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A Critical Examination of Luke 15: 11-32

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The parable of the prodigal son is arguably one of the most well-known and frequently referenced parables of Jesus. Although the story is attributed to Jesus of Nazareth, it cannot be said with certainty that it did, in fact, originate with Jesus. Nevertheless, biblical scholars, theologians, clergy, and laypersons alike have deemed the text worthy of analysis and interpretation throughout the centuries. As scholar Charles W. Hedrick establishes in his work *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, it is imperative that the content of a parable be considered in its constitutive elements as a literary work with a plot, characters, and an interior setting. This lessens the impact of any preconceived notions or external biases that may be imposed upon the story by its auditor, and that may serve as a hindrance to its original context (cf. 3). Only when an effort is made to regard a parable in its most original form can evaluations or interpretations be put forth.



A Critical Examination of Luke 15: 11-32

I. Introduction

The parable of the prodigal son is arguably one of the most well-known and frequently referenced parables of Jesus. Although the story is attributed to Jesus of Nazareth, it cannot be said with certainty that it did, in fact, originate with Jesus. Nevertheless, biblical scholars, theologians, clergy, and laypersons alike have deemed the text worthy of analysis and interpretation throughout the centuries. As scholar Charles W. Hedrick establishes in his work Parables as Poetic Fictions, it is imperative that the content of a parable be considered in its constitutive elements as a literary work with a plot, characters, and an interior setting. This lessens the impact of any preconceived notions or external biases that may be imposed upon the story by its auditor, and that may serve as a hindrance to its original context (cf. 3). Only when an effort is made to regard a parable in its most original form can evaluations or interpretations be put forth.

In this paper, I will present the interpretive responses of eight theologians in regards to this parable. These interpretations reflect both historical-critical and ecclesial approaches to the text, and offer provocative insights into the unraveling of the storyline and plot. After presenting these viewpoints, I will evaluate several of the positions in light of my own personal reading of the story. I will then offer a conclusion that suggests these varied positions work together as a resource for a better understanding of this parable within contemporary society.

II. Exegetical Analyses of the Parable of the Prodigal Son

Biblical scholar Mary Ann Tolbert views the parable of the prodigal son through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, and the teachings of its founder, Sigmund Freud in Perspectives on the Parables. Tolbert evaluates the parable as a self-contained entity, and does not compare it to other similar parables in Luke. She analyzes the literary content in terms of its relation to a “conscious representation of a wish-fulfillment dream” (Tolbert 97). She states that the elements contained in dreams are often reflective of a more complex unity, or a compounded understanding of existence, and that the structure of this parable establishes such a complex unity in the relationships between the father and his

two sons. These three central figures, or elements, of the story experience division or separation in their relationships, and Tolbert argues that the “wish” of the parable is “to reconcile these conflicting elements and restore unity” (cf. 97). The “wish” of this parable is fulfilled when its primary characters are reconciled to one another. Although this objective is not directly obtained at the conclusion of the parable, Tolbert contends that the father is, indeed, able to “[unify] the two sons within himself,” and the two sons “are joined through the person of the father figure,” by way of the statements offered by the father to each of his sons respectively (cf. 97-98).

Tolbert reiterates that this concept of complex unity is further demonstrated within the narrative structure of the parable itself (cf. 101). Defining the storyline as an example of a parallel plot parable, Tolbert upholds that there are two distinct yet complimentary storylines in the piece. Both of these storylines appear to center on the experiences between the two sons and their father, and contain parallels in their vocabulary and themes. The younger son leaves home on a journey, decides to return, is received by his father, confesses to him, and is offered his father’s response. Similarly, the elder son returns home from working in the field, receives a servant’s explanation of his brother’s return, is received by his father to whom he issues criticism, and then is offered his father’s response. Tolbert contends that, on a deeper level, these similarities between the two plots and the manner in which they are presented “[express] the longing of the human heart for wholeness, for a reintegration of the conflicting elements of life” (101). In this way, Tolbert is able to expound upon an emerging theme of this parable by considering theories often associated with the field of psychology.

In The Gospel in Parable, John R. Donahue examines the parable of the prodigal son in terms of its “dramatic structure,” rather than its reflections of psychoanalytic thought (cf. 152). Like Tolbert, he identifies the father as the central character within the story, but identifies only one storyline encompassing the actions of the three main figures. He considers the believability of the parable within the historical context, stating that the request of the younger son at the story’s opening, although potentially “inappropriate,” was legal in ancient Palestine. Although a son could ask his father for his share of his inheritance while his father was still living, he was forbidden to “jeopardize the capital” (cf. Donahue 154). It was required to remain within the family’s possession. Donahue stresses the severity with which the actions of the younger son in the parable would have been judged by original auditors, as he states: “By dissipating the property, the younger son severs the bonds with his father, with his people, and hence with God; he is no longer a son of his father and no longer a son of Abraham” (154). This reality is emphasized by the younger son himself during the story’s climax when he declares the confession he will present to his father upon returning home.

Donahue argues that the father’s actions during the “second act” of the parable would have been quite shocking to its ancient listeners since the son’s sin appeared rather extensive. The immediate compassion the father offers to his son before the confession can even be

completed is exceptional, and reinforces the theme of joyful celebration evident in the two preceding parables within the gospel of Luke. In similarity to Tolbert, Donahue also identifies deeper meanings evoked by the materials ordered by the father for his son. For instance, the robe and ring are often associated with authority, and sandals could only have been worn by individuals who were free (cf. 155). This supports the absence of the son's request for his father to treat him as a servant in the preceding section of the parable. Although the son expected to be treated as a slave, his father's response to his return extends beyond his expectations to a considerable degree.

Finally, Donahue considers the "third act" of this parable, and examines the relationship between the father and the elder son. He states that, again, the actions of the father in response to his son's behavior are startling. Although the son is self-righteous and defiant towards his father, the father "treats him as equal in authority and dignity and counters angry and divisive language with images of reconciliation and unity" (Donahue 157). Thus, literary and historical criticism of this parable uncovers elements that redefine ancient Jewish customs which permitted parents to harshly discipline rebellious children. On a more allegorical level, Donahue argues that this parable also alludes to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, or reign, of God, which "is the offer of God's mercy and love that shatters the categories of servility by which people seek God's favor" (158). In this way, man's relationship with God seems to be redefined by this parable as well.

Although in The Parables of Jesus Joachim Jeremias recognizes the love of the father character in the story as an "image" of God, he maintains that "[t]he parable is not an allegory, but a story drawn from life" (128). Jeremias argues that this reality is reflected in the younger son's declaration that he has sinned against heaven in addition to his earthly father (cf. 128). Like Donahue, Jeremias evaluates the validity of the parable's plot based upon information about ancient Jewish life. The fact that the father ran to greet his son would have been considered "a most unusual and undignified procedure for an aged oriental" (Jeremias 130). However, this inconceivable action is only followed by additional uncharacteristic responses on the part of the father, as mentioned earlier in Donahue's perspective.

Jeremias responds to critics who argue that the response of the elder brother was a later addition to the parable and not original to Jesus by stating that "linguistically and factually it fits the pattern of the story" (131). The opening sentence of the parable, which establishes that the father figure has two sons, supports Jeremias' argument. Based upon this belief that the parable was originally presented in its entirety, Jeremias postulates that the early auditors were most likely men who were similar to the elder brother in their hostility towards Jesus' gospel of God's love, grace, mercy, and goodness (cf. 132). It is possible that Jesus was responding to his critics while orating this parable. Jeremias argues that this possibility is further reflected in the two parables preceding the prodigal son parable in the Lucan account. These stories contain references to the "sinners" with whom Jesus was accused of associating, mainly shepherds and those who lived in disobedience to the Torah. With each of these characters experiencing a celebration at the parables' conclusions, Jeremias argues that Jesus is emphasizing the extension of God's love to sinners who repent (cf. 132). This interpretation serves to

illustrate the theological components that can be drawn from the parables upon critical analysis.

In Jesus of the Parables, Eta Linnemann similarly interprets the parable as “the answer of Jesus to the protest of the Pharisees against his table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners” (73). She attempts to evaluate the parable in terms of how it might have originally been received by its first auditors. If this parable was, indeed, presented to an audience of Pharisees in response to their criticism, Linnemann argues that these individuals would undoubtedly have noticed the parallels between the questionable living practices of the younger son and the behaviors of the ‘tax-collectors’ and ‘sinners’ whom they reviled. However, she also maintains that these apparent similarities do not ensure that the character of the son is allegorical for a ‘tax-collector’ or ‘sinner’ (cf. Linnemann 75-76). It can exist within the plot of the story as a self-contained attribute.

In addition to the uncharacteristic action within the parable of a male head of household running, which was discussed earlier, Linnemann stresses that the father’s subsequent actions of kissing and embracing his son would have been viewed peculiarly in ancient Palestinian culture. The father’s embrace of his son indicates that he is preventing the son from humbling himself before his father. Similarly, in offering a kiss to his son the father is demonstrating his acceptance of him and establishing him as his equal (cf. Linnemann 77). Since respect for and subordination to parents was a crucial component of ancient life, the father’s response to his younger son’s return would have inevitably startled its early auditors. Although fatherly compassion was not an entirely foreign concept to ancient Jews, there were also strict requirements that repentant sinners needed to adhere to before they could be considered forgiven. In this story, forgiveness is offered in an unconditional and unconventional manner. Although the behavior of the elder son alludes to that of the Pharisees, especially in his statement that he obeyed all of his father’s commands, Linnemann argues that the Pharisees’ protest towards Jesus’ association with ‘sinners’ is not analogous to the son’s protest of his father’s celebration for the younger son. Nevertheless, it is evident that the allusion would have evoked the attention of Jesus’ listeners and warranted a response from them (cf. Linnemann 80). This interpretation demonstrates the applicability of Jesus’ parables to the reality in which he was living.

After critically evaluating the parable as one unit that includes the two parables preceding it in Luke 15, Kenneth E. Bailey concludes that “all three are symbols for God, and that all three evolve into symbols for Jesus” (57) in Jacob & the Prodigal. He establishes that the father character in the parable of the prodigal son serves as a metaphor both for God and the person of Jesus. In presenting the father as exhibiting behavior that far exceeds the traditional expectations of an ancient patriarch, Bailey contends that “Jesus elevate[d] the figure of father beyond its human limitations as he reshape[d] it into his primary metaphor for God” (101). This metaphor is also extended to Jesus himself in that the father’s act of preparing a banquet for his wayward son is reflective of Jesus’ actions of dining with and openly receiving ‘sinners’ as table companions (cf. Bailey 62). These metaphors would most likely have been readily

apparent to the original audience of this parable, which the Lucan account describes as being primarily comprised of religious leaders.

Bailey examines the content of the parable, and describes several words and phrases that might be subject to misinterpretation apart from considering the manner in which they would have been received by ancient listeners. For instance, he cites the common conception within Christian thought that the prodigal son acknowledged his sin prior to returning to his father. However, Bailey suggests that the phrase uttered by the younger son regarding sinning against heaven and against his father is a quote from a scene in Exodus issued by Pharaoh to Moses in a dishonest attempt to manipulate Moses to ask God to stop the plagues. It is not heartfelt or genuine repentance. Jesus' audience of scribes and Pharisees was well-versed in the Scriptures, and would have recognized this parallel. Further, Bailey maintains that it is stated within the parable itself that the son was motivated by hunger to return to his father, and not by sincere remorse (cf. Bailey 106-107). This discrepancy is of utmost significance if the parable is to be interpreted as containing metaphorical language for God. As Bailey states, the fact that the son is not able to offer an honest apology until he is moved by his father's "self-emptying love" is indicative of the inability of humans to return to God unaided. Once the father warmly receives his son, the son offers the first two components of his prepared speech. Although it is commonly assumed that the father interrupted his son before he could offer the third component, Bailey insists that the son selflessly omitted this element. His primary focus was no longer on serving himself by obtaining access to food, and he was able to wholeheartedly confess his wrong-doing without any sort of agenda (cf. Bailey 109). This viewpoint seems to offer a perception of the parable that differs from more contemporary understandings of the story within Christian thought.

In The Parables of the Synoptic Gospels, B.T.D. Smith considers the parable in terms of the presentation of its multiple parts. He notes that the story is divided unequally, with a greater emphasis placed on the actions of the younger son rather than the elder son. Smith does not suppose that this inequality represents, as some scholars contend, that the concluding scene between the father and elder son was added later to address the issue of Pharisaic criticism of Jesus' acceptance of 'sinners.' He does, however, argue that this section of the parable is a significant component of its overall interpretation. Smith states that this part of the story allows the auditor to recognize that the parable's plot is not resolved at its conclusion (cf. Smith 193). Listeners are forced to wonder how the elder son will respond to his father's imploring. This ending scene of the story also reinforces the theme that surrounds the parable in its entirety. According to Smith, "By drawing emphatic attention to the peculiar quality of a father's joy in a recovered son [this section] subserve[s] the leading thought of the parable" (193). Similarly, he insists that this deeper meaning within the parable might not have been as readily recognized by its audience if not for the interaction between the father and elder son.

Smith describes the response of the elder son to his father's exuberant welcome of the prodigal son as "natural," and not controversial. He recognizes in this scene an apparent allusion to "the godly and their attitude towards the mission to the outcast," and

argues that the original intent of this portion of the parable may have been “to give assurance to the penitent” (cf. Smith 194). In this way, the parable emphasizes the forgiveness that will be offered to those who repent, as opposed to an open rebuke of the elder son for his oppositional response to his father’s behavior. By examining this unique section of the parable, Smith illuminates the greater meaning it might contain within its verses, as well as the way in which original audiences might have received it.

In The Parables of the Kingdom, C.H. Dodd seeks to analyze the parable of the prodigal son by comparing and contrasting it to the two parables that precede it in the gospel of Luke. Dodd states that the third parable in this series “is not exactly parallel with the other two” (92). According to Dodd, the first two parables seem to focus on a person’s delight after finding a lost possession that an “outsider” might consider “trifling” (cf. 92). Dissimilarly, Dodd states that the point of the prodigal son parable “would seem to lie in the contrast between the delight of a father at the return of his scapegoat son, and the churlish attitude of the ‘respectable’ elder brother” (92-93). This parable seems to be more complex in its plot than the two preceding it. There are additional human characters and, thereby, multifaceted relationships that exist between these individuals. Like other scholars previously mentioned in this text, Dodd affirms that the story is applicable to Jesus’ ministry, as is suggested by the Lucan context that describes Jesus articulating the parable to a group of Pharisees (cf. 93). By considering this parable in relation to the stories preceding it, Dodd presents elements of the parable that may have previously been unnoticed.

Herman Hendrickx provides a detailed exegesis concerning the verses of the parable as they appear in the gospel in The Parables of Jesus. Although some scholars, like Donahue, suggest that it would have been culturally acceptable for a son in ancient Palestine to request his share of his father’s property while the father was still living and healthy, Hendrickx contends that the younger son’s request essentially established that he considered his father to be dead. Based upon this harsh consideration by the son towards his father, Hendrickx concludes that it is, in fact, an extraordinary element of the parable that the father willingly permits his son’s request (cf. 151). Hendrickx emphasizes the significance of the original Greek meaning of the words present in the parable. For instance, *apedemesen* is utilized to describe the younger son’s journey “away from his own people.” In Greek, the word used for the phrase “leaving his own people” is also interpreted “as a euphemism for dying.” In similarity, the phrase *eis choran makran*, or “into a far country,” indicates “the younger son is really separated from his father” (cf. Hendrickx 152). In this case, the separation would be both literal in terms of distance and figurative in terms of the son’s relationship with his father. Although the text specifies that the younger son disposed of his income in “loose living,” Hendrickx mentions that it does not specifically describe how the son lost his funds, and concludes that this omission “implies that his fault resides mainly in the irremediable loss of the inheritance” (cf. 152). This particular interpretation is notable since it entails that the younger son was not necessarily living sinfully, or immorally, as contemporary Christian interpreters often seem to maintain. His questionable behavior could have been found in the singular action of spending his inheritance irresponsibly.

Hendrickx particularly notes the words spoken by the father to his elder son at the conclusion of the parable. He states that the term *teknon* means child, which is understood to be more “affectionate and reconciliatory” than the term *huios*, or son. By addressing the elder son in this manner, the father “assures him that his rights are not affected by the grace shown to his younger brother” (cf. Hendrickx 159). By claiming that all he has belongs to the son, the father establishes that “[the son] already ha[s] everything,” and thus has no reason to complain, while his younger son had been separated from the family and, by consequence, its possessions (cf. Hendrickx 159). Hendrickx’s critical reflection on this text offers profound insight into its interpretation and further consideration.

III. Personal Interpretation of the Parable of the Prodigal Son

After considering the exegetical analyses of several prominent theologians in response to the parable of the prodigal son, I find myself both agreeing and disagreeing with aspects of the various critical approaches. Although all of the points I have examined are incredibly thought-provoking and astute, I have uncertainties regarding some of the arguments raised and their style. For instance, I am wary of Mary Ann Tolbert’s perspective on the parable since she relies on psychological concepts over a more balanced literary criticism of the story. As scholar Charles W. Hendrick contends, “A reader is not authorized to go outside the world of the story or to use non-story ‘referential’ language in ‘interpreting’ the story, unless it is mandated by particular semantic markers in the story itself” (3). However, Tolbert does defend her use of psychoanalysis, recognizing the need to refrain from infringing upon the integrity of the literature by imposing an exterior position upon it. She maintains that analyzing the parable in this way is necessary due to the growing tendency of modern humanity to express “its self-understanding in psychological terms” (cf. Tolbert 94-95). She argues, “[T]he parable must speak convincingly to some deep layer of the human psyche in order for it to have maintained its prominence in the Christian tradition” (Tolbert 96). I agree with this statement, and feel that any interpretative effort to discover this layer could arguably lead to a more advanced understanding of the parable within its literary context. Based upon this defense, I can conclude that my objections are a response to the approach itself, and not Tolbert’s use of it.

Personally, I view the parable’s ability to remain relevant to numerous generations throughout history as indicative of its inherent value and ageless meaning on multiple levels. I agree with theologian W.O.E. Oesterley’s argument that the specific details within the story are not crucial to its plot or its capacity to affect an auditor or reader. As Oesterley affirms, “The essence of the teaching, the central point of the parables, would not have been affected, had there been ten sheep, or five pieces of money, or several sons” (183). Likewise, the generally accepted title that is typically associated with the parable could arguably be altered without detriment to the literary work as a whole. Since all of the central characters in the story seem to be significant, the story could easily be termed “The Broken Family,” or “The Jealous Brother,” or “The Loving Father.” Therefore, I am apprehensive of interpretations that focus on the story’s details as integral components of the storyline. While Donahue’s thoughts on the

deeper meaning associated with the clothing items provided to the prodigal son upon his return are insightful, I question whether the omission of these items from the parable would hinder a reader's ability to perceive the son as receiving an overtly exuberant welcome. This possibility seems especially questionable in light of the descriptive phrase "[a]nd they began to celebrate" as well as the words spoken by the father, "for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" (cf. Lk 15: 23-24) which immediately follow the text describing the father's order for the clothing items. Nevertheless, it would seem that excessive argument against belaboring detailed elements of the story would be counterproductive in that the argument itself would be delegating a large portion of energy to these very elements.

After analytically reading this parable, I find that I am in agreement with both Jeremias and Smith in that I think that the story's ending was included in the original story and not as an addition at a later date. As Jeremias suggests, the first line of the parable establishes that the father has two sons, and I consider it odd that a character would be introduced in a story without any further mention within the text. While the story would still be coherent if the final scene were not present, the storyline seems to flow more smoothly with its inclusion. This scene is relatively equal in length to the opening and middle scenes, which might suggest that it was not haphazardly strewn in as an afterthought.

Interestingly, this paper presents two opposing viewpoints regarding the legality and permissibility of the younger son's action of requesting his share of his father's estate prior to his father's death. While one scholar maintains that the act was considered acceptable in ancient Palestinian culture, another argues that the act would have been equivalent to the son viewing his father as dead. Since there appears to be a stark contrast between these two positions, I can surmise that one most likely has more historical accuracy than the other. In my opinion, it is the latter view that holds more credence. Since ancient Jewish culture dictated that children honor their parents, it would seem that a son demanding a portion of his father's estate before the father's actual death would be viewed as highly disrespectful. However, it might be that there is truth in both of these statements. For instance, it might have been culturally unacceptable, yet legally allowable, for a son to present such a request to his father.

I also am inclined to agree with Bailey's contention that the younger son's decision to return to his father and confess his wrongdoing was not motivated by sincere remorse. The text does not mention the son experiencing an awareness of his offenses against his father or against heaven, even though he chooses to include this statement in his confession to his father. Instead, the son's sensation of hunger causes him to reach the realization that he could receive food if he returned home and asked his father to treat him as a hired hand (cf. Lk 15: 17-19). His confession, thereby, seems to serve as a means for the son to obtain his desired end of satisfying his hunger, rather than as a heartfelt admission of transgression. However, I also agree with Bailey that the son's selfishness is not permanent, as he does not ask to be treated as a servant upon reuniting with his father, but, instead, simply acknowledges his sin and unworthiness to be called a son (cf. Lk 15: 21). Like Bailey, I also think that the father did not interrupt his son's

speech but that the omission of this final component was an intentional act within the story that indicates genuine repentance. The text does not seem to contain any indicators that would reference an interruption by the father, but, rather, the son is able to finish his sentence.

Although I recognize the necessity of viewing the parables of Jesus without an allegorical or ecclesial frame in an effort to establish their most original form, I think that the presence of the final scene in this parable alludes to the possibility for a deeper meaning to exist. The overwhelming compassion that the father displays towards both of his sons seems quite exceptional, and prompts questions of whether or not his actions are representative of a response that extends beyond general human nature. Similarly, the objections put forth by the elder son mirror common human responses to the extension of God's grace to "sinners," or those individuals who are deemed "lost causes" by their contemporaries or society as a whole. As I mentioned earlier, the fact that this story continues to have an impact on its readers seems to reflect elements that are more profound and intense in nature, and that cannot be easily evaluated solely in terms of the plot of the storyline.

IV. Conclusion

Although the parable of the prodigal son encompasses less than a page in the New Testament, detailed and varied interpretations of the text abound. The interpretations considered in this text contain both similarities and differences to one another, and reflect a slight portion of the various viewpoints currently in circulation. As is an essential component of any critical analysis of ancient texts, virtually all of the positions discussed in this work consider the historical and sociological context in which this parable is believed to have been delivered by Jesus. While some tend to allegorize, others are more focused on specific plot elements.

After attempting to respond to the views present in this paper while adding my own personal reading of the parable, I have reached the conclusion that there seems to be no singular interpretation that holds precedence over the others. They all present viable points that merit reflection and consideration in further study, and they all illumine aspects of the parable's plot in compelling and meaningful ways that retain their relevancy into the modernity of the present.

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