

## REPENTANCE AND CONFLICT IN THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SON (LUKE 15:11–32)

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The theme of the parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin continue in the parable of the Lost Son, though now we have a longer, more personal story with three main characters. In this parable, the younger of two sons becomes unsettled with life on the family estate and requests his share of the inheritance, only to squander it recklessly in a foreign land. Upon his return home he is welcomed and received by his father, who then orders a communal feast. This arouses the indignation of the elder brother, who resents such treatment of one so undeserving. The parable ends with the matter of the elder son's attitude unresolved.

Although commentators have been divided as to whether the father, the younger son or the elder son is the pivotal player in the story, all three characters play a crucial role and contribute to the overall interpretation of the parable.<sup>1</sup> There also continues to be disagreement over the interpretation of the parable, particularly as to whether the first section deals with the theme of repentance or not, and whether in the second part the elder son acts as a referent for the Jewish religious leaders. The aim of this paper is to analyze the story bearing these two issues in mind.

As stated above, the parable falls logically into two parts. Verses 11–24 deal with the father and the younger son, while verses 25–32 focus on the father and the elder son. Although most regard the parable as authentic, J. T. Sanders has argued that part two is a Lukan adaptation aimed against the Pharisees and constructed to form a link with chapter 16.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Drury and Schottroff, while defending the unity of the parable, regard

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<sup>1</sup> Those arguing for the father as the main player include: R. Pesch, "Zur Exegese Gottes durch Jesus von Nazaret: Eine Auslegung des Gleichnisses vom Vater und den beiden Söhnen (Lk 15,11–32)," *Jesus: Ort der Erfahrung Gottes* (ed. B. Casper; Freiburg: Herder, 1976) 179–189; R. H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 122; J. R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 152; L. T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina 3; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991) 240; G. W. Ramsey, "Plots, Gaps, Repetitions and Ambiguity in Luke 15," *PRS* 17 (1990) 41; K. E. Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992) 109–193. B. B. Scott considers the younger son to be the focus (*Hear Then the Parable* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989] 105), while C. H. Talbert favors the prominence of the elder son (*Reading Luke* [New York: Crossroad, 1982] 275).

<sup>2</sup> J. T. Sanders, "Tradition and Redaction in Luke xv:11–32," *NTS* 15 (1968) 433–438. Sanders bases his argument on two main factors: (1) vv. 25–32 exhibit less Semitisms and more Lukanisms than vv. 11–24; and (2) this is the only genuine two-part parable (*zweigipfelig*) we have.

it as a Lukan creation in its entirety.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Heininger has proposed that the original parable consist only of verses 11–17, 20, 22–23, 24c.<sup>4</sup>

While Jeremias, O'Rourke and Carlston have conclusively ruled out on linguistic grounds the possibility that Luke created any portion of the parable, its authenticity is further supported by the following.<sup>5</sup> First, the elder son is mentioned at the outset (vv. 11–12); this is redundant if he plays no further part in the story. Second, the parable builds up an inner tension, with the law of end-stress suggesting a final climax.<sup>6</sup> Third, if Luke created verses 25–32 as an attack on the Pharisees, we would have expected a far harsher portrayal of the father's relationship to the elder son, and it is extremely unlikely that the parable would have been left open-ended.<sup>7</sup> Fourth, in an illuminating study, Aus has argued that our parable draws on a Semitic/Jewish folk tale and thus clearly does not owe its origins to Hellenist Luke.<sup>8</sup> Fifth, Tolbert has demonstrated the unity of both halves of the parable on the basis of structural parallels.<sup>9</sup> Sixth, Pöhlmann has shown how the protest of the hearer is reflected in the protest of the elder son. This protest is crucial to the story, for by it the hearer is confronted with a new view of *oikos*, that of the kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup> Seventh, it must be stressed that Lukan themes are not necessarily Lukan creations.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the orientation of the parable parallels the general teaching of Jesus elsewhere.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>3</sup> J. Drury, *Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel* (London: Darton, Longmann & Todd, 1976) 143–147. Drury wrongly contends that Luke has constructed the story as an allegory of salvation history, stressing the widening rift between traditional Judaism and Gentile Christianity. See the interpretation of the parable below. L. Schottroff, "Das Gleichnis vom verlorenen Sohn," *ZTK* 68 (1971) 27–52, also regards the parable as a later Christian polemic against the Pharisees, who she claims could not have recognized themselves in the figure of the elder son. Furthermore, the themes of repentance and forgiveness are characteristic of Lukan soteriology. Regarding the latter point, C. E. Carlston argues that the understanding of repentance presented in this parable is not Lukan. Luke has more of a moral emphasis, stressing the fruit of repentance. Here the younger son simply returns and is accepted by his father ("Reminiscence and Redaction in Luke 15:11–32," *JBL* 94 [1975] 368–390).

<sup>4</sup> B. Heininger, *Metaphorik, Erzählstruktur und szenisch-dramatische Gestaltung in den Sondergutgleichnissen bei Lukas* (NTAbh 24; Münster: Aschendorff, 1991) 146–153.

<sup>5</sup> J. Jeremias, "Tradition und Redaktion in Lukas 15," *ZNW* 62 (1971) 172–181. J. J. O'Rourke, "Some Notes on Luke xv:11–32," *NTS* 18 (1971) 431–433; Carlston, "Reminiscence" 368–390.

<sup>6</sup> See J. Lambrecht, *Once More Astonished: The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 32–33; J. Nolland, *Luke* (WBC 35; 3 vols.; Dallas: Word, 1989–1993) 2:781.

<sup>7</sup> Stein, *Parables* 117; Nolland, *Luke* 2:781.

<sup>8</sup> R. D. Aus, "Luke 15:11–32 and R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus's Rise to Fame," *JBL* 104 (1985) 443–469.

<sup>9</sup> M. A. Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 98–100.

<sup>10</sup> W. Pöhlmann, *Der verlorene Sohn und das Haus: Studien zu Lukas 15,11–32 im Horizont der antiken Lehre von Haus, Erziehung und Ackerbau* (WUNT 68; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1993) 188–189.

<sup>11</sup> H. Weder correctly states, "... ist das Argument schon aus methodischen Gründen fragwürdig, fußt es doch auf dem Axiom, daß ein Theologumenon eines Evangelisten mit der Verkündigung Jesu gar nicht übereinstimmen könne" (italics retained; *Die Gleichnisse Jesu als Metaphern* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980] 254). Compare this with Heininger's reconstruction of the original parable, where vv. 18–19, 21, 24a–b are deleted due to the explicit and implicit mention of repentance (pp. 146–153).

<sup>12</sup> I. Broer, "Das Gleichnis vom verlorenen Sohn und die Theologie des Lukas," *NTS* 20 (1973) 453–462.

On the whole, therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the parable as a whole is an authentic creation of Jesus.

Numerous suggestions have been proposed for a suitable background for the parable of the Lost Son. But while there are a number of parallels in ancient Near Eastern literature and the papyri, they lack the moving force of this story.<sup>13</sup>

Aus has investigated the correlation between Luke 15:11–32 and the rabbinic parable of the rise to fame of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus. The clear differences between the stories (Eliezer's father accepts him on the basis of him becoming a great rabbinic scholar) indicate that neither one is dependent upon the other. However, Aus proposes that both drew on a common, oral folktale of Semitic origin.<sup>14</sup>

It is clear that a number of strands of OT tradition form a significant backdrop to this parable. While the younger son is clearly no hero, there are similarities between Luke 15:11–32 and the Joseph story. The images of the far country, jealousy of the elder brother(s), ring/clothes/banquet, famine, and reconciliation to the father all recall elements of Genesis 37–50.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the loving acceptance of the father for the prodigal recalls the mercy of God shown for a repentant Ephraim (Jer 31:18–20; cf. 1 Kgs 8:47–51; Hos 11:1–9; Ps 103:13). In his recent monograph, Bailey analyzes Luke 15 in light of Psalm 23, finding thirteen common motifs.<sup>16</sup> However, rather than simply considering one of the above as the background to our text, it seems wise to agree with Drury that the parable of the Lost Son embodies “a mosaic of OT reminiscences.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 1981–85) 2:1084. E. Rau examines parallels from Philo and the rabbis to confirm his thesis that the form of Jesus' parables follows late Israelite religious thought, which in turn was influenced by the Hellenistic-Roman rhetoric schools. These parallels exhibit the model of a father with two sons, one moral and the other immoral, or a father with a rebellious son. However, Rau finds that nowhere (apart from the *Sedrach Apocalypse* 6:4–6—which is later than Luke and seemingly based upon it) is this model used as a comment on God's love for sinners (*Reden in Vollmacht, Hintergrund, Form und Anliegen der Gleichnisse Jesu* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990] 216–294). Regarding the papyri, I. H. Marshall (citing Danker) refers to a letter written by a son to his mother seeking forgiveness for past mistakes (*The Gospel of Luke* [NIGTC; Exeter: Paternoster, 1978] 604–605). The attempt by G. Scholz to find structural and thematic links between 15:11–24 and the two creation accounts of Genesis 1:1–2:4a; 2:4b–3:24 fails to convince (*Gleichnisaussage und Existenzstruktur* [Frankfurt am Main/Bern/New York: Lang, 1983] 270–274).

<sup>14</sup> Aus, “Luke 15:11–32,” 443–469. J. Ernst also mentions the possibility of a Jewish *Vorlage*. (*Das Evangelium nach Lukas* [RNT; Regensburg: Pustet, 1977] 456).

<sup>15</sup> Aus finds fourteen common motifs with the Joseph tradition. The only two differences are that in Luke 15:11–32 the younger son falls into sin, and the brothers are not reconciled within the story (*Weihnachtsgeschichte—Barmherziger Samariter—Verlorener Sohn: Studien zu ihrem jüdischen Hintergrund* [Berlin: Institut Kirche und Judentum, 1988] 126–173).

<sup>16</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 194–212. The motifs are: shepherd, lost sheep, repentance, restoration, female imagery, danger and survival, protection and comfort, holiness/honor, love, banquet, reversal, house, and theology/Christology.

<sup>17</sup> Drury, *Tradition* 146. This is confirmed by O. Hofius, who examines the motifs of return (cf. Hos 2:9), confession (cf. Exod 10:16), compassion of the father (cf. 2 Sam 14:33), ring/robe (cf. Gen 41:42), fatted calf (cf. 1 Sam 28:24), dead/lost (cf. Ps 31:13), faithful to commands (cf. Deut 26:13)

Rengstorf claims that the parable should be understood against the background of the Jewish *k<sup>e</sup>tsatsah*, a ceremony whereby a person was cut off from the community for breaking the rules of society (e.g. selling property to a Gentile). This process was reversible by another ceremony, indicated in our parable by the robe, ring and shoes.<sup>18</sup> However, it seems that Rengstorf extracts too much from the parable. The son is not cut off, he goes willingly. Nevertheless, Bailey is sympathetic to this proposal in part, pointing out that if the ceremony was not enacted when the son left, it does give some insight into how the community would have reacted when he returned.<sup>19</sup>

Another point of dispute is the precise legal background that informs the dividing of the inheritance. However, as not all considerations discussed in the literature ultimately affect the sense of the parable, only the main factors will be considered in the analysis below.<sup>20</sup> It also seems wise to heed Marshall's caution that as Jesus was not a lawyer but a storyteller, we should not expect a parable necessarily to conform to legal propriety.<sup>21</sup>

## II. ANALYSIS OF VV. 11–24

In this parable, the ἄνθρωπος τις is a father who has two sons. Both are introduced here, preparing the reader for the role that they both will play in the story. In the first instance, we are confronted with the younger of the two seeking his share<sup>22</sup> of the family estate.<sup>23</sup>

According to Mosaic law, the firstborn son had rights to a double share of the inheritance (Deut 21:17; *m. B. Bat.* 7:4–5). Thus the younger son would receive a third. The property could be left via a will effective on the death of the father, or by a gift during his lifetime. In the latter case, any interest on the property was only payable after the death of the father.<sup>24</sup> Normally in this situation, if the son disposed of the property the buyer could not take possession of it until the death of the father (*m. B. Bat.* 8:7). With respect to our parable, the father seems to retain possession of the property (v. 31) and the family was supported by the income from the estate. Derrett suggests

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and squandering money with prostitutes (cf. Prov 29:3). Hofius concludes that the author of the parable of the Lost Son was saturated in the Hebrew scriptures, which in turn leads him to the opinion that the parable is an authentic creation of Jesus ("Alttestamentliche Motive im Gleichnis vom verlorenen Sohn," *NTS* 24 [1977] 240–248).

<sup>18</sup> K. H. Rengstorf, *Die Re-investitur des verlorenen Sohnes in der Gleichniserzählung Jesu (Luk. 15,11–32)* (Cologne: Westdeutscher, 1967).

<sup>19</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 121–122.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of the legal situation see Str-B 2.212; 3.545–53; Schottroff, "Gleichnis" 27–52; J. D. M. Derrett, "Law in the NT: The Parable of the Prodigal Son," *NTS* 26 (1979) 56–74; W. Pöhlmann, "Die Abschtichtung des verlorenen Sohnes (Lk 15,12f.) und die erzählte Welt der Parabel," *ZNW* 70 (1979) 194–213.

<sup>21</sup> Marshall, *Luke* 606.

<sup>22</sup> τὸ ἐπιβάλλον μέρος is a technical formula, used in the papyri of the paternal inheritance. See Pöhlmann, *Haus* 204–205.

<sup>23</sup> οὐσία (property/wealth) occurs only in Luke 15:11, 13 in the NT (cf. Tob 14:13; 3 Macc 3:28). Diogenes Laertius 9.35, tells of three bothers who divide the οὐσία when one wishes to settle in a distant land (BAGD 596).

<sup>24</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1963) 128–129.

that the younger son would have received slightly less than a third, due to the ongoing costs of running the estate.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of the above provisions, Sirach 33:19–23 warns against the practice of allocating the inheritance while the father is still alive, tying it to the issue of the father's honor (cf. *b. B. Mes.* 75b). This raises the issue of whether such practice was widespread. On the one hand, it could be argued that the mere fact that Sirach warns against the procedure makes it obvious that it was relatively common. Consequently, nothing unusual is happening in the parable and the audience would not have been surprised.<sup>26</sup>

However, Bailey has advanced some quite weighty arguments, including a detailed Middle Eastern cultural analysis, to show that such a practice was irregular in the extreme. He contends that the Sirach text does not show that the procedure was common and needs reforming. Rather, it simply reflects the prevailing community attitude. Furthermore, the issue is the father distributing the inheritance, not the son asking for it. In effect, the younger son was wishing the father dead, for the notion of passing on an inheritance while in good health is unthinkable.<sup>27</sup> No Middle Eastern son ever asks for an inheritance, let alone is given it! Normally the father would explode with rage, for this is the ultimate insult. It is even more remarkable that the son was able to sell his share. Furthermore, the elder brother should have refused to accept his brother's request and intervened. His silence indicates his refusal to do so and demonstrates that his family relationships are less than adequate.<sup>28</sup>

The radical nature of the son's request is confirmed by Pöhlmann, who analyzes the parable in terms of the Greek and Wisdom understanding of "house." He shows that the father was not rich, nor was the farm a large estate, but rather one that provided basic support for the family. The son's request for the inheritance was, therefore, contrary to the basic ethos of the house. He thus plays the role of the rebellious fool in the Wisdom tradition.<sup>29</sup>

By asking for his share of the property while the father was still alive, the son is, in effect, saying that he is no longer able to live in the family house.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the father accedes to his son's wishes, thereby granting him the freedom to choose his own destiny and live with the implications of his decision.

<sup>25</sup> Derrett, "Law" 62. Derrett suggests two-ninths as a likely amount.

<sup>26</sup> So W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of their Jewish Background* (New York: Macmillan, 1936) 183; E. Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1966) 74–75. Scott suggests that Sirach and the Mishnaic law were possibly reactions to the procedure depicted in this parable (*Hear* 111).

<sup>27</sup> In v. 12b, βίος replaces οὐσία. Bailey shows how this is an appropriate word, reflecting the inseparable relationship between land and life in the Middle East (*Lost* 119–120). Scott observes the wordplay, whereby the division of the βίος "kills" the father, by taking away his means of subsistence (p. 111). Note also the ironical use of the term in the textual variant at Luke 8:43. The woman with the hemorrhage had spent all her βίος (Mark 5:26 has τὰ παρ' αὐτῆς πάντα) but the doctors could not restore her to full life.

<sup>28</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 111–117, 122. See also K. E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 161–166.

<sup>29</sup> Pöhlmann, *Haus* 183–187.

<sup>30</sup> Derrett, "Law" 60.

The audience, completely astounded as this point, are in for a further shock. The boy converts the property into cash,<sup>31</sup> thereby ignoring any moral claim that his father had on the property.<sup>32</sup> He has now clearly violated Jewish law by failing to honor his parents and to sustain them in their old age (cf. Mark 7:11–13).<sup>33</sup>

The lad then sets off for a distant land to seek pleasure and fulfillment.<sup>34</sup> Jeremias shows that there was nothing amiss with emigrating as such, for due to frequent famine in Palestine and more favorable living conditions elsewhere many Jews moved abroad.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, *χώραν μακράν*<sup>36</sup> is probably designed to stress the alienation of the son from his family. The boy then compounds his original sin by squandering<sup>37</sup> his money with reckless abandon.<sup>38</sup>

Predictably the money eventually runs out, with the problem compounded by the onset of severe famine. The boy begins to lack the necessities of life (*ύστεριῖσθαι*). As he now has no family for support, he seeks employment with one of the local citizens.<sup>39</sup> Working for a Gentile was not viewed favorably by the Jews (cf. Acts 10:28), a fact mirrored by their low regard for tax collectors (15:1). The son's desperation is further indicated by the job he accepts. To feed pigs, unclean animals, was degrading work for a Jew (Lev 11:7; Deut 14:8; 1 Macc 1:47), a feeling endorsed by the rabbinic maxim, "Cursed be the man who would breed swine, or teach his son Greek philosophy" (*b. B. Qam.* 82b).<sup>40</sup> Thus the young man would have been forced to virtually abandon his religious customs (no sabbath, etc.).<sup>41</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Based on evidence from the papyri (Plutarch, *Cato Min.* 6.7; cf. BAGD 782), *συνάγω* can carry this sense. So Jeremias, *Parables* 129; Marshall, *Luke* 607; C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (TPINTC; London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity, 1990) 588.

<sup>32</sup> Presumably unmarried, the son would be less than twenty years of age. See Jeremias, *Parables* 129.

<sup>33</sup> Derrett, "Law" 64; Scott, *Hear* 113.

<sup>34</sup> Against J. Schmid it is unlikely that the time interval *μετ' οὐ πολλὰς ἡμέρας* indicates a mark of courtesy, for nothing the boy has done to this point has indicated any concern for decorum (*Das Evangelium nach Lukas* [RNT 3; 4th ed.; Regensburg: Pustet, 1960] 253).

<sup>35</sup> Jeremias, *Parables* 129. Jeremias estimates that in the first century AD, there were some half a million Jews in Palestine compared to four million in the diaspora.

<sup>36</sup> Carlston claims that this is a Lukan phrase (cf. 19:12; 370). However, as Scott points out, it is possibly authentic here and secondary in 19:12 (p. 113).

<sup>37</sup> *διασκορπίζω* is literally "to scatter in all directions." The word is also used of squandering property in 16:1, and forms one of several possible links between the two parables.

<sup>38</sup> *ἀσώτως* points to unbridled extravagance and indulgence. The expression *ζῶν ἀσώτως* also appears in Josephus (*Ant.* 12.4.8), while the cognate noun is found in Prov 28:7 regarding the shaming of one's parents.

<sup>39</sup> *κολλᾶσθαι* is used in 10:11 of dust clinging to the feet. The word denotes a persuasive force in offering his services.

<sup>40</sup> Note also *m. B. Qam.* 7:7, "None may rear swine anywhere."

<sup>41</sup> Jeremias, *Parables* 129. R. Hoppe argues that the parable in no way tries to indicate that the boy breaks with traditional Jewish life and practice ("Gleichnis und Situation: Zu den Gleichnissen vom guten Vater [Lk 15,11–32] und gütigen Hausherrn [Matt 20, 1–5]," *BZ* 28 [1984] 4–5). Hoppe is correct to the extent that this is not a main feature of the parable, but the depths to which the boy sinks are highlighted by such things as his attachment to a non-Jew and his engagement in an abhorrent occupation.

So great was the lad's need that he went lower than feeding pigs; he wanted to eat their food.<sup>42</sup> Obviously his food rations were meager!<sup>43</sup> Although some understand κεράτιον (v. 16) to signify the pod of the carob tree known as St. John's Bread (*ceratonia silqua*), which was shaped like little horns and was sweet tasting, Bailey contends that the carob referred to here was another variety which was wild, thorny, bitter and devoid of nourishment. Such were eaten only by very poor folk.<sup>44</sup> ἐπεθύμει is best taken as a volutive imperfect, expressing an unfulfilled desire.<sup>45</sup> Although it is possible that the boy could not psychologically cope with the prospect, Bailey contends that the human stomach could simply not digest the coarse pulp that was fed to the pigs.<sup>46</sup> The object of the iterative imperfect ἐδίδου is not given, but probably should not be seen as the carob pods. He could have helped himself to these.<sup>47</sup> Rather, the fact that nobody gave him any food led him to desire pig rations.<sup>48</sup>

Through soliloquy, a common narrative device in the Lukan parables, the boy rethinks his situation, comes to his senses, and realizes that he is better off at home. There, even his father's hired helpers (μισθοι) had an abundance of food. In contrast (ἐγὼ δέ), he is slowly wasting away.<sup>49</sup> The force of the expression εἰς ἑαυτὸν δε ἐλθὼν (v. 17) is disputed. Not all agree with Jeremias' proposal that it reflects an underlying Semitic phrase signifying repentance.<sup>50</sup> On the one hand, Evans and Petzke assert that repentance is a theme artificially imposed on the parable. They claim that there is no evidence that the younger son has rebelled against his father, and the father does not act on the basis of his son's repentance.<sup>51</sup> However, not only have we already seen that the boy has wronged his father at several points

<sup>42</sup> χορτασθῆναι. The weaker attested variant γεμίσει τὴν κοιλίαν αὐτοῦ ἀπό (A Q Ψ as well as Old Latin, Syriac and Bohairic versions) is cruder and may well be original. So W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (THKNT 3; 2nd ed.; East Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1961) 312; Marshall, *Luke* 609; Scott, *Hear* 114 n. 48. Scott believes that the description of the young man's poverty in terms of food implicitly introduces the boy's mother into the parable, for nourishment is normally associated with maternal metaphors (p. 115). More likely, however, the mention of his lack of food prepares for the contrast to the communal feast, centered around the killing of the fatted calf.

<sup>43</sup> It is unnecessary to support Jeremias who asserts that the boy must have stolen whatever food he ate (*Parables* 130).

<sup>44</sup> Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* 171–173.

<sup>45</sup> Jeremias, *Parables* 129 n. 75.

<sup>46</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 128–129. For the former suggestion, see Fitzmyer, *Luke* 1088.

<sup>47</sup> Thus, against L. Morris it is not necessary to view the boy's status as lower than a pig (*Luke* [TNTC; London: IVP, 1974] 242). Nolland believes that the idea here is that he was too closely monitored even to steal the pods (*Luke* 2:773).

<sup>48</sup> Ernst considers that at this point the story is controlled by the reality undergirding it. The statement merely shows that people who remove themselves from God find no pity from others (*Lukas* 458).

<sup>49</sup> Captured by the present tense ἀπόλλυμαι. The verb forms a link with the two preceding parables (15:4, 8).

<sup>50</sup> Jeremias, *Parables* 130. See also Str-B, 2.215.

<sup>51</sup> Evans, *Luke* 590–591; G. Petzke, *Das Sondergut des Evangeliums nach Lukas* (Zurich: Theologischer, 1990) 140–141.

in the story, he explicitly acknowledges his sin and repents (15:18, 20). On the other hand, a number of commentators, while conceding that the son has acted sinfully and speaks of repentance, insist that the boy is acting out of purely selfish motives. It is not repentance but hunger that drives him home.<sup>52</sup> Bailey, for instance, argues that if this is repentance, the parable conflicts with 15:4–10 where repentance is defined as the acceptance of being found. Indeed, there is no statement of remorse, just overwhelming hunger. Furthermore, the underlying Hebrew/Aramaic word is נָפַץ, which is informed by Psalm 23:3. There the psalmist is brought back to God; here the prodigal acts by himself (i.e. to save himself).<sup>53</sup>

In response to such suggestions, we need to understand that 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.<sup>54</sup> In fact, Bailey's argument seems controlled by theological presuppositions. The whole point is that there is a tension in the understanding of repentance represented in the three parables of Luke 15. In the first two parables, the sheep and the coin are simply found; they play no active role. Here, the son makes the initial move and is unconditionally accepted by his father. At one level, we may argue for the necessity of this variation forced upon the storyteller by the very nature of the sheep and coin compared to a human character. At a theological level, this is simply a reflection of the tension found throughout the Scriptures between divine sovereignty and human free will.<sup>55</sup>

The son now recognizes that the only way out of his dilemma is to return to his father and acknowledge his sin, thereby confirming the rabbinic proverb, "When a son (in need in a strange land) goes barefoot, then he remembers the comfort of his father's house."<sup>56</sup>

ἀναστὰς πορεύσομαι represents an underlying Aramaic phrase meaning "I will go at once,"<sup>57</sup> thereby expressing his rousing from lethargy and despair.<sup>58</sup> εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν is a reverential periphrasis,<sup>59</sup> reflecting a realization that he has wronged not only his father but violated the fifth commandment

<sup>52</sup> J. Dupont, *Les Béatitudes* (3 vols.; Paris: Gabalda, 1958–73) 2.240; Hoppe, "Gleichnis" 4–5; Scott, *Hear* 116. G. W. Ramsey supports this by arguing that "the confession of sin is one step removed from the reliable candor of interior monologue" ("Plots, Gaps, Repetitions and Ambiguity in Luke 15," *PRS* 17 [1990] 39–41).

<sup>53</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 129–133.

<sup>54</sup> Bailey, of course, must understand Psalm 23:3 in terms of repentance.

<sup>55</sup> This will be discussed further below. In apparent contradiction to his statements above, Bailey later states that Jesus' audience would have understood the prodigal's actions as repentance (*Lost* 138–141).

<sup>56</sup> Str-B 2.216.

<sup>57</sup> אִקְוֵם וְאֵצֵל. See Jeremias, *Parables* 130.

<sup>58</sup> A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke* (ICC; 5th ed.; New York: Scribner, 1922) 374.

<sup>59</sup> Not in the sense of sins piling up to heaven as in Ezra 9:6. It is a recognition that all sin is ultimately against God (Ps 51:4).

(Deut 5:16). It is important to stress that the boy's sin is not just his reckless living, but the original actions against his father in requesting his inheritance, selling it off, and leaving the family. His portion of the estate is now in the hands of foreigners.<sup>60</sup>

The prodigal is overcome with shame. He is not content to beg for forgiveness and seek restoration as a son. Possibly he realizes that this is not likely, as he has forgone all previous rights. Rather, he is prepared to take the status of a μίσθος.<sup>61</sup> Bailey notes that this is not as bad as it might seem. As a hired man he would be free and independent, and his social status would not be inferior to his father or brother. Moreover, he can avoid a problem relationship with his brother and eventually repay his father.<sup>62</sup>

So he carried out his resolve. However, it almost appears as though the father was waiting for him. He saw his son at a distance<sup>63</sup> and, not content to wait passively, he ran to meet him, embracing him warmly. Again the audience is astounded with this unexpected development, for to run was humiliating for an Oriental nobleman. Such action would immediately draw a crowd.<sup>64</sup> The father was, therefore, prepared to violate custom to reconcile and welcome home his lost son.

The two verbs ἐπλαγχνίσθη and κατεφίλησεν give insight into the character of the father. The former reflects his compassionate heart, a compassion which precedes his son's confession.<sup>65</sup> The latter signifies his forgiveness (cf. Gen 33:4; 2 Sam 14:33), with the preposition compound indicating either

<sup>60</sup> Scott, *Hear* 116.

<sup>61</sup> Bailey sees in the term a more technical sense of "tradesman/craftsman." He concludes that the boy intends to ask his father to finance his training as a craftsman so that he can repay his debt and regain his former position. However, this conjecture is unwarranted given the details provided (*Lost* 136–137).

<sup>62</sup> Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* 176–178. Bailey is surely incorrect in attempting to find a sense of "not at the present time" for οὐκέτι (v. 19). In line with his previous comments about the selfish motives of the son, he contends that this selfishness continues here, for he is only interested in paying back what he owes so he can be restored to his former position (*Lost* 133–135). However, in Rom 7:17, 20; 11:6a; 14:15 and Gal 3:18, the other NT examples of οὐκέτι used not temporally but logically (listed by BAGD 592 whom Bailey cites for support), the word is used as part of the apodosis of a first class conditional sentence. But the sense is still "no longer" (i.e. "not any more"), where the contrast is between one situation and another. If the former situation applies, the latter no longer applies. This is entirely different to the nuance proposed by Bailey. In Luke 15:19 no conditional situation is proposed by which the logical force would be apparent. Bailey's assertion, that the word reverts to its usual temporal force in v. 21, is without foundation. There is simply no valid reason to distinguish between the two uses of οὐκέτι, unless of course one has prejudged the text. We might also question whether the underlying Aramaic word was capable of the same subtleties suggested by Bailey.

<sup>63</sup> Bailey finds in μακράν (v. 20) a symbolic sense that the boy is still alienated (*Lost* 149). This is unlikely.

<sup>64</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 142–146. Bailey notes the reluctance in the Arabic versions to let the father run. Note also Sirach 19:30, "A man's manner of walking shows what he is."

<sup>65</sup> J. E. Breech sees this word as a Lukan creation. He argues that, in a similar way to 10:33 (the Good Samaritan), the word places a value judgment on the character's actions, a judgment that is lacking in Jesus' core parables (*The Silence of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983] 185–186). But not only is this a severe case of circular reasoning, compassion is not a distinctly Lukan motif (cf. Mark 1:41; 6:34; 8:2; 9:22).

repeated kissing<sup>66</sup> or tender kissing.<sup>67</sup> This unmerited forgiveness is the opposite of what is expected.<sup>68</sup> Rather, we would anticipate the son falling to the ground and kissing his father's feet.<sup>69</sup>

Bailey notes the implications of the father meeting his son in this way. As discussed previously, upon his return the boy would be open to hostility from the entire village. Here, reconciliation takes place on the outskirts of town and the son enters under the protective custody of the father's acceptance. Thus, rather than the son having to run the gauntlet, the father runs it for him.<sup>70</sup>

In the confession to his father (v. 21), the boy does not follow his rehearsed speech precisely, omitting the request to be treated as a μίσθος.<sup>71</sup> The reason for this is not that his father interrupted him or that it was not the right moment, but that in response to his father's loving acceptance he changed his mind.<sup>72</sup> Not only was the original intention redundant, to propose it would insult his father's love.<sup>73</sup>

The father, however, sends his servants scurrying in all directions, with *ταχύ* indicating that no time was to be wasted. They were to bring the best robe, a ring and shoes for his son. Rengstorf considers that *στολήν τὴν πρώτην* refers to the son's former robe, which had been stripped off as part of the *k<sup>e</sup>tsatsah* ceremony. The idea here is one of re-instatement.<sup>74</sup> However, if this was the case, we might have expected the personal pronoun αὐτοῦ.<sup>75</sup> Bailey's suggestion that this may be the father's robe is possible,<sup>76</sup> but it is doubtful that we should find eschatological suggestions present.<sup>77</sup> δακτύλιον could be a signet ring which conveyed authority (Esth 3:10; 8:8; 1 Macc 6:15). ὑποδήματα were the mark of a freeman. The son had obviously returned barefoot, typifying the status of a slave.<sup>78</sup> With all this completed, the prodigal son's honor is now restored.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>66</sup> So Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* 183.

<sup>67</sup> So Scott, who sees here another hint of the maternal theme (p. 117).

<sup>68</sup> The unmerited forgiveness shown here contrasts with that of the prodigal son encountered in Buddhist writings, who must prove himself before he can enjoy the estate once more (cited by Derrett, "Law" 67).

<sup>69</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 146.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 142–151. Bailey finds here a demonstration of part of the meaning of the incarnation and atonement. This will be considered below.

<sup>71</sup> The textual variant which attempts to assimilate this from v. 19 (8 B D) is almost certainly secondary.

<sup>72</sup> Against the proposals of J. M. Creed, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (London: Macmillan, 1942) 200; Fitzmyer, *Luke* 2:1089; Marshall, *Luke* 610; Ramsey, "Plots" 35–36. Ernst considers that nothing should be made of this. It is just an abbreviated report of the speech (*Lukas* 459).

<sup>73</sup> S. J. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 221; Nolland, *Luke* 2:785. Bailey considers that true repentance occurs here in response to the father's costly and visible love (*Lost* 152).

<sup>74</sup> Rengstorf, *Re-investitur* 40–45.

<sup>75</sup> Marshall, *Luke* 610.

<sup>76</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 154.

<sup>77</sup> Jeremias cites Isa 61:10, which speaks of being clothed with the garments of salvation and the robes of righteousness (*Parables* 130). See also Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* 185.

<sup>78</sup> See *b. Pesah.* 118a; *b. Šabb.* 152a, for the indignity of going barefoot.

<sup>79</sup> Nolland disagrees that the issue here is one of restoration of authority. The point is simply to contrast his present appearance (*Luke* 2:785, 790; cf. Evans, *Luke* 594). How Scott can criticize

The extravagant nature of the father's love continues. In addition to the above, the fatted calf was to be slaughtered. μύσχος was a young animal or calf, and it being fatted (σιτευτός) signifies an animal kept for a special occasion. Indeed, meat was only eaten at festive celebrations.<sup>80</sup> The killing of the fatted calf was, therefore, the height of hospitality.

εὐφρανθῶμεν points to a communal celebration,<sup>81</sup> a theme that connects each of the three parables of this chapter. The banquet serves as an opportunity to reconcile the boy to the entire village. In addition, the celebration and feasting imagery contrasts the carob pods and helps underline the extremities of lost-found, sin-repentance, and alienation-restoration.<sup>82</sup> Given the context of forgiveness/salvation, the imagery here may also carry echoes of the messianic banquet (cf. Luke 13:28–29; 14:15–24).

ὅτι (v. 24) introduces the father's rationale for this celebration. His son was dead, but now is alive.<sup>83</sup> νεκρός could refer to being morally dead (cf. Eph 2:1), the fact that he was thought to be dead, or that he was totally cut off from the family.<sup>84</sup> Bailey considers that it signifies that the son had previously been dead to his father's love,<sup>85</sup> while Borsch states, "Physically and also psychologically and spiritually the young man had been in a life and death situation."<sup>86</sup>

To state the matter from the perspective of the father, his son was lost and now is found. The perfect participle ἀπολωλώς<sup>87</sup> indicates the complete state of lostness in the father's eyes, thus confirming the suitability of νεκρός. A seemingly irreversible situation had been reversed.

So the celebrations begin. The young man now finds the pleasure that he had sought in the far country.<sup>88</sup>

### III. ANALYSIS OF VV. 25–32

The parable now picks up the theme of the elder brother. This is not just a "lame appendix,"<sup>89</sup> for now the audience is given a voice. They have endorsed the view of sin and repentance initially presented, but have been

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Jeremias for reducing the text to a theologoumenon by claiming that the son is forgiven and reinstated, then himself immediately interpret the father's actions as indicating his son's restoration, is quite bewildering (p. 118).

<sup>80</sup> Nolland, *Luke* 2:786.

<sup>81</sup> Bailey claims that it would require close to two hundred people to eat a fatted calf (*Lost* 155).

<sup>82</sup> D. O. Via, *The Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 165.

<sup>83</sup> Bailey is incorrect in claiming that the banquet is a celebration in honor of the father and his costly love (*Lost* 156). Both this verse and v. 27 indicate that the motivation is joy over the son's safe return.

<sup>84</sup> R. Meynet, *L'évangile selon saint Luc* (Paris: Cerf, 1988) 2:163. Rengstorf believes that it refers to the legal act of excommunication (*Re-investitur* 21–22).

<sup>85</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 159–160.

<sup>86</sup> F. H. Borsch, *Many Things in Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 42.

<sup>87</sup> The word may possibly be a Lukan addition to facilitate a further link to the two previous parables.

<sup>88</sup> Morris, *Luke* 243.

<sup>89</sup> Against Evans, *Luke* 588.

completely staggered by the father's response. Their protests are expressed in the words of the elder brother.<sup>90</sup>

The scene shifts to the field, where the elder son is returning from his day's work. This image may evoke the picture of a son still at home but distant from his father.<sup>91</sup> As he approaches the house he hears the festivities.<sup>92</sup> This puzzles him,<sup>93</sup> so he asks<sup>94</sup> one of the servants<sup>95</sup> what was happening.

The fact that the servant is made to repeat what the audience already knows serves to further emphasize the father's extravagant actions.<sup>96</sup> The elder son responds to the news with anger, with the imperfect ἤθελεν capturing his persistent refusal to enter and join the celebrations. Verse 30 would indicate the unlikelihood that his anger is due to a fear that the property may be redivided. However, he may resent the fact that his brother can be supported once again by the family estate.<sup>97</sup> More likely, he is indignant about the quick forgiveness offered to his brother, feeling that this is entirely unjustified after his initial actions.<sup>98</sup>

The father again acts contrary to all expectations. Bailey observes that in this situation a Middle Eastern father would lock the son up, finish the banquet, then have him beaten.<sup>99</sup> However, instead of rebuking his son he pleads with him to come inside. The imperfect παρεκάλει corresponds to ἤθελεν. The son's persistent refusal is met with the father's persistent pleas.

This, in turn, causes the elder brother to release his harbored frustrations. He sees himself as the model son, serving his father obediently. The use of δουλεύω is probably significant, indicating that he really did not understand what a father-son relationship was meant to be.<sup>100</sup> In fact, both sons wrongly believed that the key to acceptance by their father was to act as a servant.<sup>101</sup>

His list of grievances continues, now reminding his father that he has never violated his command. The audience cannot miss the irony here. He has just shamed his father by refusing to enter the celebration!

<sup>90</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 163.

<sup>91</sup> Scott, *Hear* 119.

<sup>92</sup> συμφωνία could be a musical instrument (e.g. double pipe), but more likely a band of players or singers. See BAGD 781; O. Betz, "συμφωνία," *TDNT* 9.304–309. For some older studies on this word see P. Barry, "On Luke xv.25, *symphōnia*: Bagpipe," *JBL* 23 (1904) 180–190; G. F. Moore, "Symphōnia not a Bagpipe," *JBL* 24 (1905) 166–175. χορός indicates a choral dance (BAGD 883).

<sup>93</sup> τί ἄν εἶη ταῦτα (v. 26). The use of the optative is typically Lukan (cf. 18:36; Acts 21:33) and expresses complete uncertainty.

<sup>94</sup> The imperfect ἐπυνθάνετο could be either inceptive or descriptive. If the latter, it pictures an interrogation. He wanted all the details!

<sup>95</sup> παῖς may be "boy" rather than "servant," for he replies with "your father" instead of "my master."

<sup>96</sup> Scott, *Hear* 119.

<sup>97</sup> Derrett, "Law" 67; Scott, *Hear* 120.

<sup>98</sup> Stein, *Parables* 122.

<sup>99</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 172.

<sup>100</sup> Not all accept this interpretation. Nolland believes δουλεύω is used purely as a contrast to the younger son's errant ways (*Luke* 2:787). See also Linnemann, who insists that the elder son does not murmur about being a slave (*Parables* 79). Nevertheless, while he does not complain about it, it still represents his whole outlook.

<sup>101</sup> Donahue, *Gospel* 157.

Recalling the attitude of the laborers in the vineyard who griped about the generosity shown to others (Matt 20:11–12), the elder son considers that he has not received just treatment. He has not even been given a kid or a goat, let alone a more expensive calf, so that he could celebrate with his friends. It is significant that here the elder son is demonstrating the same desire as his brother—to celebrate apart from his family.<sup>102</sup>

The insult now shifts to his brother, whom he describes in the derogatory sense of ὁ υἱὸς σου οὗτος (v. 30; cf. 15:2; 18:11; Acts 17:18). He cannot even bring himself to call the prodigal his brother. His only concern is with the squandered property. His brother simply does not deserve the fatted calf.

In the end, therefore, we are confronted with an elder son who is also estranged from his father.<sup>103</sup> He has insulted him, not only by refusing to enter the feast, but by addressing him without a title. This insult is even worse than that given by the younger son, for this is public. He has the spirit of a slave. He is self-righteous and he expects to be paid for his services. His friends are not part of his family; emotionally his community is elsewhere.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, he has attempted to vilify his father's love for the younger son by insisting that the boy squandered the money μετὰ πορνῶν. This is pure conjecture.<sup>105</sup>

Unbelievably, the father does not rebuke his son. Instead he displays the same tenderness shown to the younger son, soothing him by using the affectionate term τέκνον.<sup>106</sup> He reaffirms that the former property settlement still stands; the elder son will inherit the farm.<sup>107</sup>

It is at this point that the story deviates from the standard Jewish tale of the elder and younger sons, where the younger is the object of favor.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Plummer, *S. Luke* 378.

<sup>103</sup> As E. Schweizer, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas übersetzt und erklärt* (NTD 3; 18th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982) 165, states, "Mit dessen unbegreiflichem Handeln (vom Vater) hat der ältere Sohn so wenig zu schaffen wie mit dem verwerflichen des Bruders." L. Ramarson believes that the parable conveys the idea that distance from the father equals misery, whereas proximity leads to happiness ("Le cœur du Troisième Évangile," *Bib* 60 [1979] 355). However, this does not agree with the situation of the elder son, for though he was in physical proximity to his father, he was estranged in heart.

<sup>104</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 171–172, 182; Donahue, *Gospel* 156; Scott, *Hear* 120.

<sup>105</sup> Bailey notes that in the Eastern versions (apart from the Old Syriac) and commentaries, no thought of immorality is conveyed. Possibly the elder son was trying to picture his younger brother as fulfilling the conditions of a rebellious son (Deut 21:18–21), for which the punishment was death (*Lost* 122–124).

<sup>106</sup> When used in the vocative τέκνον has this sense (see BAGD 808). Scott finds another female metaphor here (*Hear* 122). However, it is hardly the case that the man is a failure as a father but a success as a mother, as Scott claims.

<sup>107</sup> πάντα τὰ ἐμὰ σὰ ἔστιν. See Marshall, *Luke* 613; Bailey, *Lost* 184. L. T. Johnson believes that the underlying idea here may be that in the ideal community or family relationship everything is held in common. It is only when people are alienated that property is viewed in individualistic terms (*The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts* [SBLDS 39; Missoula: Scholars, 1977] 161).

<sup>108</sup> Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, David and Solomon. See G. Scobel, "Das Gleichnis vom verlorenen Sohn als metakommunikativer Text: Überlegungen zur Verständigungsproblematik in Lukas 15," *FZPT* 35 (1988) 58–60. However, against Scott, the younger brother is not always the rogue (e.g. Abel, Joseph, David and Solomon; *Hear* 112). Note also that a recognition of this traditional motif argues for the original unity of 15:11–32.

The father's actions demonstrate his equal love for both sons. The fatted calf was not killed because the prodigal was the younger son, but because he had returned.

Nevertheless, the father does not retreat from his choice to celebrate. In fact, ἔδει stresses his constraint to do so. It is not clear whether we should understand ἡμᾶς or σέ with ἔδει.<sup>109</sup> However, although the tone is different, the end result is the same. The father is not only justifying the feast, but exhorting his son to join it.<sup>110</sup>

Although the father has let many angry words pass him by, there is something he must correct.<sup>111</sup> With the phrase ὁ ἀδελφός σου οὗτος (v. 32) the father emphasizes the relationship which the elder brother had chosen to ignore (v. 30).<sup>112</sup> The prodigal might well be the father's son, but he is still the elder son's brother.

A final surprise confronts the audience. The story is left open-ended. Is the elder son going to join the feast? Or will he continue to live with his father as a slave? Thus the audience is drawn into the parable and forced to identify with each of the characters in turn. Will they, as prodigals, repent? Will they mirror the love and compassion of the father to other prodigals? Or will they adopt the spirit of the elder son, displaying a critical and self-righteous attitude to those who are, in many ways, no worse than themselves?

#### IV. INTERPRETATION

The parable of the Lost Son is certainly more than a portrayal of the complexities of human relationships.<sup>113</sup> Its extravagant features beg for referents.<sup>114</sup> Without doubt the primary focus of the story is upon the extraordinary nature of God's pardoning love and acceptance.<sup>115</sup> This is represented by the atypical actions of the father, who, by his initiative and

<sup>109</sup> Fitzmyer argues for the former (*Luke* 2:1091), while Jeremias, feeling that the tone is one of reproach, supports the latter (*Parables* 131).

<sup>110</sup> Linnemann, *Parables* 80.

<sup>111</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 188.

<sup>112</sup> Note the identical construction in v. 30, with ἀδελφός replacing υἱός. This contrasts v. 24, where οὗτος is in a different position. As T. Corlett observes, English translations should render v. 32 as "this brother of yours" ("This brother of yours," *ExpTim* 100 [1988] 216).

<sup>113</sup> As maintained by Breech (*Silence* 184–212). He insists that: (1) the younger son is motivated by greed throughout; (2) the father is insecure, favors his younger son and constantly tries to justify himself; and (3) it is the elder son who reflects a maturity in his relationships, for he is concerned not for himself, but about the effects of his brother's return on his father. However, this is not only a highly suspect reading of the parable, it reduces Jesus to a teacher of vague moral truths. See also the attempts to relate the parable to modern psychoanalytical study by M. A. Tolbert ("The Prodigal Son: An Essay in Literary Criticism from a Psychoanalytical Perspective," *Semeia* 9 [1977] 1–19), and D. O. Via ("The Prodigal Son: A Jungian Reading," *Semeia* 9 [1977] 21–43). Against R. Couffignal, the general lesson of the parable is not that it is necessary to lose oneself in order to find oneself ("Un père au cœur d'or: Approches nouvelles de Luc 15,11–32," *RevThom* 91 [1991] 111).

<sup>114</sup> Against G. V. Jones, who claims that because the name of God is not mentioned, it is possible to understand the parable humanistically (*The Art and Truth of the Parables* [London: SPCK, 1964] 169).

<sup>115</sup> Jeremias titles the parable "The Father's Love" (*Parables* 128), while Pesch describes it as "as exegesis of God," a language event in which God comes to speech ("Exegese" 179–189). Evans

patience, thwarts the misguided resolution of both sons.<sup>116</sup> Throughout his Gospel, Luke consistently represents this love as directed to the outcast and the marginalized (1:52–53; 4:18; 14:15–24; 19:1–10 etc.). Here the focus is slightly different, though it is true that having asked for, and sold, his share of the property, the prodigal son was a social outcast of sorts. The main focus, however, is the attitude of God to sinners. In the father's refusal to override his son's desires, we glimpse a God who graciously leaves us to our choices. Nevertheless, he waits patiently and will always welcome home the penitent sinner. As Hoppe remarks, it is not as though God behaves like this in certain instances, it is fundamental to his character and his reality.<sup>117</sup> We are reminded of the words of Psalm 103:13:

As a father has compassion for his children,  
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

A further picture of God that emerges from the parable is one where his desire for intimate relationship transcends a mere master-servant association. Though God's children are also his servants (cf. Luke 17:7–10), they are foremost his children (cf. Gal 4:4–7).<sup>118</sup>

This desire for relationship also breaks the traditional categories of law. As the father's love for his son was not constrained by the necessity of adhering to a system of reprisals for breaking law and custom, so the love of God transcends human law and establishes its own.<sup>119</sup>

The parable also stresses the impartiality of God. Both sons are respected and treated with equal love and patience. God thus deals with all people equally. No particular group is rejected or favored; the kingdom is universal. Seen in these terms, the parable subverts the popular mytheme of the favored younger son.<sup>120</sup>

At this point, we are obliged to discuss the theme of repentance, which is more explicit here than in the parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin. A further difference is that unlike the shepherd and the housewife, the father does not seek. He waits.

Although, as we have seen, some have denied that repentance is a legitimate motif to draw from the parable, it is clear that the prodigal sinner, acknowledges his sin, accepts responsibility, and seeks forgiveness.<sup>121</sup> At the

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fails to appreciate the deploring nature of the son's actions and the father's subsequent welcome when he states that the father's love must be read into his joy (*Luke* 589–590).

<sup>116</sup> Although, admittedly, we are not privy to the final outcome with the elder son. K. W. Niebuhr shows how the character of the father is accentuated by the audience knowing the intention of both sons before they confront their father ("Kommunikationsebenen im Gleichnis vom verlorenen Sohn," *TLZ* 116 [1991] 486).

<sup>117</sup> Hoppe, "Gleichnis" 10.

<sup>118</sup> Bailey notes the same tension in the OT (Isa 44:1; cf. Hos 1:10) and in the rabbinic literature between Israel as God's servant and God's son (*Lost* 140–141).

<sup>119</sup> Pöhlmann, *Haus* 211–213.

<sup>120</sup> The favored younger son theme also appears in the NT in Rom 9:7, 12 and Gal 4:21–31, where Paul shows that the promise comes through the younger son. See Bailey, *Lost* 118–119. Against Scott (*Hear* 61–71) and Donahue (*Gospel* 159), the parable of the Lost Son does not stress favor shown to the younger son above the elder son.

<sup>121</sup> Evans believes that the parable reflects a situation of extremes—a change from misery to joy. The father's joy is simply over the son's return. He comments, "The point of the parable would

outset, the seriousness of sin is underlined. The boy demands his inheritance, insults his father and family, then loses the money to Gentiles. In addition, the imagery of "the far country," "feeding pigs," "lost" and "dead," all serve to highlight the alienation that results from his sin.<sup>122</sup>

Likewise, we should dismiss the view that the prodigal does not repent until he is confronted by his father's love. Such a view then leads onto the erroneous assumption that the parable illustrates that God must make the initial move to stimulate repentance.<sup>123</sup> However, it is the boy who comes to his senses and makes the initial move. Granted, his idea of repentance is bound up with law, and he does not count on the radical forgiveness offered by his father. In this sense, Jesus redefines the prevailing view of repentance, which considered that penitence needed to be demonstrated tangibly in order to be effective.<sup>124</sup> Here, in contrast, the father places no strict demands on his son. He is accepted simply because he has returned. Nevertheless, there is a prerequisite involved. The boy must return. To say that repentance is not a prerequisite, but that God accepts all who return, is a contradiction in terms. In what sense can one come home to God and not repent? Following Bailey's line of reasoning, God accepts those who are not truly repentant, but act out of purely selfish motives. Not only is this artificially imposed onto the parable, it contradicts the entire biblical revelation. Indeed, as stated above, the three parables of Luke 15 splendidly capture the biblical tension between divine sovereignty and human free will.<sup>125</sup>

That the parable makes no explicit mention of the atonement is not a problem. The purpose of the story is not to give a "compendium of all Christian theology,"<sup>126</sup> but to highlight one or two aspects of God's relationship to the world. Nevertheless, Bailey finds reference to the atonement in the costly and unexpected love shown by the father. He comes out of the house to meet the boy (incarnation), risking public humiliation and scandal to demonstrate his love (cross/suffering servant motif).<sup>127</sup> In a similar vein, Crawford finds the atonement represented in the father's anguish over the son, and the elder brother's representation of the Pharisees who were responsible for Jesus' death.<sup>128</sup> The latter point is dubious, although the other images may have aroused impressions of the atonement for Luke's readers. In the original setting, however, the father's costly love certainly mirrors

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then seem to be, not the penitence and conversion of the sinner as such, . . . but the miraculous fact that these do occur, and that they are equivalent to life from the dead" (*Luke* 590–591). However, Evans appears to be attempting to draw an artificial distinction, in this instance between what the parable describes and what it teaches.

<sup>122</sup> Pesch, "Exegese" 161; D. Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989) 110; Bailey, *Lost* 127.

<sup>123</sup> So H. Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986) 165; Weder, *Gleichnisse Jesu* 262; Bailey, *Lost* 129–133.

<sup>124</sup> As discussed by P. Fiedler, *Jesus und die Sünder* (Bern: Lang, 1976) 228.

<sup>125</sup> Compare John 5:40 with John 6:44, and Jer 8:22 with Mal 3:7.

<sup>126</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke* 2:1086, quoting T. W. Manson.

<sup>127</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 148–151, 174, 191.

<sup>128</sup> R. G. Crawford, "The Parable of the Atonement," *EvQ* 50 (1978) 2–7.

Jesus' willingness to associate with sinners and suffer reproach from the religious authorities for doing so.

This raises the issue of christology, for the parable is certainly an implicit christological statement and a declaration of authority.<sup>129</sup> It is not a depiction of the love of God in general, but of God's love coming to concrete expression in Jesus.<sup>130</sup> Seen in its literary context (15:1–2), this parable, as do the previous two parables, serves to provide a justification for Jesus' ministry to outcasts and sinners. It is he, who by the very actions for which he is reproached demonstrates the compassion, patient love and unconditional acceptance of God for the lost.

Although the polemical tone is diminished somewhat if the literary context is regarded as secondary, the parable is still a "veiled assertion of authority."<sup>131</sup> It signifies that God's saving reign is now operative in the words and actions of Jesus. Furthermore, the theme of communal celebration that unites all the parables of Luke 15 has messianic overtones. The parable is thus a commentary on the unfolding of the eschatological reign of God in the ministry of Jesus. For Luke's readers, the christological dimension of the parable is more explicit, for they recognize that without the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the truth conveyed by this parable would not be possible.<sup>132</sup>

The parable of the Lost Son is also a stark portrayal of the attitude of the scribes and Pharisees, who are clearly represented in the character of the elder son.<sup>133</sup> Two pictures emerge. First, as we have seen, the elder son is not in a perfect relationship with his father. Nevertheless, his loyalty and sincerity are not disputed. Similarly, the religious authorities, themselves not "lost" in the strict sense, have misunderstood the nature and character of their God. Strict observance of the law is not the only way to love and acceptance.

Second, the elder son is not in a perfect relationship with his brother. In fact, his father has to re-stress the relationship which the elder boy denied. Similarly, the Pharisees and scribes had forgotten their relationship to their fellow-Israelites, refusing to accept them as brothers.<sup>134</sup> Technically they did

<sup>129</sup> See Pesch, "Exegese" 185–187.

<sup>130</sup> Weder, *Gleichnisse Jesu* 261; Meynet, *Luc* 2.165.

<sup>131</sup> Jeremias, *Parables* 132.

<sup>132</sup> Schweizer, *Lukas* 167.

<sup>133</sup> B. E. Beck discusses what he terms "the Pharisaic mind" as a mindset detrimental to following God. The Pharisees' attitude to wealth, pride, elitism, hypocrisy and misplaced devotion to the law typify most of the characteristics that Jesus teaches against and which Luke's readers must avoid. As such, the Pharisees are central in Luke's mind and provide structure for much of the Gospel (*Christian Character in the Gospel of Luke* [London: Epworth, 1989] 127–169).

<sup>134</sup> E. P. Sanders disagrees strongly with Jeremias (and the legacy handed down by him) in arguing that the Pharisees did not equate the *people of the land* with *sinners*. The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees was not, therefore, over table fellowship with the common folk, nor the associated issue of ritual purity, but arose because of Jesus' willingness to include sinners in the kingdom of God, apart from the requirements of the ceremonial law, if they responded to his message (*Jesus and Judaism* [London: SCM, 1985] 174–211). This issue is far from settled in NT scholarship, as evidenced by Meyer's disapproval of Sanders' criticism of Jeremias and Sanders's subsequent reply (see *JBL* 110 [1991] 451–462; 463–477). Perhaps it is a case of both sides overstating

not deny such people the right of repentance. However, they refused to associate with them and to acknowledge their right to belong to the people of God until repentance was confirmed in a tangible way (i.e. strict observance of the law).<sup>135</sup> Consequently, their self-righteous attitude prevented them from experiencing the joy that God experiences over the lost-now-found.<sup>136</sup>

Some commentators dispute the association of the Pharisees with the elder son as unwarranted allegory. This association is generally challenged at two points. First, such a negative depiction of the Pharisees is simply incorrect.<sup>137</sup> Second, assuming it is correct, the elder son is not an appropriate symbol. His objections to his father are not dismissed but acknowledged, he is always with the father and inherits all, and the father's gentle words could not be directed to the self-righteous.<sup>138</sup>

In response, it is evident that to some extent the resolution of the second objection cancels out the first. The scribes and Pharisees are not, in fact, represented in an entirely negative light. They do have a relationship to the father, and they are devoted and sincere. Nevertheless, all is not well with their outlook. They have shortcomings that Jesus wishes to address.<sup>139</sup>

In doing so, it is important to note that Jesus does not attack. The way he constructs the parable echoes the grace of the father in the parable. His aim is not to rebuke, but to win over.<sup>140</sup> As Hunter states, ". . . if it is polemic, it is polemic at its finest, polemic armed with the gentleness of love."<sup>141</sup>

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their case somewhat. Those Jews who continually violated the purity code would include those engaged in occupations that made the keeping of the law difficult. As such occupations encompassed donkey drivers, peddlers, tanners and shepherds (see Jeremias, *Parables* 132), a fair proportion of the *people of the land* may well have been despised by the religious authorities. This is confirmed by I. M. Zeitlin, who states, "In sum, an *am ha-aretz* is an ignorant individual who fails to educate himself and his children and who neglects or violates the ethical and ceremonial precepts of the twofold Torah" (*Jesus and the Judaism of his Time* [Cambridge: Polity, 1988] 104). See also the study by J. D. G. Dunn, who argues that "sinner" should be understood as a factional term. Against Sanders, he contends that the Pharisees would have been likely to despise those who did not follow the rigorous demands of their sect ("Pharisees, Sinners, and Jesus," *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism* [ed. J. Neusner et. al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988] 264–289).

<sup>135</sup> It is clear from the later rabbinic writings that repentance needed to be tangible; verbal repentance was not enough (*b. Sanh.* 25b). Thus repentance becomes inseparably connected with restitution (*b. B. Qam.* 94b; *b. B. Bat.* 88b). Because of this connection, at times repentance itself was seen in terms of a meritorious act (*b. Sanh.* 103a; *b. Abod. Zar.* 5a; *b. Menah.* 29b).

<sup>136</sup> Nolland points out that although there is no mention of heavenly joy in this parable, 15:10 paves the way for the reader to link the father's joy to divine joy (*Luke* 2:780).

<sup>137</sup> See Schottroff, "Gleichnis" 49–51.

<sup>138</sup> Scott, *Hear* 105; C. F. Evans, *Luke* 592.

<sup>139</sup> J. A. Darr points out that in 15:4–10 the Pharisees are encouraged to identify with the *ninety-nine who have no need of repentance*, thereby facilitating an identification with the elder son in the final parable. In so doing, Jesus traps them into self-evaluation (*On Character Building: The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts* [Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1992] 110).

<sup>140</sup> L. Goppelt correctly notes that the Pharisees are also called upon to repent, a repentance that involved a sharing of joy. In many ways this was a more difficult repentance, for they had to discard thoughts of self-righteousness and superiority (*Theology of the New Testament* [ed. J. Roloff; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981] 1.136).

<sup>141</sup> A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (London: SCM, 1960) 61.

It is also irrelevant to argue whether or not the Pharisees and scribes would have identified themselves with the elder son.<sup>142</sup> Jesus is forcing his audience to examine themselves, challenging their views of God and their fellow-Israelites. Thus, while they might not want to identify with the elder son, Jesus wants them to do so. Dupont comments, "Les termes par lesquels le fils aîné décrit sa conduite sont si précis qu'ils permettent d'identifier sans peine les interlocuteurs de Jésus. . . . On ne saurait décrire de façon plus exacte l'idéal religieux des scribes et des Pharisiens."<sup>143</sup>

Perhaps a qualification is needed at this point. It is not as though there is a definitive, one to one correspondence between the religious authorities and the elder son. Jesus is depicting a type of person or an attitude. This attitude is typified in the spirit of the Pharisees and certainly fits with other depictions that Luke's Jesus gives of them (cf. 14:1–6; 18:9–14). In fact, we can readily picture the elder son saying about his father, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."<sup>144</sup> Nevertheless, the story is not a complete allegory. Bailey notes that, in its final setting, the parable is addressed to every religious community, for all have their insiders and outsiders.<sup>145</sup>

A subsidiary theme that emerges from the parable is the proper use of wealth and possessions. Though not developed significantly here, it forms part of an important emphasis of the Third Gospel and is a significant factor running through many of the Lukan parables. This theme re-emerges more fully in the parables of the Dishonest Manager and the Rich Man and Lazarus in the following chapter.

Some have suggested that Luke found in the parable an application relevant for a mixed Jew/Gentile church.<sup>146</sup> While this is possible, the fact that the elder son is not rejected makes it difficult to detect a comment about the rejection of unbelieving Israel.<sup>147</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis above, it is evident that the parable of the Lost Son is rich in theological motifs. Among such motifs, particularly in its Lukan setting, is the theme of repentance. Furthermore, it would appear that not only Luke but also Jesus intends the character of the elder son to function as a rebuke to the Jewish religious authorities.

<sup>142</sup> As does Schottroff, "Gleichnis" 49–51.

<sup>143</sup> Dupont, *Béatitudes* 2.239. See also J. V. Kozar, "Absent Joy: An Investigation of the Narrative Pattern of Repetition and Variation in the Parables of Luke 15," *TJT* 8 (1992) 86, 91–92.

<sup>144</sup> Morris, *Luke* 243.

<sup>145</sup> Bailey, *Lost* 181. Lambrecht finds a special emphasis on rigorism versus those struggling with sin (*Once* 52).

<sup>146</sup> G. Braumann, "Tot–Lebendig, verloren–gefunden (Lk 15,24 und 32)," *Wort in der Zeit: Neutestamentliche Studien* (ed. W. Haubeck and M. Bachmann; Leiden: Brill, 1964) 156–164; Evans, *Luke* 592.

<sup>147</sup> Both Drury (*Tradition* 143–147) and Scott (*Hear* 124) believe that it is natural that the early church saw in the parable a description of its own relationship to Judaism. Thus the church identified itself with the younger son, while the faithless elder son typified unbelieving Israel. If this was the case, despite the problems inherent in associating Israel with the elder son, the church has ironically come dangerously close to emulating the attitude of the elder son!