

THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL FATHER

AN INTERPRETATIVE KEY TO THE THIRD GOSPEL

(LUKE 15:11-32)

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Summary

Agreement on a title for the parable in Luke 15:11-32 has proved problematic for interpreters: is this primarily a story about the 'son' or 'sons' or a 'family'? While such descriptions are viable, they are insufficient and the view taken in this essay, along with that of an increasing number of scholars—not discounting the role of the two sons—is to approach the story from a paternal perspective. Moreover, this parable is about a 'prodigal father' for his extravagant generosity and liberality is highly unusual and unexpected. Such conduct, however, is no less a part of the evangelist's wider agenda of 'prodigality' in the third Gospel, where the same munificence and largesse are characteristics consonant with those who belong in the kingdom of God. It is concluded that if the father is representative of God in his reckless beneficence then another legitimate designation for this narrative should be 'The Parable of the Prodigal Father'.¹

1. Introduction

The debate over the title of the last of the trilogy of parables in Luke 15—arguably the best known and certainly the longest in the Gospels—has at times proved contentious and inconclusive. This is due in part to the interpreter's perception concerning the main character(s) in the narrative. By far the most common approach adopted by

¹ I am grateful to Drs Craig Blomberg, Carolyn Osiek, Arlund Hultgren and Joel Green for their helpful comments on versions of this article, though I assume responsibility for the content. Thanks also to Simeon Burke for formatting the final version for publication.

commentators and scholars alike has been to focus on the filial dimension of the storyline and the reckless behaviour of the younger son, prompting Howard Marshall, among many others, to designate this ‘the parable of the prodigal son’.² Others have taken issue with this rather narrowly-driven agenda. For example, Frederick Danker concentrates his efforts not on one but the two sons, since both are understood to be acting in a profligate manner, and prefers to view this as a story of ‘the prodigal sons’.³ Still others take a broader holistic tack, concluding that the parable is not about the individual characters in the storyline but more about a community—an ancient household—and is therefore a tale about ‘a dysfunctional family’.⁴

These are all legitimate ways of looking at the narrative; nevertheless, over the years and currently this has not prevented an increasing number of interpreters viewing the parable from a paternal perspective.⁵ Indeed, there is good reason for approaching the story

² I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (2nd edn; NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978): 598, though he does agree with Thielicke that the father is the main figure. The literature which has grown up around this approach to the parable is considerable. See, for example, K. H. Rengstorf, *Die Re-Investitur des Verlorenen Sohnes in der Gleichniserzählung Jesu Luk.15,11-32* (Köln: Verlag, 1967); W. Pöhlmann, *Der Verlorene Sohn und das Haus, Studien zu Lukas im Horizont der antiken Lehre von Haus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1993); F. Bovon: ‘The Parable of the Prodigal Son: First Reading’ in *Exegesis: Problems of Method and Exercises in Reading Genesis 22 and Luke 15*, ed. F. Bovon, & G. Rouillier (Pennsylvania: Pickwick Press, 1978): 441-66; J. D. M. Derrett, ‘Law in the New Testament: The Parable of the Prodigal Son’, *NTS* 14 (1967): 56-74; B. B. Scott, ‘The Prodigal Son: A Structuralist Interpretation’, *Semeia* 9 (1977): 45-73; D. A. Holgate, *Prodigality, Liberality, and Meanness in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: A Greco-Roman Perspective on Luke 15:11-32* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

³ F. W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988): 275.

⁴ R. L. Rohrbaugh, ‘A Dysfunctional Family and Its Neighbors (Luke 15:11b-32)’ in *Jesus and His Parables*, ed. V. G. Schillington (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997): 141-64.

⁵ E.g., J. Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1954): 128; H. Thielicke, *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parable of Jesus* (London: James Clark Company, 1987). E. Schweizer, *The Gospel according to Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984): 247-48; K. E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008): 355, asserts that the parable has been mistakenly titled and concludes: ‘The ... parable in Luke 15:11-32 ... has traditionally been called the parable of the prodigal son, as if the wayward younger son were the central figure in the parable rather than the father’ (emphasis added). J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (AB 28A; Liturgical Press: Doubleday, 1985): 1084, notes: ‘“The prodigal son,” and the traditional German title *Der verlorene Sohn* scarcely sum up more than an aspect of the story. The parable of ‘the two sons’ is hardly an improvement ... the ‘parable of the Father’s love’ comes closer to an adequate summary, for the central figure in the story really is the father.’ A. J.

accordingly, for in the first instance the father is presented as ‘the master’ or ‘authority figure’ and the sons as the ‘two contrasting *subordinates*’ in the narrative.⁶ This is evident by the way the parable begins—‘there was a certain man’ (v. 11) whom the Gospel evangelist immediately identifies (twice) as the ‘father’ (πατήρ, v. 12). Moreover, this is also how the parable concludes (‘The father said, ‘My son, you are always with me’ vv. 31-32) as the father explains to the older son the necessity for the celebration in light of the return of the younger son.⁷ Thus, the father figure functions as an *inclusio* or as ‘book-ends’ to the story, prompting Joachim Jeremias to conclude for most interpreters holding to this hermeneutic that ‘[t]he father, and not the returning son, is the central figure’ in the narrative.⁸

With this in mind, and without diminishing the importance of the two sons, I shall approach the parable from the perspective of the father. But if the father features as the main protagonist in the parable (and not as an extra or a background character), I wish to further argue that this story is as much about a ‘*prodigal father*’⁹ for his behaviour is highly unusual and appears to be every bit as rash and unconventional as the younger and older sons.¹⁰ Approaching the parable from this

Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002): 72, writes: ‘[A]s the parable unfolds, it is clear that the central figure is not the younger son but the father of the two sons.’ S. Eastman, ‘The Foolish Father and the Economics of Grace’, *Expository Times* 117 (2006): 402-405, rightly indicates in the main title of her article that this ‘famously misnamed ... Parable of the Prodigal Son’ is misplaced since the father is the primary figure in the storyline.

⁶ C. L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990): 171 (emphasis added). Blomberg, however, is of the view that there are three main characters in the story.

⁷ If statistics are anything to go by, the noun ‘father’ occurs on ten occasions whereas ‘son(s)’ (of which there are two) is only found eight times. Also, those listening to this parable would expect the father as the head of the household to take centre stage in the narrative. And viewing the parable from the perspective of the father also has the advantage of uniting the ‘two halves’ of the story as the father entertains both sons—on this last point, see Bovon, ‘The Prodigal Son,’ 446.

⁸ Jeremias, *Parables*, 128 n. 63. See also n. 5.

⁹ C. Osiek and D. L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997): 139. While interpreters have described this parable as ‘The *Waiting Father*’ (Thielicke) or ‘The *Foolish Father*’ (Eastman) no one to my knowledge has approached it from the perspective of the ‘*Prodigal Father*’.

¹⁰ Viewing the father’s actions as unconventional is also significant in light of the way that the Third Gospel begins. Even though the evangelist is committed to a typical view of family life, in Luke 1:16 he does not address the need for children to obey their fathers, which is what the reader would expect. Rather, he writes that the ‘*the hearts of the fathers ... be turned to their children*’ which is highly significant in the

perspective, however immediately prompts an important caveat because the father's so-called 'prodigality' is of a more positive nature than that of the younger son. That is to say, whereas the term 'prodigal' (δαπανήσαντος, Luke 15:14) used here to describe the actions of the younger son means to 'spend freely ... waste everything'¹¹ and has therefore clear pejorative connotations, I am using the expression 'prodigal' to describe the father's actions in a more positive sense as in the case of the 'Good Samaritan', for example where the cognate verb προσδαπάνησῃς (Luke 10:35) means 'spend in addition'¹² and so suitably describes the father's liberal generosity. Indeed, viewing the father's conduct from the perspective of the latter has not been without its advocates, as David Holgate, for example, has rightly noted that the father's actions and treatment are 'governed by the ... principles of liberality ... in his dealing with his two sons'.¹³ Holgate, however, situates the father's largesse and open-handedness against a *topos* from Graeco-Roman moral philosophy where mimesis, celebration and moral exhortation are to the fore.¹⁴ While there may be certain commonalities between the father's liberality and the ideals of the Graeco-Roman world, I will argue in the first part of this essay that the father's unusual conduct—including his reckless charity—is *not what would be expected*, especially when situated against the standard social assumptions of the (Jewish and non-Jewish) father-son relationship of the period. This will be followed by a discussion of how the father's behaviour can be understood within the wider provenance of the Third Gospel after which we conclude by commenting on the message which the evangelist is seeking to convey by portraying the father's behaviour in this way.

Roman world, where Jewish and non-Jewish fathers had almost absolute power over their children. This *unexpected* inversion at the outset of the Gospel is preparatory for our reading of the parable and alerts us to the fact that the father who despite his son's actions will also have his heart turned towards him; see also D. Good, *Jesus' Family Values* (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2006): 93.

¹¹ BDAG, 212.

¹² BDAG, 876. See later for a discussion of this text.

¹³ Holgate, *Prodigality, Meanness and Liberality*, 191 and 168 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ The *topos* in question is 'On Covetousness and Moral Philosophy'. Holgate's approach to the father's conduct also provides no room for seeing the father as being representative of God. See n. 85.

2. Three Prodigal Actions of the Father

Scene 1:

There are three significant scenes concerning the father's conduct which are worthy of comment. First, the parable opens with the father's younger son coming to him for his 'share of the inheritance' (lit. 'the share of the property that will belong to me', μοι τὸ ἐπιβάλλον μέρος τῆς οὐσίας, v. 12).¹⁵ The father-son relationship in the ancient world was a hierarchical one—Philo writes that 'parents belong to the superior class ... while children occupy the lower position of junior' (*Spec. Leg.* 2. 226-27; cf. Ps. Phocylides, *Sent.* 8; Plutarch, *Frat. Amor.* 4:479F)—and so for this son to also *demand*¹⁶ his share of the inheritance while his father was still living would have been construed as unusual. A father was not normally obligated to divide the inheritance during his lifetime,¹⁷ as the following sage advice of the period makes clear:

To a son or wife, a brother or friend, do not give power over yourself, *as long as you live ... do not give your property to another*, lest you change your mind and must ask for it. While you are still alive and have breath in you, do not let anyone take your place ... At the time when you end the days of your life, in the hour of death, distribute your inheritance (Sir. 33:19-23).¹⁸

¹⁵ Secular Greek has similar expressions to the one found here, including Didorus Siculus, *History* 14.17.5: τὸ ἐπιβάλλον αὐτοῖς μέρος. See also A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient Near East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Greco-Roman World* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927): 166, where he lists an inscription from a pre-Christian ostrakon: ἀπέχω παρὰ σοῦ τὸ ἐπιβάλλον μοι ἐκφόπιον ('I have received from you the fruit falling to me').

¹⁶ The younger son does not ask but issues an *order* or a *command*—'Give me', δός μοι (v. 12)—for his share of the inheritance. The imperative mood, in addition to the 'aorist tense of the verb calls for a specific action with a note of urgency'—C. L. Rogers Jr. and C. L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998): 148. See now J. D. Fantin, *The Greek Imperative Mood in the New Testament* (Berlin, Lang, 2010).

¹⁷ This was certainly the case in Roman law, where an inheritance was only effective after death, as F. Schulz, *Classical Roman Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951): 242, makes clear: 'It is incredible that a testator should ever convey his whole present and future estate to someone with immediate effect: he would then have been entirely dependent upon the goodwill of the *familiae emptor* [= the trustee of the estate]'.
¹⁸ Similarly, the Babylonian Talmud also counsels: 'Our Rabbis taught: three cry out and are not answered: he who has money and lends it without witnesses; he who acquires a master; *he who transfers his property to his children in his lifetime*' (*b. Baba Mezia*, 75b). See also Tob. 8:21; *Apoc. of Sed.* 6.4. Admittedly, the views represented here and in the Mishna are more opinions rather than strict legislation to follow.

It is at this early point in the narrative that the question of the stereotypical expectations of paternal conduct would have been triggered in the minds of the first hearers regarding what the father would do. Would the father capitulate and give in to the desires of his son? More importantly, what *ought*¹⁹ the father to have done in the circumstances? As noted, the son's ultimatum signifies a break with the social norms of family etiquette but it is what is about to happen next as regards the actions of the father that is even more jarring and shocking. Startlingly, the father acquiesces and gives the younger (and older) son his share of the inheritance without any demurring or a single word being uttered: 'So he divided his property between them' (ὁ δὲ διεἴλεν αὐτοῖς τὸν βίον, v. 12).²⁰ Such an action would have been surprising to those listening especially as we have already noted fathers were specifically cautioned against giving their inheritance to their offspring or to *anyone* else during their lifetime.²¹ Usually it was only

Nevertheless, the counsel that is given here is sagacious and is therefore advice that could be relied upon and be expected to be followed.

¹⁹ When the NT authors use family language such as 'father' and 'son(s)' how were these terms heard and understood by the first hearers? Undergirding these expressions in the ancient world is a whole raft of stereotypical attitudes, what we could call *normal social expectations* where e.g. fathers, were supposed to exercise authority and discipline their children and the latter were to reciprocate by obeying, imitating, etc. their father's example; see the following studies H. Moxnes, "'What is Family?': Problems in Constructing Early Christian Families' in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. H. Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1994): 13-41 (18); T. J. Burke, *Family Matters: A Socio-Historical Study of Kinship Metaphors in Thessalonians* (JSNTS 247; London: T&T Clark, 2003): 28-33; Burke, 'Paul's New Family in Thessalonica', *NovT* 54.3 (2012): 269-87.

²⁰ Interpreters are divided over the meaning of a number of issues here, not least the meaning of βίος which is probably best understood as 'property' or 'livelihood' (i.e. life savings, the farm, animals, and crops), a term that is synonymous with the earlier expression οὐσία. Such a reading makes sense as the evangelist goes on to say that the father does 'divide' (διαιρέω) his property between the two sons. Additionally, the latter verb can also be used to describe the dividing of *estates* and *territories* (e.g., Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.22; cf. Luke 21:4). However, it is unclear that if a third of the land was passed on to the son that he could sell it. The Mishna states that neither father nor son could sell the land while the father was still alive: the father could not sell it because he had given it to the son and the latter could not dispose of it either while the father is still alive since the father still continues to have possession of the estate. Alternatively, it is stated that the son could sell it but that the purchaser has no claim on the estate until the death of the father (cf. *M. B. Bathra*. 8:1).

²¹ An exception to this rule, however is found in the Mishna: 'If one assigns in writing his property to his children, he must write 'from today and after [my] death' (*M. B. Bathra* 8.7) which the Babylonian Talmud interprets as describing exceptional circumstances, for example, a father 'in good health ... who desires ... to marry a second time, and wishes to protect the sons that were born from his first marriage from the possible seizure of his estate by his second wife'; I. Epstein, *The Babylonian*

when the father had died that a son could receive the portion allotted to him.²²

It was also assumed in accordance with the stereotypical expectations in antiquity that the younger son would stay at home and work (like the older son) and care for his father in his old age which included giving the latter a decent burial (e.g., Philo, *Opif.* 1:104-105; Seneca, *De Ben.* 4:25.). The son's demands, moreover would also have been construed by the first hearers as a challenge to the father, who as the head of the household had 'authority over [his] offspring' (Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 2:231, 233; Josephus, *Ap.* 2:199; Seneca, *De Ben.* 3:37:1-3). Given the importance of reciprocity in the ancient world, children in turn, were expected 'to reverence ... and honour parents ... and yield to those in authority' (Plutarch, *De lib.* 10). The patriarchal structure of ancient society moreover required that children were always expected to show deference to their father. To be sure, a father's absolute authority over his children may have been waning by the time of the empire,²³ but the father was still a formidable figure within his household and had considerable power at his disposal, especially when this is understood against the prevailing background of the Roman world.²⁴ Therefore, the father's failure to exercise this rite would undoubtedly have been unsettling to the first hearers of this story and have left them wondering why he does not discipline his son (e.g., Prov. 29:17; Ben. Sir. 30:2, 13; Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 2:232) by bringing him into line, rather than emptying his pockets and giving in to his demands. How this factors into our understanding of the dynamics of the parable will become apparent as we proceed,²⁵ but at this stage of the narrative the reader is left thinking that it is not only the younger son whose behaviour (as the story continues to unfold) is wasteful,

Talmud, Seder Nezikin, Baba Bathra II, trans. and ed. I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935): 573 n.1.

²² An important and often overlooked point in the parable is that the son was not entitled to any 'share' but only what would fall to his lot if the father calculated what would be reasonable if such a separation during his lifetime took place. In this regard, note especially the conditionality of the statements in n. 21. See also Derrett, 'Law in the New Testament', 59.

²³ E.g., Sextus Empiricus, *Pyr.* 3.211.

²⁴ See J. Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome: The People and the City at the Height of the Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1940): 76-80. R. P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 102-132.

²⁵ See pp. 235-36.

extravagant and reckless—the father, as rightly noted by Carolyn Osiek and David Balch,²⁶ appears to act with a similar kind of reckless abandon by behaving in a ‘prodigal’ manner, namely by generously giving the son his portion of the inheritance in advance,²⁷ as opposed to administering the necessary correction normally expected of him.

Scene 2:

A second point to note in the parable is in regard to the father’s reaction and behaviour to the return of his younger son. Having prodigally squandered that inheritance so prodigally given to him by his father, the younger son, now penniless, is anxious to return home (v. 17). But no sooner has the son resolved to do so than we read of the father’s response: ‘while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; *he ran to his son* and threw his arms around him and kissed him’ (v. 20). Again, there is no exchange of words and no time given for an apology from the son—just warm embrace, a kiss, and acceptance by the father²⁸ who neither waits to find out what his son was up to or what had been on his mind. Additionally, the father throws caution to the wind and with little concern for his public image or dignity does not walk but runs to his son which would have been unnerving to those listening to this story—for a mature, adult male to run was not only undignified but also a sign of not being in control. In this respect Ben Sir. 19:30 delineates that ‘a man’s manner of walking tells what he is’ which in the present context, as Kenneth Bailey notes, is more than likely a comment on ‘the slow, stately walk expected of men of position, age and rank in that society’.²⁹ This, in addition to his having to pull up his tunic and tuck it

²⁶ Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 139.

²⁷ Though, as noted above (n. 21 and 22) there were rare exceptions to when a father would give a son his inheritance, G. W. Forbes’s comment is on the mark: ‘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’ (emphasis added); see *The God of Old: The Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke’s Gospel* (JSNTS 198; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000): 133.

²⁸ K. H. Rengstorf, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962): 186, highlights the father’s acceptance of the prodigal back into the household as a son; ‘Das Bild des Vaters, der dem heimkehrenden Sohne entgegeneilt, kein ins einzelne gehendes Schuldbekenntnis zuläßt ihn umarmt, ihm das Festgewand anlagen und ihm neben den Ring anstecken läßt, der ihn *als Sohn vom Sklaven unterscheidet*’ (emphasis added).

²⁹ K. E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999): 181. Clement of

into his belt, meant the father would have been shamefully exposing himself thereby bringing public humiliation upon himself and his family in the eyes of the whole community.³⁰ Once again the impulsive and reckless father in the heat of the moment acts out of character and breaks with the social norms—he does not do what the first hearers would expect him to do. Rather than disciplining his son, the father’s actions, especially the display of tender affection and compassion (v. 20b) and the ostentatiousness of the accompanying gifts (‘the *best*³¹ robe’, ‘a ring’ and ‘the fattened calf’, vv. 22-23), might appear excessive, but they are deemed appropriate by the father for a celebration and are without equal or precedence in the rest of the New Testament. It is quite a turnaround in fortunes as John Barclay adroitly comments: ‘*Everything here is extravagance, expense, surfeit*—after the prodigal’s extreme lack, in which no one deigned to give him anything, he is now judged worthy to receive the very best and to receive it from those he has wounded most’, including his own father.³² By accepting his son back again, and in the way that he did, the father’s actions, as noted by Gerald Hughes, are ‘even more prodigal than the son’.³³

Alexandria also comments: ‘For *from his look shall a man be known ... the man is known [by] ... dress ... the step of his foot ... tell tales of him*’ (Paed. III).

³⁰ Rohrbaugh, ‘A Dysfunctional Family’, 156. Forbes, *The God of Old*, 138; F. Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (vol. 3; Benziger: Verlag, 2001): 49, comments accordingly: ‘Der Vater rennt – ein *nicht eben standesgemäßes* Verhalten für ein Familienoberhaupt.’

³¹ The adjective *πρῶτος* (lit. ‘first’) is in the third attributive position where the substantive ‘robe’ is indefinite and the adjective makes a particular application—the phrase captures the following meaning: ‘a robe, the *best* one’; see D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996): 307.

³² J. M. G. Barclay, “‘Offensive and Uncanny’”: Jesus and Paul on the Casuistic Grace of God’ in *Jesus and Paul Reconnected: Fresh Pathways into an Old Debate*, ed. T. D. Still (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007): 1-18 (9). M. Wolter, *Das Lukasevangelium* (Mohr: Siebeck, 2008): 537, also writes: ‘Deren Plot (das Wiederfinden von Verlorenem löst Freude aus) wird dadurch zur Interpretationsanweisung für die Wendung im Leben des zu seinem Vater zurückgekehrten *filiius luxuriosus*.’

³³ G. W. Hughes, *God of Surprises* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008): 115. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 176, also writes: ‘It is more generally agreed that *the father’s welcome for the returning prodigal was certainly atypical*.’ (Emphasis added.)

Scene 3:

One final comment regarding the father's conduct is in order and for this we fast forward to the point in the parable where he encounters the older son. Upon the younger son's return, the older son who is out 'in the field' (ἐν ἀγρῶ, v. 25) hears of this news and of the extravagant party and reception his father has given his sibling. The older son 'drew near the house' (ἤγγισεν τῇ οἰκίᾳ, v. 25) and immediately registered his displeasure ('he became angry', v. 28) at what had been given the younger son. Moreover, he 'refused to go in' (οὐκ ἤθελεν³⁴ εἰσελθεῖν, v. 28a) to join the celebration,³⁵ at which point 'his father went out and pleaded with him' (πατὴρ αὐτοῦ ἐξελθὼν παρεκάλει αὐτόν, v. 28b). The father breaks with social protocol for he leaves the house and the festivities, of which he was host, prematurely and in full view of the other members of the household. He is now *outside the house* where his actions would also be readily seen and evident to all in the entire village and community. The older son then begins to berate his father (vv. 29-30)³⁶ in a public space which would have not only been dishonouring and humiliating to the latter but also to the entire household of which the father was the leading figure. While the father's reminder to the older son of what he has been given (v. 31b) and of the need for a celebration (v. 32) might be construed as some form of rebuke,³⁷ significantly, and once again, he does not take any remedial action. Not only had he earlier failed to exercise his authority over the younger son, he replicates the same behaviour with the older

³⁴ Wolter, *Lukasevangelium*, 538, comments on the evangelist's choice of tense to depict the older son's action: 'Das imperfektische οὐκ ἤθελεν soll die definitive Ablehnung zum Ausdruck bringen und nicht eine momentane Unschlüssigkeit', p. 538 (emphasis added).

³⁵ Forbes, *The God of Old*, 142 points out that by not going to the banquet the older son has shamed his father and violated the fifth commandment to honour his father.

³⁶ The subtle change in the language used by the older son as he harangues his father is significant. Unlike the younger son who is returning to his 'Father' (vv. 12, 18, 21), the older son in v. 30 does not address his father as 'Father'. Additionally, one would also have expected the older son to have used the expressions 'my brother' or 'your son' but he does not do this either. Rather, he distances himself with the expression 'this son of yours' where he anchors the younger son to his father instead of himself, effectively creating some degree of distance and unfamiliarity. 'This change in anchoring relations—the way you think about them—is referred to as *recharacterization*'; see S. R. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010): 324-25.

³⁷ See for example, D. G. Chen, *God as Father in Luke-Acts* (St. BL; New York: Lang, 2006): 184.

son and forgoes the need to correct and discipline him. As a consequence the father would have been perceived as weak and unstable. Instead, the father's unexpected mollified—even 'gentle'³⁸—treatment and patient tolerance toward the older son is clearly in evidence as he explains the reason for the celebration (vv. 31-32). Evidently the maintaining of the relationship by his patience and compassion is more important to the father than his own social standing, position or winning the argument.

3. Luke and the Cultural Customs of the Period

These three vignettes manifest unusual behaviour on the part of the father and prompt us to ask to what extent, if at all, the author of the third Gospel is clued into the social expectations of family life? Clearly, Luke appears to be aware of the cultural presuppositions of the period³⁹ as is evident from what we read elsewhere in the Third Gospel. Two examples will suffice to illustrate our point. Earlier in the Gospel, a youthful Jesus (ὅτε ἐγένετο ἐτῶν δώδεκα, 'when he was twelve years old', Luke 2:42)⁴⁰ is taken by his parents to Jerusalem for the Passover, only for him to go missing in the city without his parents' knowledge (Luke 2:41-51). Both parents are naturally concerned at their son's sudden disappearance but it is how the narrative concludes which is significant for our purposes. Here the evangelist carefully picks up on Jesus's stereotypical response as son by complying with the wishes of both his parents: 'he went down to Nazareth and was *obedient to them*' (Luke 2:51).⁴¹ On another occasion and after he had publicly embarked on his mission, Jesus the adult presents a challenge to a man about discipleship and the need to decide to become his follower: 'Follow me', Jesus asserts (Luke 9:59a). This would-be

³⁸ J. Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* (WBC 35b; Word Books: Dallas, 1993): 790; Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 175.

³⁹ J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997): 12, 14.

⁴⁰ As Jesus is aged twelve he would not be going to Jerusalem for his Bar Mitzvah as it was not until a male reached thirteen years of age that he would be considered an adult; see Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 440.

⁴¹ For these ancient social expectations, see Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 2.236; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.22. For discussion, see Burke, *Family Matters*, 55, 67, 90-93; P. Balla, *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and Its Environment* (WUNT, 155; Mohr Siebeck 2003): 127; H. Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003): 36.

disciple is faced with a choice: either to throw in his lot with Jesus and become a member of his new eschatological family or to remain loyal by attending to the needs of his biological family. The man responds in a manner expected of any dutiful son of his day: ‘Lord’, he replied, ‘let me *first go and bury my father*’ (Luke 9:59b). Giving one’s parents a decent burial was the last responsibility expected of any son in the ancient world.⁴² We can conclude, then, that the third evangelist (not to mention the other Gospel writers)⁴³ is fully cognizant of the *expectations vis-à-vis* parents and their offspring and draws on widely held cultural assumptions in order to affirm them.

But if there are occasions when Luke upholds the stereotypical attitudes of the period, this does not mean that he cannot at other times challenge such assumptions. Luke can and is prepared to stray beyond the conventional boundaries and cultural associations of his time even to the point that he is prepared to overturn them. Thus, although the author of the Third Gospel can draw on widely held family norms in order to support them, he can, as Joel Green observes also ‘undermine them’ and in so doing ‘provide an alternative view of the world’.⁴⁴ We have noted how on a number of occasions in the parable in Luke 15:11-32 the evangelist appears to be overturning the standard cultural assumptions regarding the father’s behaviour. I shall now demonstrate that the evangelist’s portrayal of the father’s disregard of the cultural norms, evident in his reckless generosity or ‘prodigality’, however is by no means an isolated instance of such conduct in Luke’s Gospel—there are others who appear to act in a similar manner, as Brendan Byrne rightly points out: ‘*the Gospel’s essential purpose is to bring home to people a sense of the extravagance of God’s love ... [but there] ... is a long list of characters in this Gospel who perform extravagant*

⁴² See Josephus, *Ant.* 4.260-63; Plutarch, *Frat. Amor.* 4.479F. The following inscription makes clear the importance of caring for aged parents and giving them a proper burial: ‘The child died before he was able to reciprocate his well-deserving parents’ (*CLE*, 93). From the encounter in Luke 9:59f, Jesus clearly expects the man to prioritise by following him.

⁴³ See Moxnes, ‘What Is Family?’, 18.

⁴⁴ Green, *Luke*, 12-14; B. B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989): 111, writes: ‘The evidence seems reasonably clear. The situation in the parable, though not unknown, *is surely not the norm*’ (emphasis added).

gestures in ... response to salvation'.⁴⁵ It is to these gestures that we now turn our attention.

4. Luke's Penchant for Prodigality

We begin with evidence from the genre in question, the parabolic literature in the Third Gospel before considering other texts more widely in Luke. In Luke 10:25-37, otherwise known as the parable of the 'Good Samaritan' (Luke 10:25-37), what is immediately striking is his attentiveness and *activity*⁴⁶ where he holds back nothing as he cares for the injured man. The emphasis on praxis and 'doing' is important and frames the entire story: 'What must I *do*?' (v. 25, τί ποιήσας;) and 'Go and *do* likewise', (v. 37, πορεύου καὶ σὺ ποιεῖ ὁμοίως). Thus, unlike the case of the Priest and the Levite who 'came' (v. 31) and 'saw' (v. 32) and 'passed by' (vv. 31 and 32), the Samaritan also 'came' (v. 33), 'saw' (v. 33), but was 'moved with compassion' (v. 33), and 'cared for' (v. 34) the wounded man. Most important is how the Samaritan attends to the man by voluntarily employing *all of his own resources*.⁴⁷ In the first instance, he tends to the man's wounds with oil and wine and the application of bandages (v. 34a)⁴⁸ and further aids him by putting him on to his own donkey (v. 34b), presumably the only mode of transport immediately available. He then offers to generously provide his own money—not one but *two*⁴⁹ denarii (v. 35, i.e. two full days' wages for a labourer) to cover the costs and is prepared to stay

⁴⁵ B. Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000): 2, 150.

⁴⁶ In Luke 10:34-35 of the NA 27th edition, fifty words in total are employed in describing all that the Samaritan *does* as a neighbour.

⁴⁷ Byrne, *The Hospitality of God*, 101, comments on the Samaritan's behaviour: 'he sets about fulfilling *in a most extravagant way* the duties the other two had ignored' (emphasis added).

⁴⁸ This is to say nothing of the time, energy and the considerable risk to the Samaritan's well-being. For a Samaritan to transport a Jew to a Jewish town, Jericho would have put him in considerable danger, even though he was doing the latter a good turn.

⁴⁹ Two denarii could either provide one month's food for an adult male or food, lodging, and service for well over one week, or even two; see K. Harl, *Coinage in the Roman Economy, 300 B.C. to A.D. 700* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996): 278-79, for the former and Jeremias, *Parables*, 205, for the latter.

overnight⁵⁰ in order to ensure the incapacitated man is properly care for. This, coupled with the instruction to the innkeeper to ‘Look after him’ (v. 35) and if additional expenditure is incurred the ‘Good Samaritan’ would ‘reimburse any *extra expense* (προσδαπανήσης) you may have’ (v. 35). Those listening to this parable—of a Samaritan coming to the assistance of an injured Jew—would have been shocked and shaken their heads in disbelief at such an unexpected, charitable action for it would have upset their common sensibilities.⁵¹ His actions are ‘compassion’ (v. 33b) at a great personal cost, ‘an *unexpected love* [shown] to the wounded man’.⁵² The Samaritan’s generosity appears excessive—even ‘prodigal’⁵³ as Robert Funk rightly describes his actions—he not only assisted the man by the roadside but also offered to cover the costs of his initial treatment (two denarii) on arrival at the inn *and* then voluntarily offered to make a further payment to the innkeeper should there be any extra cost involved (v. 35).⁵⁴

This same pattern of liberal generosity is not only evident in the parables but is seen more widely elsewhere in Luke’s Gospel. For example, in Luke 7:36-50, a ‘sinful woman’ (v. 37, γυνή ... ἁμαρτωλός) made her way to the house⁵⁵ of Simon the Pharisee where she learned Jesus had been invited to a meal. The woman’s ‘greetings’, especially her (continual) ‘kissing’ (κατεφίλει) and ‘anointing’

⁵⁰ The expression καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν ἄνκτιον (v. 35) strongly suggests the Samaritan also stayed overnight in the inn, which would also be important given the dubious reputation of innkeepers in antiquity; see Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, 223.

⁵¹ The expectation on the part of the audience is that a Jew (certainly not a Samaritan) because of purity laws would have come to the assistance of another injured Jew.

⁵² K. E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008): 296 (emphasis added). C. Spicq, *Agape in the New Testament* (vol. 1; St Louis and London: B. Herder Book Co., 1963): 116, also writes: ‘The supreme revelation of the parable of the good Samaritan is that charity is composed of *compassion* and *mercy*’ (emphasis added).

⁵³ R. W. Funk, *Parables and Presence: Forms of the New Testament Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982): 55, describes him as ‘The Prodigal Samaritan’.

⁵⁴ The word order in v. 35 is very emphatic ἐγὼ ἐν τῷ ἐπανέρχῃ με ἀποδώσω σοι, giving the sense: ‘I, and not the wounded man, am responsible for payment’; A. Plummer, *The Gospel according to St. Luke* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1898): 288.

⁵⁵ How this woman got into Simon’s home is a matter of some debate: probably this was a special banquet given in honour of Jesus where the door would have been left open at such special meals so that uninvited guests could enter, to sit by the walls, in order to hear the conversation. To all intents and purposes, unlike Jesus who had been ‘invited’ (vv. 36, 39) to the meal, this woman was not.

(ἤλειφεν)⁵⁶ the feet of Jesus would have undoubtedly shamed Simon on his own turf—within the context of his own home!—for he had failed to perform any of these courtesies⁵⁷ which the woman had carried out in relation to Jesus when he first arrived at the Pharisee’s home. The woman’s actions are a stunning put-down, for strikingly *she*⁵⁸ provides the expected hospitality (and so in effect takes on the role of the host), not Simon.⁵⁹ Indeed, in the absence of such common proprieties Jesus had every right to immediately leave this man’s home (cf. Matt. 10:14). Further still, the woman unfurls her hair in the full view of those present, an action which has too often been construed as indicative of a person with loose morals (i.e. of a prostitute).⁶⁰ However, the woman’s actions do not need to be understood in this manner. Charles Cosgrove for example, on the basis of evidence from the Greek novel *Chaereas and Callirhoe* suggests ‘that unbound hair on a weeping woman is naturally associated with grief, supplication and gratitude’.⁶¹ Thus, just as in the case of the ‘Good Samaritan considered earlier’, the woman’s behaviour and hospitality are ‘not only honourable but *extravagant*’⁶² as evidenced, for example by the quality of the essence used—it was ‘good perfume’,⁶³ a reflection of

⁵⁶ The *Aktionsart* of the two verbs warrant the translation ‘was kissing’ and ‘was anointing’.

⁵⁷ Marshall, *Luke*, 312, states that it was not essential for Simon as host to provide water and a kiss. This is true, though such courtesies would have been expected after a long journey. Moreover, the fact that Jesus was a special (and no ordinary) guest as well as his drawing attention to the omission of these customs (vv. 44-45) shows that he expected Simon to provide them.

⁵⁸ Note the threefold use of the third person pronoun αὐτῆ (vv. 44, 45, 46) which in addition to parataxis (a piling up of ‘ands’, vv. 37-38) underscores the woman’s gratefulness and effusive attention over against Simon’s egregious passivity.

⁵⁹ The woman’s actions are especially shaming to Simon given the fact that in Luke ‘the most important use of houses was to show *hospitality*’. H. Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke’s Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004): 85 (emphasis original).

⁶⁰ Green (*The Gospel of Luke*, 310) goes too far in suggesting that the woman’s action was tantamount to a modern day woman going topless; see Bovon, *Luke*, 1:1-9.50, 294-95.

⁶¹ C. H. Cosgrove, ‘A Woman’s Unbound Hair in the Greco-Roman World with Special Reference to the Story of the “Sinful Woman” in Luke 7.36-50’, *JBL*124 (2005): 675-92 (689).

⁶² Green, *Luke*, 313. The point of course, according to Jesus’s allegorical story (vv. 41-43), is that the extravagance of the woman’s offering is in accordance with the one whose debt was extravagant and yet was forgiven (v. 43).

⁶³ B. Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus’ Attitudes to Women and Their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (SNTSMS, 51; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 55.

her *deep gratitude* and love. Thus, Jesus informs Simon of the reason for her conduct: ‘Her many sins (αἱ ἁμαρτίαι αὐτῆς αἱ πολλάι) have been forgiven—as⁶⁴ her *great love* (ἠγάπησεν πολύ) has shown’ (v. 47). ‘Point by point ... Jesus contrasts the *woman’s extravagant hospitality* with Simon’s deficient response (no water, no kiss, no oil).’⁶⁵ In short, her deeds too have been described as ‘the prodigal actions of ... [a] woman’.⁶⁶

Again, later in the Gospel when Jesus entered Jerusalem (Luke 19:29-44), his appearance in the city provoked such a spontaneous, outpouring of affection from the *disciples*⁶⁷ present that they began to discard their cloaks. Like the woman (Luke 7) and the ‘Good Samaritan’ (Luke 10) just considered, the disciples’ action is also an extraordinary and voluntary one—they choose to remove ‘their cloaks’ (τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτῶν, v. 36), ‘an outer garment’⁶⁸ reputed to be ‘the most prized possession of ... a man’⁶⁹ in the ancient world. The cloaks are then spread⁷⁰ on the road thereby emphasising an on-going reception by the disciples. The offering of a cloak, moreover was a highly significant action, for it was a thick garment made of wool which also doubled up as a blanket to provide warmth and protection from the cold. Indeed, such was the value placed on this garment that bandits were known to try and steal it (Luke 10:30) and it could also be used as

⁶⁴ There are two ways of taking the ὅτι clause depending on which verb it modifies. The ambiguity is resolved if we take ὅτι as modifying the verb ‘say’. Thus, Jesus can say the woman is forgiven because she loved much, not that she is forgiven because she loved much. In other words, her love is *evidence* of her forgiveness.

⁶⁵ F. S. Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?: Gospel Profiles of Jesus’ Personal Conduct* (TPI; Harrisburg; Continuum, 2003): 109 (emphasis added).

⁶⁶ J. L. Resseguie, *Spiritual Landscape: Images of the Spiritual Life in the Gospel of Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004): 71.

⁶⁷ These are *disciples* who must be distinguished from the crowds elsewhere in the Third Gospel, as R. A. Aascough implies. Aascough discusses the crowd scenes in Luke-Acts (e.g., ὄχλος, Luke 6:17; πλῆθος, Luke 8:37; and λαός, Luke 20:6) which at times demonstrate popularity and hostility. However, he does not include a discussion of the crowd scene in Luke 19:37, an omission which strongly suggests that the latter crowd is to be distinguished from the crowds elsewhere in the Gospel, as it is a πλῆθος τῶν μαθητῶν (‘a crowd of *disciples*’, Luke 19:37), one which is actually committed to following Jesus. See R. S. Aascough, ‘Narrative Technique and Generic Designation: Crowd Scenes in Luke-Acts and in Chariton’, *CBQ* 58 (1996): 69-81; see also D. E. Garland, *Luke* (ZEC, 3; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011): 771.

⁶⁸ *Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: OUP, 1999): 380.

⁶⁹ G. Hammel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine: First Three Centuries C. E.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990): 71.

⁷⁰ Luke employs the continuous tense (ὑπεστρώωννυον, v. 36) of the verb.

payment for debts and as collateral.⁷¹ Such a generous and unexpected action appears rash, hasty and spontaneous in the circumstances, but it is a no less appropriate response and expression of devotion to Jesus the Messiah who had come to deliver his people. More specifically, the surrendering of what was these disciples' most valuable possession to Jesus was nothing less than an 'outpouring of prodigality'.⁷²

Lastly, the same kind of munificence is also in evidence in Zacchaeus' conduct when he invited Jesus to his house (Luke 19:1-10). Zacchaeus was not only a toll-collector,⁷³ but an ἀρχιτελώνης—a *hapax* in Greek literature—denoting a leading toll-collector, that is, someone who either supervised contracts or who, more than likely, had others under his authority. He was also 'wealthy' (v. 2), presumably through dubious means, a point borne out by his own admission in Luke's use of the first class conditional clause 'if I have cheated anyone ... then' (v. 8).⁷⁴ This makes Zacchaeus' willingness not only to offer to throw a banquet but also voluntarily to give back half of his possessions to the poor (v. 8) an action of immense generosity—normally, the laws of restitution required paying back the full amount in addition to twenty percent (e.g., Lev. 6:1-7; Num. 5:7). Zacchaeus's actions therefore go well beyond the law's requirements. In addition, he offers to 'repay fourfold'⁷⁵ to anyone from whom he has exacted money. His outrageous extravagance⁷⁶ and big-hearted generosity align well with the actions of others we have already

⁷¹ Hammel, *Poverty and Charity*, 71.

⁷² Resseguie, *Spiritual Landscape*, 93.

⁷³ By this time two forms of taxation existed, direct taxes (e.g., land tax) collected by Jewish councils and indirect taxes (e.g., tolls and customs) handled by private entrepreneurs, a category which Zacchaeus fell into. The latter were expected to bid for the task with the highest bidder winning the contract. Although efforts were taken to restrict malpractice, the whole system was ripe and open to abuse and fraudulence.

⁷⁴ The first class conditional clause 'denotes a simple conditional assumption *with emphasis on the reality* of the assumption (not of what is being assumed)'; see BDF, §371 (emphasis added) and Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond Basics*, 690.

⁷⁵ Since Zacchaeus was a Roman functionary, one inscription provides evidence from a Roman milieu to show that if he had been brought before a Roman court of law he would have been liable to pay back four times what he had stolen; see R. Taubenschlag, *The Law of Greco-Roman Egypt in the Light of the Papyri 332BC-640AD* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe 1955; rep. Milan, 1972): 552-53.

⁷⁶ Byrne, *The Hospitality of God*, 150, writes how in behaving thus, Zacchaeus 'does something *extravagant*' (emphasis added).

considered and are also ‘prodigal’,⁷⁷ standing as they do in stark contrast to his diminutive stature (Luke 19:3).⁷⁸

When the father’s behaviour in Luke 15 is viewed against this portrayal of the magnanimous actions of others (cf. Luke 9:17) in Luke, his actions are essentially a hermeneutical key for the rest of the Gospel since he is not the only ‘prodigal’ in Luke; rather, the author has a proclivity for portraying the conduct of a number of different people as also being ‘prodigal’ in order to get his point across. But what exactly is the evangelist’s point?

5. Reading the Parable

Approaching the parable from the perspective of the father has opened up some significant, unexpected aspects in this story. In the first instance, the appropriateness of our methodology not only confirms the approach of an increasing number of interpreters who view the father as the main figure in the storyline, it also fits well contextually with the two earlier parables of the lost coin (15:1-7) and lost sheep (15:8-10). That is to say, in the case of the lost coin and sheep, neither could have been found without the proaction and initiative of the woman and the shepherd. Likewise, even though the younger son had chosen to leave, his return would not have been possible unless he believed that the same father who had been so generous in the first place would be so again and receive him back rather than turning him away. It is not without significance then, that the son’s first thought as he prepares to return is his father’s previous track record of liberality and open-handedness: ‘my father has food enough *and to spare*’, (τοῦ πατρός μου περισσεύονται ἄρτων, v.17).⁷⁹ More specifically, even though the younger son has left home and has wasted his part of the

⁷⁷ Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 181.

⁷⁸ Physical descriptions of characters in the Gospels are rare and though Zacchaeus’ lack of height is a reason for his scaling the tree to catch sight of Jesus, one wonders whether the evangelist intends a double entendre in the sense that his short stature was also evidence of his one-time small-mindedness; for the latter view, see M. C. Parsons, “‘Short in Stature’: Luke’s Physical Description of Zacchaeus”, *NTS* 47 (2001): 50-57 (51-53). If Parsons is correct then this interpretation (i.e. his ‘small-mindedness’) contrasts well with Zacchaeus’ open-handedness and reckless generosity.

⁷⁹ The context in v. 17 is that of the hired hands where the point is that if they have been well provided for by the father, the son thinks he can expect the same and more.

inheritance, it is to his *father*⁸⁰ that the younger son is returning—four times in as many verses his ‘father’ is mentioned (vv. 17, 18, 19, 20): ‘I will arise and return to *my father*’ (τὸν πατέρα μου, v. 17); and ‘he arose and came to *his father*’ (ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ, v. 20). Thus, as a number of commentators have rightly concluded, ‘[it] is *the father who takes the initiative* in the restoration of the ... relationship. The son can do no more than come within reach.’⁸¹

To be sure, the father’s actions are highly unusual, but his so-called ‘prodigality’ as noted earlier must be carefully distinguished from that of the two sons for in the case of the former it is entirely positive (as opposed to the pejorative connotations of the latter). Moreover, as we have demonstrated, when the father’s actions are understood against the wider backdrop of the Third Gospel, they not only make good sense but are also in accord with the ‘prodigal’ behaviour of the other figures noted earlier (i.e. the woman at Simon’s house, the ‘Good Samaritan’, the disciples on ‘Palm Sunday’ and Zacchaeus)—each share the characteristics of voluntary, extravagant generosity and liberality. The father in the parable, moreover, also forgoes the right to exercise his paternal authority⁸² which is not only unexpected but is also deeply subversive and countercultural. He instead warmly and surprisingly welcomes and embraces the younger son, and does so even before the latter has time to blurt out his well-rehearsed, repentant lines. Significant too is the fact that the father does not demand this son earn the right to be accepted back into the family—he is unconditionally and immediately received back by a voluntary act of prevenient grace.

The father’s actions toward the older son, moreover, are equally patient, affective and gentle, as opposed to correcting and disciplining him, further proof of a parent who freely gives this son what he does not deserve. Thus, a distinctive—and in my view *unexpected* feature—of the father’s conduct in regard to both offspring, as David Holgate rightly points out (albeit from what he perceives to be a philosophical stance and for different reasons from the ones we have advanced in this essay) is

⁸⁰ E.g., Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 140, who rightly notes: ‘V. 20 underscores that the prodigal did not return home: *he returned to his father*’ (emphasis added).

⁸¹ E. g., Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, 790 (emphasis added); D. L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, Baker, 1996): 1313.

⁸² L. Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006): 142.

that *his treatment of his younger son is governed by the same principles of liberality* which he always practiced at home. He has always treated his sons equally: how then can this be called unjust? This reveals that *the real basis of the elder son's complaint is his dislike of his father's liberality...*⁸³

In both encounters with his sons the father waives the right to employ his paternal power and authority and chooses in its place not only to be generous but to be generous to a fault, where mercy mingled with compassion is evidence of abundant grace, a grace that is always unmerited and undeserving. The father's repeated and unexpected behaviour, furthermore, accords well with the general nature of the parables which are in the truest sense of the word 'pictures of revolution'.⁸⁴ That is, these parables are not children's stories with a happy ending but are more barbed and turn the first-century understanding of father-son relations on their head—a world in reverse if you like—where 'the first will be last and the last will be first' (Luke 13:30). More specifically, within the wider context of the Gospel of Luke, and as most interpreters are agreed, the father does not correspond to Jesus but to God as Father,⁸⁵ an image used by the evangelist repeatedly throughout in the context of prayer (e.g. Luke 6:36; 10:21; 11:2; 12:30, 32). Elsewhere, the author makes a comparison between God's paternity and a human father (Luke 11:11-13), all of which would mean that his 'readers are predisposed to make the same connection between the father of the parable and God as

⁸³ Holgate, *Prodigality, Liberality and Meanness*, 191.

⁸⁴ D. Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus: Pictures of Revolution* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1989): 9.

⁸⁵ J. Nolland, in this regard, speaks for most scholars when he writes, 'Given the lack of any argument for breaking the link between the father and God, the otherwise complete scholarly consensus that there is such a link, as well as the pattern of likelihood of such a link established by examining the whole body of Lukan parables, it seems unnecessary to offer fresh argument here for the link between the father and God. The link is secure' (201); 'The Role of Money and Possessions in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)' in *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation*, ed. C. G. Bartholomew, J. B. Green and A. C. Thiselton (Carlisle/Grand Rapids: Paternoster Press/Zondervan, 2005). Even though the father in Luke 15 is representative of God, I am not suggesting that what is presented is a full-orbed portrayal of the 'character' of the latter, which requires supplementing from elsewhere in Luke. And even though there may be some correspondence between the father in this parable and God we should not automatically make this assumption in parables where the male figure is to the fore, for example, in the parable of the pounds (Luke 19:11-27), which is more allegorical than the narrative we are considering here.

Father'.⁸⁶ This being so, God does not do what the hearers expect God to do, for in the kingdom of God grace is always bestowed upon those who least warrant or presume upon it. Moreover, in the divine scheme of things, no one gets what they deserve for God's mercy is not contingent upon the actions of others. This too does not add up by any reckoning for in God's economy the hearer is confronted with what could otherwise be described as the scandalous arithmetic of divine grace.⁸⁷ God is prepared to love lavishly, extravagantly, wastefully—a prodigal love for a prodigal people. In short, this is love cast wide without limits, 'a *God whose love surpasses all typical expressions known to humanity*'.⁸⁸

Certainly, this may not be the only way to read the parable and while the father's actions are indeed surprising, challenging, even offensive to those who first heard them, this is precisely the point. That is to say, the father's actions are atypical and collide with the norms and everyday realities of family life as the evangelist's hearers would know them to be. But in so doing, the parable provides a fresh opportunity for the audience—including Luke's prime targets 'the Pharisees' (i.e. Jews, v. 2) *but also* the 'sinners' (i.e. *the Gentiles*, v. 1) listening—to seize the moment. And when the audience understands it accordingly, the parable, as Osiek and Balch rightly note, 'breaks through and *contradicts the order and righteousness of the household ... so that the hearer encounters the world of the kingdom of God*'.⁸⁹ Moreover, *in this realm* where the actions of a father are a depiction of God as Father whose outrageous generosity, compassion and liberality cohere well with the evangelist's wider agenda, as evidenced by his presentation of others who (are to) demonstrate the same kingdom characteristics—signifying that a new day of salvation-history has dawned for *everyone*—then would not another (more) appropriate title

⁸⁶ Chen, *God as Father*, 179. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 78, rightly asserts: 'the compassion of the father reflects divine compassion'.

⁸⁷ See Rengstorf, *Die Re-Investitur des Verlorenen Sohnes*, 74-75, who notes that the parable gives clear evidence of divine grace in that whoever returns to God, trusting in God's goodness, is received back as though no barrier had ever existed.

⁸⁸ Hultgren, *The Parable of Jesus*, 86 (emphasis added). A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (New York/Evanston: Harper & Row Publishers, 1953): 85, comments accordingly on this parable, 'The Parables do not say, 'God must, rationally, act thus', but 'God does in fact act thus, *contrary to all rational calculations ... [a] Divine love that baffles all rational calculations.*' He concludes: 'Certainly not every earthly father acts in the way here described; *but it is the way God acts*' (emphasis added).

⁸⁹ Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 140.

for this tale of the unexpected be ‘The Parable of the Prodigal Father’?⁹⁰

⁹⁰ M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996): 164-65, rightly emphasises that the reason the father is able to act so liberally is because of ‘*the priority of the relationship ... [which] ... explains the father’s ... ‘prodigality’ to both of his sons*’ (emphasis added).