’s reducing Israel to repentance represents a widespread sentiment,” then the hearers of the parable (v. 16) would expect the son to turn things around, especially because this parable is riding on the heels of the first two where repentance is the major thrust (*Hear*, 115). It does make things even more interesting if the son hits this explicitly *Jewish* rock bottom—to the religious leaders hearing this parable—and remains conniving. Scott admits that the son’s “coming to himself” changes the trajectory of the story, but viewing it as repentance is a stretch: “By coming to himself he begins to overcome his self-destructive pattern of behavior. To term this development repentance is to turn the narrative into a theologoumenon. After all, his stomach induced his return” (ibid, 116). Philipp Sellew’s contribution is that of identifying the literary device of “interior monologues” in Luke’s narrative, a unique feature in the Gospel tradition. By “interior monologue,” Sellew means the way in which characters in the parables, when faced with a pivotal and moral decision, “usually in a moment of a moral crisis” (239), address themselves. This is seen in the following six parables: The Foolish Farmer (12:16-20), the Unfaithful Servant (12:42-46), the Prodigal Son (15:11-32), the Crafty Steward (16:1-8a), the Unjust Judge (18:2-5), and the Owner of the Vineyard (20:9-16). In all of these parables, the character “comes to himself,” “says to himself,” etc. (“Interior Monologue as Narrative Device in the Parables of Luke,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 11, no. 2 [1992]: 239). George W. Ramsay also notes how there is no mention of sin (*hamartia*) in the previous two parables of Luke 15, but consistently there is rejoicing over repentance (*metonoia*). “He came to himself” is used in the Testament of Joseph to reveal Joseph’s state of mind when he realized Potiphar’s wife was advancing towards him. The only other place the phrase is repeated verbatim in the New Testament is Acts 12:11, where Peter “came to himself,” realizing that he had not been seeing a vision when

country does not express remorse, “*only* a desire to eat.”⁷² The son does not speak of the pain he causes his father or the shame placed on the household. He does not even mention the money he squandered. He is hungry and since he knows he cannot return home for fear of his older brother, father, and community he must get a job that pays cash, perhaps to repay the debt to his father. The only way to not live on the estate and still make cash is to become a “hired man.”

Bailey’s explanation of this process adds weight to his interpretation of the son’s actions: to become an apprentice with a local craftsman, a hired man, he has to have his father’s backing. “The game plan therefore was to make a ‘very humble speech’ that would (he hoped) convince his father to back him—just once more.”⁷³ There were three tiers of servants on first century Jewish estates. A bondsman (*doulos*) was not paid, nor was a slave of the lower class (*paidēs*),

the angel lead him out of prison, but it was in fact reality. These examples underscore a sudden awareness or deep realization, but neither imply repentance; the phrase is “tantalizingly ambiguous and leaves us uncertain as to whether this means anything more than that the prodigal came to his senses, or realized what he had done” (“Plots, Gaps, Repetitions and Ambiguity in Luke 15,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 17, no. 1 [1990]: 38).

⁷¹ Green takes the phrase “he came to himself” as the signal of the “turning point” in the story. Green admits that the phrase itself is not synonymous for “repentance,” but reminds the reader of the powerful undercurrents of the co-text highlighting repentance. The repentance of sinners is underscored (vv. 1-2, 7, 10) and the younger son’s internal monologue leads him to acknowledge his sin and return home (vv. 18, 21). For Green, “shades of repentance are clearly evident” in what is happening to the son in his moment of realization (*Luke*, 581). Green speaks directly to the positions of Bailey and Ramsey, noting that they “have seen in the younger son’s interior monologue his shrewdness or the development of a self-serving conspiracy, but these interpretations do not take seriously enough the co-text in which this text is set” (ibid, 581). Nolland admits that the son’s empty stomach was catalytic to his repentance, but in no way should that preclude sincerity; “While the basis of the son’s repentance is clearly his own situation of desperate need, and a desire to improve his lot, it is wrong-headed to question his sincerity or to detect continuing pride in his bid to become an independent employee (against Bailey, *Poet*, 173-79)” (*Luke*, 784). Forbes, another voice that believes Bailey’s repentance motif is off track (and probably the most caustic towards his work) is right to highlight that one need not pit the practical need of getting out of a bad circumstance and repentance at odds with each other: “There is not necessarily a dichotomy between hunger and repentance. In this instance, it is the lad’s hunger that stimulates repentance. Against Bailey, it is inappropriate to argue from the basis of a word that Jesus may have used, and then draw an extremely tenuous link to Psalm 23” (*Conflict*, 218). Forbes also points out Bailey’s own contradictions (in his other writings) where he explains how Jesus’ listeners would have understood the prodigal’s actions as repentance (ibid). Marshall, too, comes to a similar conclusion. First, he demonstrates that the key phrase in question, “he came to himself,” is itself an idiom present in several other languages denoting “a thoroughgoing change of heart” (*Restoration*, 13; both Marshall [*Luke*, 609] and Jeremias [*Parables*, 130] use this same reasoning). David A. Holgate, too, when viewing this parable against the backdrop of the philosophical tradition in the Greco-Roman world would agree that Jesus listener’s would have identified the son’s actions with repentance (*Prodigality, liberality and meanness: The prodigal son in Greco-Roman Perspective* [Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999], 198-206).

⁷² Bailey, *Cross*, 59, emphasis in original.

⁷³ Ibid.

but both had a guaranteed meal at the end of the day. A hired servant (*misthios*)⁷⁴ on the other hand, was paid in cash and lived in a local village, not on the estate, but his situation was more unnerving as he had to find consistent employment.⁷⁵ For the son to set out as a hired man, he will “be a free man with his own income living independently in the local village. His social status will not be inferior to that of his father and his brother. He can maintain his pride and his independence.”⁷⁶ The son’s plan will enable his independence, acquisition of cash, and maintain severed family ties.

At this point the western reader may be going through interpretive culture shock. The son wanting to be slave and no longer be treated as a son *is* indicative of heartfelt repentance and not a “self-serving conspiracy.” Moreover, his contrition comes through his own mouth, “Father I have sinned against Heaven and against you” (v. 18). Bailey argues to the contrary: the religious leaders to whom Jesus was telling this parable knew the Scriptures well enough to hear the manipulating voice of Pharaoh penetrating through the mouth of the prodigal (Exod 10:16). After the ninth plague, Pharaoh consented to meet Moses. As Moses appeared before him, Pharaoh’s opening remark was proleptic of the prodigal’s: “I have sinned against the Lord your God and against you.” Bailey is incredulous towards Pharaoh’s “repentance” because “everyone knows that Pharaoh was not repenting. He was simply trying to manipulate Moses into doing what he (Pharaoh) wanted. The prodigal’s actions are best understood as attempting the same thing.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ “Hired servant” found only here in the New Testament (Hultgren, *Parables*, 76). Fitzmyer notes that “hired hands,” lit. “how many salaried ones” is found also found Lev 25:50; Job 7:1; Tob. 5:14 (*Luke*, 1089). The Torah mandated regular payment to these workers, but says nothing of personal relationship (Johnson, *Luke*, 237). Bailey notes that it was not uncommon in biblical times to hire oneself out to get money (Lev 25:39-55; 2 Kgs 4:1; Matt 18:25; *Cross*, 61).

⁷⁵ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social*, 372.

⁷⁶ Bailey, *Poet*, 177.

⁷⁷ Bailey, *Jacob*, 106; Hultgren agrees with the manipulating insincerity found with Pharaoh before Moses, “I have sinned” in Exodus 10:16 and Psalm 51:6 (LXX); “against heaven” means against God, as the term heaven is “occasionally a pious circumlocution for God” in Dan 4:26, 1 Macc 3:18, Matt 21:25, and Luke 15:7. Sinning against God and a person, or simultaneously is also found in Num 21:1 (*Parables*, 77). Fitzmyer also points out the

For the son to state “I will arise”⁷⁸ only heightens the irony for Bailey. The significance of the word “arise” is much needed but not demonstrated by the son; it is only after the embrace with his father where the resurrection is authentic (in vv. 24, 32); “A ‘resurrection’ is needed, and at this point he thinks that he can accomplish that resurrection on his own. This same word will reappear in the mouth of his father with stunning power.”⁷⁹ Green, however, notes the significance of the phrase “I will arise” as the “central verbal form of the chapter”⁸⁰ and that the father acknowledges that his son is alive again in verses 24 and 32 as the decisive change in the story: lost begins to be found, dead to life, etc. “Within this co-text, *anistēmi* suggests not only ‘the beginning of action,’ but also, metaphorically, ‘being raised from the dead.’”⁸¹ Nolland parallels “having arisen” to the “resolve of faithless Israel to return her husband”⁸² in Hosea 2:7.

Bailey notes that to the religious leaders’ surprise, Jesus is actually affirming their position. So far the story follows what the rabbis taught about repentance: that sin is confessed, that there is compensation for evil carried out (i.e., paying his father back) and sincerity in keeping the laws that were broken.⁸³ The only element needed is for the son to face the ignominious wrath of the community to drive the point home. He would never disgrace his father’s house again.

Now the religious leader’s view of salvation will appear—if the younger son “repents” and follows through with the intent of his rehearsed speech, and carefully negotiates with his father, things just might end the way the religious leaders would expect. “Even so, the sinner

connection to Pharaoh in the text of (Exod 10:16), but does not surmise the connection that Bailey draws, in fact he sees the opposite, that this is a key move towards authentic repentance (1 Sam 7:6, 24:12; Deut 1:41; *Luke*, 1089). Forbes notes that the use of “sin” here does not convey the sense of sins “piling up to heaven” like Ezra 9:6, but used in a sense that all sin is against God (i.e., Ps 51:4; *Conflict*, 218).

⁷⁸ Lit. “rising, I shall set out for” occurs in the LXX: Gen 22:3, 19; 24:10, 43:8; Tob 8:10 (Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1089).

⁷⁹ Bailey, *Cross*, 60.

⁸⁰ Green, *Luke*, 582.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Nolland, *Luke*, 784.

⁸³ Bailey, *Lost*, 138.

who fulfills these requirements will be accepted by God. Their view of the problem (sin) and their understanding of the solution (salvation) are each authentically represented in the parable up to this point. Thus they can be confident in the parable's ending."⁸⁴

Regardless of the son's motivation to return home, the listening audience would expect the boy to be ridiculed and shamed as the *qetsatsah* ceremony will eminently be enacted when he returns. The goal of *qetsatsah* ultimately lies in its deterring power; villagers would be afraid of their own sons getting these ideas.⁸⁵ After the humiliation of the community he would reach his father's house, where, after presenting his rehearsed speech there would be "considerable negotiation,"⁸⁶ convincing his father to trust him yet again so that he can be sent away from the estate quickly to receive training to be a craftsman.

Self/ess Prodigal: a Father's Response

As the son makes his journey home we can note how this parable embodies "a mosaic of OT reminiscences,"⁸⁷ where repentant Ephraim is restored (Jer 31:18-10, Hos 11:1-9, Mal 3:17) and where God is likened to a compassionate father and mother waiting for his children (Ps 103 and Isa 63:15). As a Jewish young man the son almost certainly would have been reflecting on these Scriptures. Bailey gives the impression that the son was probably thinking, "if only *my* father would forgive me like this," rather than thinking "he probably will do this because he loves me"—the former being a much more negative assumption than the western viewpoint that correlates these Scriptures with what the son could most likely expect.⁸⁸ "But rather than remain

⁸⁴ Ibid, 141.

⁸⁵ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social*, 373.

⁸⁶ Bailey, *Lost*, 142.

⁸⁷ Forbes, *Conflict*, 213.

⁸⁸ Bailey, *Lost*, 142; I would argue that the primary reason for this is due to the fact that the West has not historically had *qetzazah* in mind; see Nolland, *Luke*, 785.

aloof in the family home, waiting to see what the young man has to say for himself,”⁸⁹ the text reads that the father sees him at distance, has compassion, runs, embraces, and kisses him.

To unpack the power and surprise behind this climatic reconciliation scene, Bailey’s contextual reading is quintessential, as it carefully unearths, detail by detail, first century middle-eastern customs and cultural cues. “Seeing him from a distance” has tremendous significance as the family farm is not isolated on the top of a hill where the father just happens to look down at the right time and sees his son. The home is somewhere in the middle of a traditional village, which naturally faces a narrow street. To make sure the son is not treated badly and there is no time to perform *qetsatsah*, the father is “determined to reach the boy *before the boy reaches the village*.”⁹⁰ Middle-eastern towns spanned about six acres with streets only wide enough to make room for a loaded camel;⁹¹ the proximity by which neighbours lived was tight, as houses and shops were “wall to wall.”⁹² The other assumption throughout all rabbinic literature is that everyone lived in a town. Farmers went out early and came home late to the village; “The street is the ‘commons’ of the community,”⁹³ and it is through such streets that the prodigal must make his way to his father. “The gauntlet the prodigal must run to reach his father’s house is intimidating if not terrifying.”⁹⁴

Seeing him from a distance the father was “filled with compassion.”⁹⁵ This is the third and final time we encounter “compassion,” (*splanhizomai*), in Luke’s Gospel: Jesus had compassion on the widow at Nain (7:11-17) and so did the Good Samaritan when he encountered

⁸⁹ Bailey, *Lost*, 142.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 143, emphasis in original.

⁹¹ The old sections in the cities of Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Damascus and Cairo for example reflect this reality (ibid).

⁹² The Mishnah illustrates the tight space by its Sabbath regulations on the movement of food; i.e., could not take food out of your house on Sabbath, but you could lean over and pass it from balcony to balcony (ibid, 139).

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 140.

⁹⁵ Compassion appears 12 times in the New Testament and only in the Gospels (Mark 1:41; 6:34; 8:2; 9:22; Matt 14:14; 15:32; 9:36; 18:27; 20:34; Luke 7:13; 10:33; 15:20). Apart from its use here in Luke and the parable of Matt. 18:27, it is used only of Jesus himself (Hultgren, *Parables*, 78).

the left-for-dead Jew (10:25-37), “so here compassion is central to the movement of the parable.”⁹⁶ The father’s compassion (v. 20) is contrasted with the elder brother’s anger (v. 28). Bailey notes that “in each parable this response comes from a person who is not expected to show compassion,”⁹⁷ and this scene of a compassionate father⁹⁸ is no exception, for compassion that compels a wealthy man to run in public dashes to pieces the image and expectations of a middle-eastern patriarch. Jesus’ presentation of a compassionate father taking back his youngest son brings us back to pivotal moments in the Prophets, where YHWH, unlike a human father, will not come in wrath⁹⁹ to receive his wayward son.

It is one thing for a father to be filled with compassion, it is another to run. Unpacking the significance of the running father is Bailey’s most valuable contribution to the historical-critical reading of this parable. His insights here are cited ubiquitously in all recent western commentaries. Middle-eastern men do not run because in order to do so they must lift up their long robes, exposing their legs, an act considered humiliating (and on par with western understandings of public nakedness). This can be seen in Isaiah 47:1-3¹⁰⁰ and other prohibitions in the both the Mishnah and other general Greek wisdom literature.¹⁰¹ Bailey notes that in

⁹⁶ Green, *Luke*, 582. Note the many other places where “father” is correlated to compassion in Luke’s Gospel: 6:36; 8:51; 9:42; 11:2, 11, 13; 12:30, 32; cf. 1:17 (ibid).

⁹⁷ Baily, *Lost*, 143.

⁹⁸ The etymology of “compassion” is significant. Both Greeks and Hebrews knew the abdomen as the seat of emotion, and “compassion” has its root in bodily “innards.” When middle-eastern villagers today hear of a story of suffering or an especially moving story, he uses an expression, “You are cutting up my intestines!” (Bailey, *Cross*, 68).

⁹⁹ “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboyim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man—the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath...” (Hos 11:8-9).

¹⁰⁰ “Go down, sit in the dust, Virgin Daughter of Babylon; sit on the ground without a throne, Daughter of the Babylonians. No more will you be called tender or delicate. Take millstones and grind flour; take off your veil. Lift up your skirts, bare your legs, and wade through the streams. Your nakedness will be exposed and your shame uncovered...” (Isa 47:1-3).

¹⁰¹ The Mishnah indicates that if a “bird crawls under your robes on the Sabbath, you may not catch it. The suggested alternative is to sit very quietly and wait for sundown and then seize the bird” (Bailey, *Lost*, 145).

regards to the prohibition of men running in public, the “Greek and Semitic worlds meet.”¹⁰² Sirach 19:30 states “a man’s manner of walking tells you what he is.” Aristotle stated that “a slow step is thought proper to the proud man, . . . and a rapid gait [is] the result of hurry and excitement.”¹⁰³ This prohibition still exists today throughout the Middle East as Eastern Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs, do not run in public.¹⁰⁴ Yet here, the only place in the New Testament, a father runs.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, in the Syriac and Arabic translations of this text, translators have used euphemisms for over a thousand years: “he went,” “presented himself,” “hastened,” “hurried,” etc.¹⁰⁶; “Such phrases were employed (almost as a conspiracy) to avoid the humiliating truth of the text—the father *ran!*”¹⁰⁷ The reason for the hesitancy is the allegorical connection between this father representing God, for how could God disgrace himself in this way?¹⁰⁸

But with robe in hand and bare legs exposed, the vicarious exchange of shame will be transformative: the son will be publicly liberated by the ignominious actions of his father—the *bona fide* prodigal.¹⁰⁹ Incredible, as all this is happening so that he will reach the son before the villagers see him. The father runs because “the son is in immediate danger from hostile villagers.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid; additionally see Prov 19:2 which states, “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way.”

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 146-47.

¹⁰⁵ “Run,” *trekhô*, occurs 12 times in the New Testament; the Garasene demoniac (Mark 5:6), the people run to bring the sick to Jesus (Mark 6:55; 9:15), a bystander at the cross runs to bring Jesus vinegar (Matt 27:48), excitement at the resurrection (Matt 28:8, Luke 24:12, John 20:2) etc.; only in the story of Zacchaeus do we have a “prominent” person running. But Zacchaeus is *protrekhô*, “running ahead” with confidence that no one will see him and hides in a tree. Mark 10:17 is the only exception of a prominent person running, yet even there the reason was because Jesus was “setting out for a journey” and the young man needed to catch him. However, in Luke 18:18 the portrayal of this same encounter has no mention of running (ibid, 144).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 146.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁸ Not until 1860, with the presentation of the Bustani, the *Van Dyck Arabic Bible*, does the father appear running (ibid).

¹⁰⁹ At this point, arguably, it may no longer be theologically correct to refer to the son as the “prodigal” since prodigal means “generously wasteful,” or “having spent everything.” The son spent everything in a financial way whereas the father is much more worthy of such a designation at this point, since he too spent money but more importantly he was generously wasteful with (his money and) his honour. However, for the sake of being consistent throughout the essay the designation will remain on the younger son.

He is not running to welcome his son, as western readings would have it. By hastening to the edge of the village the father pre-empts hostile village reaction, signalling by his kiss and embrace that the errant son is under his protection.”¹¹⁰

The text goes on to suggest that the father “falls on his neck and kisses him”; others have pointed out the significance of the climactic reconciliation scene in Luke 15:20 with the patriarchal narratives.¹¹¹ But Bailey names its subversive elements: the expectation would be for the prodigal to lay prostrate before his father kissing his feet rather than the father embracing him and kissing him. In a way, the connection to the patriarchal narratives is close at first glance, but in reality is incomparable. One can recall Jacob’s encounter with Esau, and how he bowed to the ground seven times (Gen 32:24-32). In the open country these brothers reconcile (with no one really important other than family and slaves to watch). Similarly, Joseph “fell upon” his brother Benjamin’s neck, wept and kissed him. But this happens in private, after the assurance of the remorse from the brothers.¹¹² “After stealing his nerves for the harsh treatment he knows awaits him in the village, suddenly the son sees his father running the gauntlet for him!”¹¹³

Baily also identifies the father’s actions as overtly maternal. In this type of situation it is the mother who is expected to run and kiss her son,¹¹⁴ not the boy’s father. Fathers were expected to “remain aloof in the house” (as mentioned above).¹¹⁵ This sensitive detail finds

¹¹⁰ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social*, 373.

¹¹¹ Lit. “fell on his neck” is found in the LXX of Gen 33:4; 45:14-15; 3 Macc 5:49; Acts 20:37; for “kissed him” see 2 Sam 14:33 (Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1089).

¹¹² Bailey, *Lost*, 146-47. For further comparisons and connections with patriarch narratives see Bailey’s *Jacob and the Prodigal*, where he finds some 53 key connections between the Jacob Narrative and the parable of the Prodigal.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 147.

¹¹⁴ There is a parallel story in Tobit 11:5-15 where the mother runs to her son (Marshall, *Restoration*, 20).

¹¹⁵ Bailey, *Lost*, 159.

affinity with Scott, as for him this is the second display of the overtly maternal theme expressed in the parable.¹¹⁶

A “costly demonstration of unexpected love”¹¹⁷ towards the younger son has occurred yet again. In the opening it occurred in private. Here the father makes public his costly love. Additionally a trilogy reading heightens the value of this observation: in the first parable the shepherd and the woman are responsible for loss, thus it should be incumbent upon them to search diligently. Here the father, having no responsibility for loss actively finds and reconciles his son through conspicuous self-abnegation. It is key to understand that western readings still miss the insurmountable cost to reconcile when it is assumed that running to embrace a wayward child would be considered a normal, parental, and more specifically, fatherly, response.¹¹⁸

With father and son now in climactic embrace, the rehearsed speech is altered. In 15:21 we see a verbatim repetition of the speech outline by the prodigal in 15:18-19a, but leaving out the request for servitude.¹¹⁹ What is critical for Bailey is that the father is not interrupting the son’s speech, as many western commentaries have suggested,¹²⁰ but rather the son is blindsided

¹¹⁶ “To kiss affectingly hints at the maternal theme... he will play the nourishing role” (Scott, *Hear*, 117). There are other hints of Jesus’ unique portrayal of a compassionate “motherly” father sprinkled throughout Scripture; as noted Father as metaphor appears in Isa 63:16 and 64:8, but also 66:10-14, where God compares himself to a mother. The absence of the mother in the story demonstrates how Jesus is following the practice of Isaiah, “the single metaphor preserves the unity of God and the finest qualities of father and mother are built into that unity” (Bailey, *Lost*, 159). Also, we need not look farther than 13:34 where Jesus speaks of himself as a hen longing to gather in her chicks. Johnson reminds us that Luke’s Gospel is eager to couple female image with male images for God; see 1:6-7; 2:36-38; 4:25, 38, 7:11-15, 36-50; 8:1-3, 19-21, 43-56; 10:38-42; 11:27; 13:10-17 (*Luke*, 236).

¹¹⁷ Bailey, *Lost*, 148.

¹¹⁸ “While it may be painted here in vivid colors, this father’s reaction, although it would not be that of every father, is an understandable parental reaction” (Nolland, *Luke*, 790).

¹¹⁹ Hultgren, *Parables*, 79.

¹²⁰ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1089. Marshall, *Luke*, 610; Hultgren, *Parables*, 79. Bock agrees with Bailey that the son at this point recognizes that his father has “gifted” him with new relationship, “but his characterization of the son is too negative. The parable describes a returned prodigal, a sinner found, which for Jesus is a positive, not a conniving, category” (*Luke*, 1314). Nolland states how repeating the repentance speech would “almost be more pressingly appropriate” post embrace—while omitting the request to be made a slave makes sense, as it would be “insult to his father’s love” to say it to him after their incredible embrace (*Luke*, 785). Nolland also sees a parallel in the parable of the tax collector and sinner in 18:13, “God have mercy on me, a sinner” in contrast with the elder brother in 15:29 (ibid). Ramsay takes up a position similar to Bailey’s, believing that the repetition of the son’s speech (vv. 18-19, 21) is about presentation: “Even after he is greeted warmly by his father, he comes out with (a mechanical repetition

by his father's love, leading him to repentance. After seeing his father "running the gauntlet for him" the prodigal is overrun with emotion, and can only offer the first part of his rehearsed speech.¹²¹ But this speech now has meaning. By leaving out the request for servitude and job training the son makes it clear that he has "no bright ideas for mending their relationship."¹²² From full on conniving, independence, and turning to himself, the son is overwhelmed by his father's display of costly grace, and "surrenders his plan to save himself and lets his father find him. He comes finally to accept being found"¹²³ as he turns to his father. Readers can be assured that the son chooses repentance at last.

Time does not lapse between the reception of the son and the commencement of the party, implying that servants joined father and son (along with the crowd) at the edge of the village. "The father wants witnesses because he is sending signal to the community. After his offer of costly love there can be no *qetsatsah* ceremony."¹²⁴

With the appearance of elaborate party attire Bailey sees the robe, ring, and sandals first as simply dressing the son up, so that that all visible signs of humiliation evaporate. Only secondary to this, however, do the material items presented to the son carry significance¹²⁵ which is interesting as western readings, not thinking in terms of honour and shame, see and evaluate the symbols first (instead of relationship first). That said, however, there are allusions here to the scenes with the patriarchs, and the uncomfortable hint that the youngest is getting what should

of) the memorized speech, exactly as he conceived it in the far country. It gives the appearance of a self-serving stratagem" (*Plots*, 40).

¹²¹ Bailey, *Jacob*, 109.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Bailey, *Lost*, 152. Against Rengstorf, I agree with Marshall and others who believe that the father obviously did not perform the *qetsatsah* ceremony. Rengstorf notes that the son's reinstatement (which we will soon witness) was lifting the "cutting off" of *qetsatsah*. But the way the father talks about his son in v. 24 and v. 32 (not to mention his actions all the way through the parable) makes it clear that the father refused to carry out this ceremony (Marshall, *Luke*, 606).

¹²⁵ Bailey, *Lost*, 154.

belong to the oldest. There is indeed, as Hultgren states, a “portentous mixture of signals going on.”¹²⁶

The son is given the finest clothes to wear, and as such the robe¹²⁷ given to him is *protos*, or *first* “clothes.”¹²⁸ Jesus’ listeners need not look far back to recall the obvious cases of poor parenting which incites fraternal feuding (and attempted fratricide) because the youngest brother was given the best robe and favoured by his father (the story of Joseph). Bizarrely enough, in Genesis 27:15 Rebekah presents Jacob, the younger son, with Esau’s robe. We also see notice the presentation of a robe when Joseph was “instated in high office” (Gen 41:42) and by Antiochus to Philip in Maccabees 6:15.¹²⁹ Many western scholars, however, equate the scene with Mordecai in Esther 6:6-11 as the more accurate parallel, where the significance is on “the man whom the king delights in honour.”¹³⁰

Additionally the son is presented with the “signet ring,” which can be used (ironically) to seal a will or a marriage contract. “Giving the prodigal a signet ring will be particularly galling to his older brother because this means that the prodigal is trusted with this seal. The rest of the estate is promised to the older son. What will the prodigal do with the power of this ring?”¹³¹ Hultgren indicates just how subversive this “granting of authority”¹³² to the younger son is, as the signet ring would fall to the oldest at the father’s death. Granting the ring indicates that the younger son “has in effect now supplanted his older brother.”¹³³ Nolland underscores a careful reading of these “signals,” stating that the younger brother is “not made the plenipotentiaries of

¹²⁶ Hultgren, *Parables*, 79.

¹²⁷ The robe is a “long, flowing” garment (*stolê*) used in Mark 16:5 of the angels and “glorified believers” in Rev 6:11 and pictures “formal attire” (Luke 20:46 uses it as scribal robes; Bock, *Luke*, 1314).

¹²⁸ As seen in Song 4:14; Ezek 27:22; Amos 6:6 (ibid).

¹²⁹ Hultgren, *Parables*, 79.

¹³⁰ Nolland, *Luke*, 785; Bailey also vouches for the Mordecai scene to be the closest parallel (*Cross*, 71).

¹³¹ Bailey, *Cross*, 71.

¹³² Hultgren, *Parables*, 79.

¹³³ Ibid.

his father as Joseph and Mordecai were made plenipotentiaries of the Pharaohs and king respectably.”¹³⁴

As for footwear, in the Mishnah we read that “when a son (in a strange land) goes barefoot, then he remembers the comfort of his father’s house.”¹³⁵ In the ancient world slaves were typically barefoot, thus sandals (or footwear) indicated freedom.¹³⁶ But more saliently, the very act of the son having sandals placed on his feet is an acknowledgement by his father’s servants that he now, also (or once again), is their master.¹³⁷

The son came home wishing to be treated only as a servant but instead all the visible signs—pronounced as they are—of personal freedom and belonging to family again have been bestowed up him.¹³⁸ The son is dressed like a son again, ready to eat, drink and be merry. The Father has received his son back, but his joy will be made complete when the community celebrates his son’s reincorporation. Thus the presence of the family’s friends at the party “would have signalled their acceptance of the father’s wish to bring his son back into the family and the village.”¹³⁹ Rather than a foodless rejection ritual, *qetsatsah*, the exact opposite takes place. Meat is a rare delicacy in the village and here a *fattened* calf will be killed, a significant statement on quantity—which will feed an upwards of 200 people¹⁴⁰—and quality.¹⁴¹ The father

¹³⁴ Nolland, *Luke*, 785. In a similar vein Bock agrees that the ring “may contain a seal and thus represent the son’s membership in the family, but stops short of being a transfer of authority” (*Luke*, 1314-15). I agree with Bock and the general sentiment of the other authors (Nolland, Bailey, etc.), as they have been careful not to repeat the problematic interpretations of the past that fall into an anti-Semitic (sometimes referred to as “replacement theology”) reading.

¹³⁵ Marshall, *Luke*, 609.

¹³⁶ This sentiment persisted through the modern era of slavery, as the old Afro-American spiritual expresses: “All of God’s chillum got shoes. When I get to heab’n I’m going to put on my shoes; I’m going to walk all ovah God’s heab’n” (Nouwen, *Prodigal*, 111).

¹³⁷ Hultgren, *Parables*, 79. Additionally the master of the house would keep sandals on while guests would remove theirs. Here we are seeing the symbols of “authority and possession as well as freedom” (Marshall, *Luke*, 610).

¹³⁸ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social*, 372.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Bailey, *Lost*, 155. However it is important to note that cooked meat spoils quickly, thus perhaps even the entire village was welcome (Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social*, 373).

is making a profound statement.¹⁴² They are eating the choice meal in contrast to the indigestible carb pods. The son's reality is filled with food and celebration juxtaposed to hunger, isolation and rejection.

This banquet is indeed unusual, even for Lucan banquet scenes.¹⁴³ "Its unusual circumstances are one more affirmation of the costly grace that the father is extending to his son,"¹⁴⁴ and in the process, for Bailey, Jesus is making a statement about the meaning of his table fellowship with sinners.¹⁴⁵ This celebration is happening because a son who was thought to be dead is actually alive, he was lost but now is found. The words of "lost" and "found" (vv. 6, 9, 32) on the lips of the father binds this parable to the previous two.¹⁴⁶

As for the father's pronouncement of his son being previously "dead," (*nekros*), there are three possible corresponding thoughts: morally dead (Eph 2:1), "thought to be dead," or hypothetically dead, as in "cut off from the family."¹⁴⁷ Bailey states that the son was "previously dead to his father's love."¹⁴⁸

¹⁴¹ The fattened calf is a grain fed animal producing the highest quality of meat. "Fattened" calf, *situeton*, is from the word grain, *sitos*; Bailey, *Cross*, 72; "Fattened" calf only appears here in the New Testament and in Judg 6:28 and Jer 26:21 in the LXX (Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1090).

¹⁴² When understood against the backdrop of the Old Testament instances where a calf is killed, this event is truly subversive. The Old Testament associates the killing of a calf with very important occasions, and was intended only for "kings, princes, and *very special guests*" (e.g., Abraham with three angelic visitors in Gen 18:7 and King Saul orders a servant to butcher for him in 1 Sam 28:24-25). The parable subverts this process in two ways: the person of lesser rank/ standing is always the one to butcher the calf, and the guests have never "offended the host." Even contemporaneously Bailey has never heard someone butcher a calf to celebrate (*Lost*, 156).

¹⁴³ In the previous chapter (14:15-35) Jesus challenged his listeners to invite the poor and the lame, those who will dishonour you, to such a party. Go back one more chapter (13:28-30) and Jesus uses a parable to illustrate just how few will enter the great banquet at the end of the age; but a similar theme emerges in both parables: that the first will be last, which is implicitly implied in this parable as well, no doubt. A chapter before that (12:13-21) a man is condemned for his "private self-celebration" (Nolland, *Luke*, 786), and what precipitated the telling of that parable by Jesus was a man demanding that Jesus make his other brother divide their inheritance. But in our parable, this party is being funded precisely by inheritance money, and which according to the father is a judicious way to spend money. Though the elder brother will soon contest this.

¹⁴⁴ Bailey, *Lost*, 156.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1090.

¹⁴⁷ Forbes, *Conflict*, 221.

¹⁴⁸ Baily, *Lost*, 159.

As for “alive,” (*ezêsen*), Bailey points out another gem of an eastern reading and a profoundly missed nuance in the West. This word “alive” functions as a prodigious statement on healed relationship. It is significant as the father is announcing that “for the first time, my son is alive!” “Had he not been ‘lost and dead’ from the start, he would never have made his cruel request, sold his portion and left home.”¹⁴⁹ Many modern Bible translations still read “this son of mine was dead and has come to life *again*.”¹⁵⁰ In all the nearly two thousand years of Syriac and Arabic translations of this text, the word ‘again’ has never appeared.”¹⁵¹

The Selfish *non*-Prodigal: O Brother Where Art Thou?

The world has turned upside-down (or right-side up?) for the younger son. He is no longer living as a dead bastard, orphaned in a foreign land. Up until recently he was a “dead man walking,” wishing for a stay of execution—now, exonerated. He is at home celebrating with his father and community. There is just one problem: the feast of a lifetime has started without the prodigal’s older brother.

The older son coming in from the field has theological significance for Bailey. It underscores relational distance as both sons are journeying home but severed relationship now only occurs with the oldest. For the older son to be hearing music and dancing indicates how this would be a “loud, boisterous, joyous celebration,”¹⁵² as the drum beat will be heard throughout much of the village. Pointing out the customs of the day it would be a natural reaction for any son (or sibling) immediately to welcome guests, exchange compliments and enter the banquet hall for such a grand feast, but especially the oldest son. He could excuse himself temporarily to

¹⁴⁹ Bailey, *Cross*, 73.

¹⁵⁰ Emphasis in original; *Ezêsen* also appears in v. 32, though here it is prefixed by *ana*; Bailey admits that “the connotation of ‘again’ is possible, but in Rom 7:9 and elsewhere the emphasis on ‘again’ is clearly lost and the word becomes merely a synonym of *zâô* (ibid).

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Bailey, *Lost*, 166.

change from field cloths to banquet clothes, but that would be the only reason he would not be conspicuously present. Instead of the typical eagerness of the oldest brother joyfully to take up his role at the banquet, the hearers of this parable will now see many instances of abdication and familial disrespect¹⁵³ (in addition to the lack of mediation between younger brother and family already witnessed in v. 12). The word used for elder brother, (*presbyteros*), is used for the elders of the people, usually used in connection with the scribes—it is unequivocal for Luke who the elder brother represents.¹⁵⁴

The older son calls on one of the *paidos* to get information. *Paidos* can be translated as “servant/ slave,” “young boy,” or “son.” Obviously he is not a son, and servants are busy throwing the party. Additionally a servant, when called on, would have to answer “My master has done so and so”... but the young boy says “your father has done so and so.” Young boys were not permitted to enter the banquet hall¹⁵⁵ and Luke uses *doulos* for “servant” twenty-seven times—the Arabic bible has always, throughout the centuries, translated it as young boy, and not servant. For Bailey the significance of this response coming from a young boy is that he is typifying the sentiment of the community at large. He is not providing a personal opinion.¹⁵⁶ Scott corroborates Bailey’s point of view: the servant is repeating what the audience already knows, which underscores the incredible love the father displays.¹⁵⁷ The young boy tells the elder brother that his father has “received him back,” a frequent rendering of *apolambano*, but is too passive to capture the father’s proactive pursuit. It can also be translated “he has gotten him

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Bailey, *Cross*, 78.

¹⁵⁵ “Young boy” is found in some key New Testament passages: the boy (*pais*) Jesus remains in the temple Luke 2:43; Herod orders the death of all male children (*paidas*) in Bethlehem (Matt 2:16); Jesus casts out a demon from a young boy (*pais*) in Matt 17:18; though servant is possible (Matt 8:6, 8, 13; 12:18; 14:2; Luke 1:54, 69; 7:7; Acts 4:25), it highly unlikely (ibid, 79).

¹⁵⁶ Bailey, *Lost*, 170.

¹⁵⁷ Scott, *Hear*, 119. Additionally for Scott there is a “delicious irony between ‘elder’ and ‘boy,’ not missed by the audience. The boy attempts to insert the perspective of ‘brother’ into the story, but the elder rejects it with ‘this son of yours.’ Finally, the father responds with an affectionate ‘dear child’” (ibid, 122).

back,” which Bailey prefers.¹⁵⁸ This boy recognizes the father’s proactive approach to restoring the prodigal to the family and the community.¹⁵⁹

The young boy goes on to state that “your brother” has been gotten back in “good health,” or “safe and sound.” Here again, the English rendering for Bailey is too weak and has missed something profound. The prodigal was received back in *hygiaino*, which affirms physical wellbeing, but in the LXX *hygiainô* is always translated as “shalom,” which includes physical, emotional, spiritual *and* relational wellbeing. If the older brother hears a report that his younger brother is back home in good (physical) health, he might race to the house and see what his brother’s lot is. The elder might be thinking, “Excellent, this licentious vagabond will be brought to justice!” What will his father do then? Bailey typifies his response with “make the irresponsible fool get a job and return the money before you let him in the door!”¹⁶⁰ But the younger son has been received back in shalom. Also, if we leave shalom out of the picture it “greatly cheapens the declared motive of the banquet.”¹⁶¹ This is not to celebrate a good health report, but renewed relationship. “If the father is reconciled to the prodigal and that reconciliation is being celebrated at the banquet, then the major decisions about the prodigal’s future status in the house are already made.”¹⁶²

The parable has again come full circle as here we are encountering a *presbyteros*’ refusal to take part in table fellowship. And much more than grumbling, soon we will see acrimonious accusations (vv. 29, 20 in contrast to v. 2). The Rabbis had a saying around shaming an equal in public: “It is better for a man that he should cast himself into a fiery furnace rather than that he

¹⁵⁸ Bailey, *Lost*, 167.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Bailey, *Cross*, 81.

¹⁶¹ Bailey, *Lost*, 170

¹⁶² Ibid.

should put his fellow to shame in public.”¹⁶³ But this is not a fellow, it is his father he is shaming in public. The refusal to go into the banquet is a greater insult to the father than the younger son’s wishing his death in the beginning—as the latter happened privately. It would be expected of a wealthy father to order the servants to detain the disobedient son and drag him by force to be locked up during the party while the “grim faced father”¹⁶⁴ would continue at the banquet, then order a beating once the party was over.

For the second time today the father is acting in painful self-emptying love, once again abnegating his honour and prestige while his eldest son, the one who is supposed to represent him, is abdicating his responsibilities at the party, in his family and the wider community.¹⁶⁵ In response, the father comes out of the party to call¹⁶⁶ his son back in to celebrate.¹⁶⁷ In a village quarrel each side will “play the audience, knowing everything said will be remembered and repeated to their shame or credit for a long time to come.”¹⁶⁸ At least 200 people are watching, in bewilderment.

At this point it is helpful to momentarily step outside the father-son encounter, looking back on the landscape of the two preceding parables which informs our trilogy reading. In the opening parable there were 99 sheep safe in the fold (symbolizing all those religious leaders who do not need to repent). That same audience was then reduced to nine coins (symbolizing all those religious leaders who do not need to repent). Here we move away from commodities and coins to life itself, two sons. One who began as lost and dead in the distant country—confirming the

¹⁶³ Ibid, 171.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 172.

¹⁶⁵ Green notes Bailey’s insightful work around the lack of the older brother’s presence at the feast (*Luke*, 584).

¹⁶⁶ Some versions in the East have translated “call” as the same word for “searching” in the case of the shepherd and the women to enhance a trilogy reading. But this is not in the Greek text (Bailey, *Lost*, 171).

¹⁶⁷ Bock notes how this scene demonstrates a “parable of reversal:” the lost son is now inside, while the elder brother (who is an insider) now complains as an outsider. The older son was obedient as a *doulos* with no reward while the prodigal who “wandered and squandered is given a huge celebration. What the younger son felt fortunate to become (a mere servant) the older brother resents” (*Luke*, 1317).

¹⁶⁸ Bailey, *Lost*, 173.

religious leaders' view of sin and salvation—but since has been found alive. Which implicitly leaves the other son (who ironically never left home) as not found. For Bailey, the religious leaders are now granted the opportunity to participate (as they are symbolized in this lost brother). They are invited into the parable to experience their “centre stage soliloquy,”¹⁶⁹ and with it, a direct challenge to their definition of sin and salvation.

Back to the celebration at hand. The Father goes out to “entreat” his rebellious son, not punish or challenge him. The Greek word for “call” is *kaleô*, but there are seven possible prefixes, altering the word substantially.¹⁷⁰ In v. 26 the elder brother “summoned” (*pros-kaleô*) the young boy, demanding information. Here the listener would expect the father, also, to summon (*pros-kaleô*) his son, or challenge him (*pro-kaleô*) or accuse him (*eg-kaleô*)—surely he must come down hard and fast, getting answers quick to silence his son as embarrassment over not entering the banquet is piling up. Instead the father humbly “appeals to,” “entreats” and “try’s to reconcile” (*para-kaleô*) with his disrespectful oldest son. “*para*” means “alongside” or “beside” (cf. our *parallel*), whereas *pros* denotes a “facing one another,” as the elder summoned the young boy, making him face himself as any inferior does to a superior; but here the father calls the son to “stand alongside,” to “look at the world from the father’s perspective.”¹⁷¹ This same reconciliation invitation is coming from a father who has every right to accuse, challenge,

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 181.

¹⁷⁰ *eg-kaleô*: “call against: or “accuse”

eis-kaleô: “call in” or “invite”;

epi-kaleô: “call by name”

pro-kaleô: “provoke” or “challenge”

pros-kaleô: “summon” or “call to oneself” as an officer would summon an orderly or a master a servant

syn-kaleô: “call together”

para-kaleô: “appeal to” or “entreat” or “try to reconcile” (Bailey, *Cross*, 83); Johnson has a similar take on the significance of *parakaliô*, from “exhort,” “plead,” or “comfort” (*Luke*, 238).

¹⁷¹ Bailey, *Cross*, 83; Paul uses *para-kaleô* in his famous call for reconciliation in 2 Cor. 5:20, “we implore (*para-kaleô*) you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (ibid).

and tie up his son during the party. The elder son thinks both his father and brother owe him something, when in reality he needs to be forgiven by both of them.¹⁷²

As the younger son had a rehearsed speech to present to his father before their radical embrace, so too here there is a good chance the older brother has been waiting to say what he is about to say for a long time. The hearers of the parable would note the disrespect of the older son's omission of the title "father" when addressing him; he has always been addressed respectfully as "father" up until this point. This reflects "bad manners and borders on insult."¹⁷³ He prefaces his comments about serving in slavery by saying "Look!" which really means "Look, you!"¹⁷⁴ "Served in slavery" is an option the prodigal never considered—he considered being a craftsman (*misthios*), but here the oldest son compares himself the lowest type of slave (*doulos*).¹⁷⁵

Here it is noteworthy to include Lahurd's contribution as she presents the contemporary voice of Arabic women, giving middle-eastern insight toward cultural norms found in the world of Luke 15 (and even more fascinating for our purposes she is testing many of Bailey's observations with her participants). As such, she offers a different conclusion with respect to the older son's statement about serving in slavery for his father: it is normal for older children to often "sacrifice their own ambitions"¹⁷⁶ taking responsibility for property, family business, parents, etc.: "Younger siblings can 'play around,' get everything they want from the parents,

¹⁷² We see this in the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

¹⁷³ Bailey, *Lost*, 175. Nolland disagrees. Not addressing his father should not be over-interpreted and is "more to point up the contrast with the ways of his younger sibling than to express fully the attitude he has adopted over the years or the nature of the service he has provided to the father (cf. the use of the very same verb in the heated language of Gen. 31:41). It is important not to Paulinize this language (note the very positive use of the cognate *doulos* "slave" in Luke 2:29)" (*Luke*, 787). To illustrate the obedience of a son to his father's commands note Prov 2:1, 3:1; Sir 3:1 (ibid).

¹⁷⁴ Keller notes how a modern day equivalent of the son saying "Look, you!" would be writing a "humiliating tell-all memoir" that destroys the reputation and career of his father (*Prodigal*, 27).

¹⁷⁵ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1091.

¹⁷⁶ Lahurd, *Women*, 67.

and often ‘get away with a lot’ while the older siblings are ‘killing themselves and seldom getting ‘good words’ from the parents.’¹⁷⁷ Thus for Lahurd “serving in slavery” language is not as indicative of poor (perceived or actual) relationship with one’s father, but of the work load that the oldest child carries.

Whichever view the reader takes forward at this point, the son’s statement about serving in slavery is really a *non sequitur*: this is a wealthy family (property owners, prime beef, slaves, space to host 200 hundred people, festive robes and goats available for meals) where an older son would not have performed any real “work in the fields.” Landowners with servants never do manual labour themselves. As the prodigal made his way home the older son “has been seated respectfully in the shade somewhere, supervising the laborers.”¹⁷⁸

Furthermore the father in this parable has demonstrated that he has never been about a master/ servant relationship. A master does not give inheritance to a servant, would not shame himself for a slave and no slave would challenge a master in this way. Earlier we were reminded that the older son received his (two-thirds) share of the inheritance (v. 13), and with it the right of possession. Ever since then it has been up to him to maintain the estate in a way that best benefits him. This is a smokescreen and a contradiction. He has not slaved for anyone.

Yet he vehemently declares that “I have never disobeyed any of your commandments!,” which, for Hultgren, makes a “not-so veiled reference to the Pharisees and scribes present.”¹⁷⁹ A phrase we could also entertain coming from the lips of the 99 righteous who need not repent. Additionally, “command” can also mean “commandment,” and this is the case for both Hebrew

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Bailey, *Cross*, 78.

¹⁷⁹ Hultgren, *Parables*, 81. Additionally Fitzmyer states that this “alludes as well to the loyal service of keeping the commandments on the part of Jesus’ critics” (*Luke*, 1091). Johnson agrees that “the elder son is like righteous Jews who do not need repentance” (*Luke* 238).

and Aramaic. Thus, for Hultgren, its double meaning at this point in the story would be impossible to miss.¹⁸⁰

Not getting “even a goat” is an “accusation of favoritism”¹⁸¹—everyone listening knows the son will take possession of what is left at his father’s death. The brother is critical of the prodigal, but more insidiously here he is showing disdain for not being able to dispose of the assets the way he wants to. His younger brother did, and “killed” his father in the process. To the listeners’ surprise, they probably see the flagrant request of death here too. “Ah! So does he *also* want his father dead?”¹⁸²

“Why can’t I celebrate with my friends,” expresses how those present are not *his* friends—he does not need his family to celebrate with. The desire to celebrate with friends is also symptomatic of unhealthy relationship. Green notes how the elder son “has apparently lived in isolation from his father.”¹⁸³ Wishing to celebrate with friends rather than his father (or family) illustrates “breaching the kinship values operative in his world.”¹⁸⁴

Listening between the lines the hearer cannot help but pick up on the need for recognition; “Why don’t you recognize me, and my righteousness?!” The need for recognition and exalting oneself was already condemned by Jesus in a banquet parable in 14:7-14, will be condemned yet again in another parable in 17:7-10 (ironically in a slave-master example), and carries strong primordial and fraternal connections to our parable.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁰ “Never have I disobeyed your commands” is virtually identical with that of Deut 26:13 in the LXX (Hultgren, *Parables*, 81). Bock notes that historically this has been the case for this verse, the disdain for the Pharisee’s insatiable appetite for obeying all the commands, Luke 18:11-12, 21, Phil 3:6; but Bock also notes the absence of rebuke by the father for this claim (*Luke*, 1317-18). This is an example where an unhealthy Jew/ Gentile hermeneutic could lead to an anti-Semitic reading.

¹⁸¹ Bailey, *Lost*, 177.

¹⁸² Ibid, emphasis in original.

¹⁸³ Green, *Luke*, 585.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Note that the need for recognition was evident in the first account of murder in the Bible, fratricide, where the oldest son kills his younger brother (Gen 4:2-8).

Outraged, the eldest son cannot entertain fraternal ties, but harshly “un-brothers” his brother. He speaks of him as “this son of *yours*” (in contrast to the young boy’s “*your* brother” in v. 27, and the father’s “*your* brother” in v. 32). Bock notes that “your son,” “*this* one,” (*houtos*), represents contempt in Matt 20:12, Luke 18:11, Acts 17:18, but more importantly will reappear as Jesus is accused by the assembly of the Jews before Pilate in Luke 23:2, and while crucified in v. 35.¹⁸⁶ Also noteworthy is that the crafted circumlocution is similar to the lawyer in the parable of the Good Samaritan.¹⁸⁷

Though we have unravelled many of the accusations of the older brother towards his father thus far, his rant now exposes one of the most fascinating elements in the entire parable: the insidious list of sins trumpeted by the older brother. The brother could not know what the prodigal was doing. We observed earlier how contemptuous pigs were to the Jews in Jesus’ day. If the older brother was really the knowledge keeper of his younger brother, it would be logical that contact with pigs would be at the top of his “list of sins.”¹⁸⁸ But chiefly on the list, however, is the prostitutes charge. Again, this exchange between father and son is being carefully overheard by those attending the celebration. If those in attendance believe this, no one would give their unmarried daughter to the prodigal.¹⁸⁹ It will soon be discovered that the prodigal lived among Gentiles and lost his inheritance among them—but here, his brother is insinuating that he slept with Gentile prostitutes.¹⁹⁰ The lapidary label of prostitutes would have consequences in yet another way:

¹⁸⁶ Bock, *Luke*, 1318.

¹⁸⁷ At the end of the parable, when Jesus asks “which of the three... was a neighbor to the one who fell into the hands of robbers?” The lawyer responded “the one who took pity on him” (Bailey, *Lost*, 178).

¹⁸⁸ Bailey, *Lost*, 179.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Hultgren corroborates this claim, as “whores or harlots or prostitutes” in English does not capture the derogatory meaning of this accusation. He points out the word play: the accusation is that he “had sex with Gentile whores, pigs!” (*Parables*, 81). Bailey states the profundity of sleeping with foreign women in that “Villagers from Spain to

If he can make the promiscuous label stick he can destroy the younger brother's place in the family and probably in the village as well. The fear would be that down the road 'sons' of the prodigal might show up claiming family and village rights and chaos would ensue. If the older son's label sticks, therefore, the younger son would have to leave the village for good and no progeny of his could ever return.¹⁹¹

Up until this point the younger brother's failure was framed in familial and economic terms; "now the potential for sexual shame is introduced"¹⁹² by the older brother. The format of the story has come full circle. Previously we saw the legal and familial customs being desecrated by the younger son, and then noted how the text evocatively corroborates these realities. Here again we have the same phenomenon, though this time with greater precision as the narration of the prodigal's actions in v. 13 will be expounded upon by the older brother's commentary in v. 30: "In the elder son's summation of his kid brother's behavior," notes Ramsey, "every element in the sentence is given a sinister nuance."¹⁹³

In v. 13 we are told that the prodigal:

1. *scattered* (*diaskorpizô*) 2. *his* (own) *inheritance* (*ousia*) 3. *in wild living* (*zon asotos*).

In v. 30 the older brother states of his younger brother (to his father) that he:

1. *devoured* (*katavrochthise*) 2. *your life* (*bios*) on 3. *harlots* (*pornon*).¹⁹⁴

Iraq have killed for centuries over such accusations." Centuries before, Nehemiah forbade the marrying of foreign wives (13:23-27; (*Lost*, 179). The charge with harlots echoes Prov 29:3 (Bock, *Luke*, 1319).

¹⁹¹ Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "A Dysfunctional Family and Its Neighbours," in *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today*, ed. V. George Shillington (Edinburgh T & T Clark, 1997), 161.

¹⁹² Lahurd notes that *pornon*, "prostitutes" is the only female character in the parable. The Arab culture around honour and shame—a zero sum culture where "honor gained is always honor taken from another" shows how desperate the brother was to introduce sexual shame. Also noteworthy is that the women interviewed agreed that "Arab culture double standards would more strongly condemn a daughter who became a prostitute than a son who went to prostitutes, the prodigal's sexual behaviour would, if true, nonetheless constitute the worst shame that he could cause his family" (*Women*, 69).

¹⁹³ Ramsay, *Plots*, 36-37.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Several observations must be made: first, the narrator's account "utilized a verb [*diaskorpizō*] more suggestive of wasteful, imprudent dissipation than of the greedy consumption which the elder brother alleges."¹⁹⁵ Secondly the narrator states explicitly that the property (*ousia*) that was being scattered was legitimately the prodigal's, not his *father's*. For the eldest to use the term *bios* in his accusatory remark seems like an "attempt to employ a word which will make the father feel that he should recognize his own life has been damaged."¹⁹⁶ But this caustic statement is nonsensical: if the living still belongs to the father (as the older brother indicates) he could not have accepted his two thirds portion in the beginning (v. 12).¹⁹⁷ All in all, where the narrator was opaque about the prodigal's activities, the older brother pinpoints his actions in the most degrading way thought possible to the Jewish imagination (degrading to father, sons, and community).

It would be no stretch of the imagination for listeners of the parable to entertain a palpable sense of embarrassment that the guests must feel for the father, for the family. No doubt, they have been insulted too; for the older brother to attack the younger brother whose "reincorporation has been recognized by both father and attending villagers,"¹⁹⁸ he insults the latter as well.

Not only does his oldest son treat his father with no respect, but the flagrant shouting about having sex with Gentile "pigs" could be the nail in the coffin for any honour left in this (dysfunctional) family. It is clear that the older brother wants to cut off the purposes of the

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. Green, however, reminds the reader that "the older son is only stating what might otherwise have been taken for granted—namely, the association of prostitutes with celebrative meal settings in the Greco-Roman world" (*Luke*, 584). At great length Holgate's work expounds upon the common link between covetousness and immorality in Jewish, Greco-Roman and early Christian literature (*Prodigality*, 142-48).

¹⁹⁷ Bailey states how the listeners would have expected the older son to state, "No, no, father, may you live a hundred years! I will never accept my portion of the inheritance while you are in good health with many years (God willing) to live" (*Lost*, 178).

¹⁹⁸ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social*, 373.

celebration, namely, *shalom* between prodigal and community. He is screaming to his father and the community that this “son of yours” is clearly the rebellious son of Deut 21:18-21; “He deserves to die, not to be treated as the one the king delights in!”

Furthermore the elder brother charges his father with “killing the fattened calf for *him*,” assuming the banquet was for his younger brother, the prodigal. By and large western commentators have implicitly and explicitly agreed to this statement made by the older brother. But for Bailey, and for a middle-eastern contextual reading, this is a misread. As seen earlier when this parable is heard as a trilogy, the momentum in the parable is consistent all the way through: as the friends came to celebrate the success of the shepherd and woman’s “costly efforts”¹⁹⁹ (because the shepherd’s party is not in honour of the lost sheep, nor is the woman’s celebration in honour of her coin) so to “this party is taking place because the father recovered his son with shalom”²⁰⁰ As he complains, he misunderstands his father’s implied search for him also.²⁰¹

Though Jesus’ listeners would have identified many flaws in the older brother, they could also appreciate his tantalizing and potential economic sacrifice. On the other hand, the contemporary western reader without access to first century middle-eastern customs may be unable to appreciate the true cost for the older brother to celebrate his younger brother’s return, because he does have good grounds to be angry. “For the older son to relinquish his objects and join in the feast of forgiveness would be costly for him,” notes Marshall, “for it could require of him a willingness to share his goods with his penniless brother.”²⁰² The prodigal already lost one-third of the family estate, and even though his father “could confer on him the symbols of

¹⁹⁹ Bailey, *Lost*, 180.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 181.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Marshall, *Restoration*, 24.

forgiveness and familial esteem”²⁰³ he could not procure additional land. What remained now belonged to his elder brother. “The prodigal’s inheritance was gone for good, unless his upright brother would graciously choose to give him a stake in what he possessed.”²⁰⁴

Self/ess Prodigal: a Father’s Response (Take II)

After the son’s pernicious soliloquy, in contrast to the prodigal’s repentance speech (according to the western reading), the father addresses him in a way that shows “considerable psychological sensitivity.”²⁰⁵ The word for son, (*hyios*), appears eight times in the parable, but here “my beloved boy” (*teknon*) is used.²⁰⁶ Anger is exchanged for grace as this close-to-home-and-alive son seems lifeless and lost. For Scott, addressing his son as “my beloved boy” again illustrates that the maternal theme is represented.²⁰⁷

The father gently reminds the son that all his hard work has really been serving himself, as the estate had been his ever since his brother left. Even if he misses out on his father’s gracious response, at least he does not have to fear further inheritance loss. By saying “all that is mine is yours” he is reassuring the older son that he need not worry about additional resources going to be given to his brother. He can enter the banquet hall because “*all* his rights and privileges are intact.”²⁰⁸

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Johnson, *Luke*, 238.

²⁰⁶ Bailey, *Lost*, 183. Bock also notes the use of *teknon* in Matt 21:28, Mark 10:24, Luke 2:48 and 16:25 (*Luke*, 1319). In the parable of the two brothers in Matt 21:28 one son did not listen to his father at first, but then proved to be obedient son “who did what the father wanted” (in contrast to the son who said yes to his father’s orders but did not carry them out). It is interesting to note that Jesus was also telling this parable to the religious leaders, and also used it to illustrate that “tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you,” a very similar thrust and purpose to our parable.

²⁰⁷ “A subterranean movement in the story has associated nourishment with a maternal theme. That theme resurfaces in the final address, for the father dismisses the legal title and deals with his sons as children. The kissing and embracing of the younger son signals the same function as addressing the elder as child. The father combines in himself the maternal and paternal roles. As a father he is a failure, but as a mother he is a success” (Scott, *Hear*, 122).

²⁰⁸ Bailey *Lost*, 184, emphasis in original. To the older brother’s credit, though, I still wonder how the signet ring could not be a terrifying aspect to all of this as the prodigal is bestowed with unchecked power.

The father allows these incriminating words about himself to pass without comment, but not so with references to the relationship to his younger brother, as the father correctively says “*your* brother” in v. 32.²⁰⁹ In the face of death, that of being “de-fathered” he responds not to his own needs but to that of his sons, and their need for reconciliation. The only authority he is possessing right now is, as Nouwen thoughtfully articulates, the “authority of compassion.”²¹⁰ Previously he had been “de-fathered,” but did not face one son “un-sonning” himself from the other. And the father’s celebration is inseparable from his insistence on the older son recognizing that this is *your* brother; it is for *your* brother that “we had to celebrate!”

Green notes the imperative, *edei*, “*had* to celebrate” is the clause that “employs one of Luke’s favorite terms for divine necessity.”²¹¹ Most recently this construction was used in 13:16 when Jesus expressed the need to liberate the daughter of Abraham who was bound by Satan.²¹² The father is pointing out to the oldest son that the banquet is not just a celebration that the son is home, but “already of his transformation.”²¹³ In vv. 24 and 32 the father “underscores the *changed* standing of his wayward son.”²¹⁴

After this closing statement by the father, with eyes of everyone transfixed on this scene outside the banquet, the older brother’s response is pivotal. We can be sure that Jesus’ listeners are in dire straits to know what and who will have the last word. But before that is possible, the ending (?) of the parable is interrupted by the curtain call. Bailey notes that this “critical tension”²¹⁵ found at the closing of this parable is not unique to Lucan parables.²¹⁶ In this parable

²⁰⁹ Bailey, *Lost*, 188.

²¹⁰ Nouwen, *Return*, 95.

²¹¹ See 2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 11:42 et al; Green, *Luke*, 586.

²¹² Johnson, *Luke*, 239.

²¹³ Marshal, *Restoration*, 22.

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, emphasis in original.

²¹⁵ Bailey, *Lost*, 192.

²¹⁶ In 7:36-50 the “righteous” are upset that Jesus is welcoming and dining with sinners. Jesus’ reply is that if he has to distance himself from sinners, he should also do so from Simon, because the sinner whom Simon despises is

the critical tension also demonstrates literary structural brilliance as the lack of reconciliation between father and oldest son in the closing scene abandons what could have been a beautiful chiasmic structure.²¹⁷

It seems like Luke 15 could end with a closing similar to that of the Good Samaritan. Instead of the emphasis on the neighbor, Jesus could ask, “Who was a true brother to the younger son?” anticipating the answer, “The father!” followed by Jesus saying, “Then go and do likewise—be that elder brother who repents and rejoices!”

Luke’s Gospel as a whole has been called the “Gospel for the outcast,”²¹⁸ and at times chapter 15 itself has been tagged with the same designation. Though true, that title marginalizes the older brother. Other titles have suggested “God’s joy at finding the lost,”²¹⁹ but this also misses the lack of joy at the banquet as the elder son is yet to be celebrated. Bailey suggests another: “the offer of costly love to *all*,”²²⁰ a title that fully encapsulates “insider and outsider, found or not-yet found, at the edge of the town or the edge of the house—the love of God, like the love of the father, comes in self-emptying humiliation to all in the person of Jesus.”²²¹

Boys Will Be Boys: Reflecting on the Brothers

If we are to fully utilize the evocative imagery provided by the middle-eastern reading and locate this parable in its first century socio-historical context, where demanding inheritance and publicly shaming one’s father is synonymous to wishing his death, then both sons have attempted murder, or patricide to be more precise, though the blood on the hands of the older

“making up for his (Simon’s) mistakes,” covering up for his lack of honour (Bailey, *Lost*, 192). This is also seen in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:9-14) and the encounter with Zacchaeus (19:1-10; Bailey, *Poet*, 1-21). In an allegorical sense it is quite simple to see these similar dynamics represented between the prodigal (“sinful women,” “tax collector,” and Zacchaeus) and his older brother (Simon, the Pharisee, the grumbling crowd of religious leaders).

²¹⁷ Bailey, *Poet*, 142-206.

²¹⁸ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1084.

²¹⁹ Bailey, *Lost*, 192.

²²⁰ *Ibid*, emphasis in original.

²²¹ *Ibid*.

brother is greater. The younger son's action figuratively drove a knife into his father's back, and shockingly the elder should have pulled it out—imploing his younger brother to reconcile and repent (as his father did to him in v. 28)—but does not. Rather he plunges it deeper, twisting it.

In the first scene we have a killer, with actions pre-meditated no doubt, but equally as lurid, lurking in the shadows is the silent accomplice. In the second round of attempted murder we have an accomplice/*ess* killer who no doubt had been plotting this out too (premeditated as well). The younger son set out to kill only his father, but his older brother is guilty on two accounts of manslaughter, patricide *and* fratricide.

But more remarkable than simply recognizing the elder brother as sinning more gravely than the younger—a total subversion of the western typical telling of this parable where the younger son is “the bad one”²²²—is that the father has defied death. Compassion curtailed cardiac arrest. Though dishonoured, shamed, and “killed” by both sons, the father did not retaliate. Had he performed *qetsatsah* with the younger son or excommunicated the older son, we know that that anger would also be synonymous with wishing death in return.²²³ That anger would have led to familialcide. To the contrary, to the degree that the younger son harmed his father, the father is redemptive to his older son.²²⁴ Love has covered a multitude of sins (1 Pet

²²² What the work of Keller (Prodigal) and Geddert (*Priorities*) adequately communicates.

²²³ From the lips of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount we are told that unchecked anger is synonymous with murder Matt 5:22.

²²⁴ Forbes notes that this story deviates from the standard “Jewish tale” where the younger son is “the object of favour,” i.e., Cain and Able, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, etc. (*Conflict*, 223). Scott states that “The parable’s scandal derives from its subversion of the mytheme’s power to resolve between the chosen and the rejected... just as the Samaritan saves the Jew in the ditch, so the elder son inherits all. The audience must come to terms with one who in the myth was rejected and in parable inherits all” (*Hear*, 125). Forbes is right to critique Scott that this parable does not “stress favour shown to the younger over and against the elder,” as the father loves both sons equally (*Conflict*, 223). Against Scott, I agree with Forbes that the younger brother “is not always the rogue” (e.g., Abel, Joseph, David, Solomon). Scott does, however, illustrate how pervasive the favored son theme is in the New Testament, i.e., Gentile inclusion in Rom 9, (cf. Gen 21:12, Rom 9:7; Gen 25:23, Rom 9:12) and Gal 4:21-31 (“Now we, brethren, like Isaac are children of promise,” 4:28) and in the early church, where “early Christians used this mytheme to understand their own chosen states against those who had been previously chosen. The Christian community used the parable A Man Had Two Sons to reflect on its self-understanding. Naturally they identified themselves with the younger son, and faithless Israel with the elder” (*Hear*, 124).

4:8). In relation to both sons we have a death defying *prodigal* father. As the father had to celebrate over the alive and found-ness of his thought-to-be-dead-and-lost son, so to the listener and reader, then and now, must celebrate how this magnanimous father overcame death.

III. Critical Assessment

This essay has demonstrated the inexorable connection among my three objectives: inclusive look at all actors, bringing the middle-eastern interpretation in dialogue with the western interpretation, and a hermeneutic focusing on relationship. Pulling on one of these threads, i.e., middle-eastern context, we find interconnected the focus on relationship and the necessity of all actors. One cannot pull one of the threads without uniform movement of the others (i.e., one cannot address relationship without substantially unpacking middle-eastern customs to define relationship). This same interconnectedness applies to an inclusive look at all actors as well.

Though both eastern and western eyes utilize Jewish sources in their research, only Bailey uses—and relies heavily on—Syriac and Arabic translations of the New Testament and the subsequent Syriac and Arabic commentaries, which is a significant factor in establishing his interpretive position(s). Without the excavating work on first century customs that Bailey has provided we would be at a loss to experience the scandal within the parable: the running father, the abdication of the elder brother's role in family conflict, his role at banquets, etc. and the renewed (and more elastic) definition of repentance: accepting that you are lost. Bailey's work has made a remarkable impact on interpreting this parable and has indeed uncovered the scandal of the Gospel for western (and eastern) ears of any age, but especially ears for today: the cost to be reconciled—for both law-keepers and law-breakers—comes at a tremendous price.

There are, however aspects to Bailey's work that seem forced, where he is "trying to have it both ways," i.e., that the younger son never broke any rules (only relationship), but I would argue that wishing his father's death is more grave an offense than broken rules. On the one hand Bailey does creatively illustrate how the prodigal was more conniving and sinister in his actions than previously thought of (i.e., delayed repentance), but on the other hand, Bailey makes the prodigal look too spotless, too innocuous, only breaching relationship and not rules. By producing a more spotless image of the prodigal, Bailey actually lessens the scandal, the embrace of the running father and his son in their climactic reconciliation scene.

Bailey's trilogy reading of the parable does unravel completely new concepts, such as that a banquet is thrown in honour of the father's costly efforts (just as parties were thrown for the shepherd and woman's costly efforts). Though creative, I struggle with its practical implications: I cannot picture the father throwing a party to honour himself first, and secondly to welcome the prodigal.

This essay has also confirmed that the historical-critical approach still has its place, and can make convincing arguments to counter Bailey's conclusions, i.e., seeing the older brother's accusation of promiscuous behaviour as a completely fabricated reality. There must be some room to read between the lines on this, and Fitzmyer's solid work does just that, leaving me incredulous to Bailey's reading here. In different examples we observed other contextual voices from the Middle-East to corroborate this point, and calling Bailey on his embellishment of certain points, i.e., "Slaving for you" as not indicative of a servant-master mentality but rather the sober reality of the workload an oldest son carries in the Middle East (historically and contemporarily).

The middle-eastern contextual reading does bring significant balance to the story. Knowing the customs leaves the western reader much less able to “other-ify” the older brother, viewing him as a callous and chronic complainer (for no good reason). That is easy to do when we do not understand how costly it would be for him to reconcile (both economically and familiarly). Through Bailey and Scott’s work the reader also gleans the implied maternal care of the father’s actions.

The goal of this paper was to watch the dialogue and interaction unfold between a middle-eastern contextual reading and the historical-critical approach. Both readings have brought out the best within each other, stretching the modern interpreter’s previously navigated topography of the text and of its context. This combined interpretive method provides a rich topography to the parable, without which it would leave Christian readers missing many of the nuances, challenges, surprises and scandals throughout.

Works Cited

- Bailey, Kenneth E. *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1992.
- *Jacob and the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003.
- *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, 1980. Reprint (combined edition), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.
- *The Cross and the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of the Middle East*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005.
- Blomberg, Craig L. *Interpreting the Parables*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990.
- Bock, Darrell L. *Luke: 9:51-24:53*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1996.
- Fritzmyer, Joseph A. *The Gospel according to St. Luke X-XXIV*. AB. New York: Doubleday, 1981.
- Forbes, Greg. "Repentance and Conflict in the Parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32)." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42, no. 2 (1999): 211-229.
- Geddert, Tim. "The Parable of the Prodigal: Priorities." *Direction* 24, no. 1 (1995): 29-36.
- Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke. New International Commentary on the New Testament Series*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.
- Harrill, J Albert. "The Indentured Labor of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:15)." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 no. 4 (1996): 714-717.
- Holgate, David A. *Prodigality, liberality and meanness: The prodigal son in Greco-Roman Perspective*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.
- Hultgren, Arland J. *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000.
- Jeremias, Joachim. *The Parables of Jesus*. New York: Scribner's, 1963.
- Johnson, Timothy. *The Gospel of Luke*. Sacra Pagina. Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991
- Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*. New York, NY: Dutton, 2008.
- LaHurd, Carol Schersten. "Rediscovering the Lost Women in Luke 15." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24 no. 2 (1994): 66-76.

- Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. USA: Fortress, 1992.
- Marshall, Christopher D. "Offending, restoration, and the law-abiding community: restorative justice in the New Testament and in the New Zealand experience." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27 no. 2 (2007): 3-30.
- Marshall, Howard. *The Gospel of Luke*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978.
- Nolland, John. *Luke 9:21-18:34*. Word Biblical Commentary. Waco: Thomas Nelson, 1993.
- Nouwen, Henry J. *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. New York, NY: Image Books, 1994.
- Ramsey, George W. "Plots, Gaps, Repetitions and Ambiguity in Luke 15." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 17 no. 1 (1990): 33-42.
- Rohrbaugh, Richard L. "A Dysfunctional Family and Its Neighbours," in *Jesus and His Parables Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today*, ed. V. George Shillington. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997.
- Scott, Bernard Brandon. *Hear then the parable: a commentary on the parables of Jesus*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989.
- Sellew, Phillip. "Interior Monologue as Narrative Device in the Parables of Luke." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 11 no. 2 1992: 239-253.
- Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996.
- Wright, N.T. *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God. Vol. 2*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

Additional Resources

- Alles, Tyrell J, "The narrative meaning and function of the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)." PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2008.
- Bailey, Kenneth E. "The Pursuing Father." *Christianity Today* 42, no. 12 (1998): 34-40.
- Beeck, Frans Jozef van. "Lost and Found in Luke 15: Biblical Interpretation and Self-Involvement." *Expository Times* 114, no. 12 (2003): 399-404.

Carlston, Charles E. "Reminiscence and Redaction in Luke 15:11-32." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 no. 3 (1975): 368-390.

Crossan, John Dominic. *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*. Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1992.

Evans, Craig. *Luke*. New International Biblical Commentary. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990.

Fleer, David. "Preaching as conformity to scripture's language: the case of the elder brother and the party." *Restoration Quarterly* 43 no. 4 (2001): 253-266.

Herzog, William R. *Parables as subversive speech: Jesus as pedagogue of the oppressed*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

Huffstetler, Joel W. *Boundless Love: The Parable of the Prodigal Son and Reconciliation*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2008.

Plummer, Alfred. *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*. New York: Scribner, 1896.

Schottroff, Luise. *The Parables of Jesus*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006.

Trench, R. C. *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord*. London: John W. Parker, 1857.

Wendland, Ernst R. "Finding Some Lost Aspects of Meaning in Christ's Parables of the Lost—and Found (Luke 15)" *Trinity Journal*, 17 no. 1 (1996): 19-65.

Wright, N.T. *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999.