

# RE-EXAMINING THE "PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON" IN THE LIGHT OF ITS CONTEXT

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## **Abstract**

As in the case with other works of literature, the importance of the context in the understanding of the message of a text or passage especially for the study of parables is being highlighted in this paper. The concept of context in interpretation is applied to the Parable of the Prodigal Son and this results in a strong shift in the traditional understanding of the parable. The paper begins by examining the traditional understanding of the parable by looking at four different authors. After this, the contexts of the parable, which is furnished us in Luke 15:1-3 and 15:4-10 is examined both linguistically and culturally in the light of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine to bring out the contextual implication. In treating the context, words like 'tax-gatherers', 'sinners', 'Pharisees' and 'scribes' are examined to bring out what class of people they stand for. Having seen that these two classes of people represent the socio-religious divide of the Jewish community in the days of Jesus and that they are all Jews, the principles of application is then applied to limit the application of the parable in the conclusion. This underscores the fact that the interpretation cannot be sustained on the basis of this context to stand for a believer versus an unbeliever situation, but a situation where Christians are involved with the one backsliding and the other steadfast

## **Introduction**

Since the death of allegorization, which was championed by Adolf Julicher on 1888 in his book *Die Glesnreden Jesu*, the study of parables has grown tremendously. It is worthy to note however that most approaches to parables that have been developed post-Julicher (that is from C. H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias down to Kenneth Bailey), only the aesthetic approach seems to have played down the importance of the context of a parable in the understanding of a parable. In fact, within the aesthetic school however, there are a few dissidents like Via and Osborne who admit that the context could be blended with the aesthetic for a better understanding.

Persisting his view on the role on context on biblical interpretation, Osborne points out that "the context provides the situation behind the text" and that context provides the scaffolding upon which we can build the in-depth of a passage, without which the edifice of interpretation is bound to collapse" (Osborne, 1001:19). In narrowing down the role of context to parables, he states that a parable's evocative power is best discerned when seen as Jesus intended it; that is in terms of its first-century background and its Gospel context" (Osborne, 1991:245).

Since the role of context in understanding the message of parables is now generally acceptable, it is the opinion of this writer that the parables should then be re-interpreted in the light of their context. If this is done, new meanings would emerge and traditional understandings, which are myopic, could be rejected. In this paper, one seeks to apply the study of context to the parable of the Prodigal Son.

## **A Brief Overview of the Parable**

According to its immediate context (Luke 15:1-3) Jesus told this parable to the group of Pharisees and Scribes who were grumbling because Jesus was fellowshiping with sinners and tax collectors. It was the story of a young man who collected his inheritance while his father was still alive and left home. On squandering the lot, he returned home only to be welcomed by the father to the chagrin of the elder brother who had been at home. It ended with the father's plea to the elder brother to embrace his younger brother.

Most pastors and theologians have seen in this story a lesson to the church to seek the lost and integrate them to the church. In his conclusion, Tolbert maintained that:

The parable is an invitation to the critical, self-righteous churchmen to shed their resentment and join in a happy feast with Jesus and the prodigals who had returned to the fathers (Tolbert, 1970:127).

While one must commend Tolbert for recognizing that the parable is a message to the critical, self-righteous churchmen, one must admit that his failure to identify who the prodigals are, is a big minus. In this, a vacuum is left to be filled.

In his own conclusion, Porter identifies the older son with the Pharisees and concludes thus: By his attitude the older son reveals his kinship with the Pharisees of Lk. 18:11-12. The whole parable points sternly at the Pharisees in Jesus audience who, far from rejoicing that outcasts were finding blessing, murmured saying, "This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them (Porter, 1986:1214).

Like Tolbert, Porter also left the outcasts unidentified and thus failed to bring the message home to contemporary readers.

The Life Application Bible, in its comment on 15:25-31 says:

It was hard for elder brother to accept his younger brother when he returned, and it is just as difficult to accept 'younger brother' today, people who repent after leading notoriously sinful lives are often held in suspicion; churches are sometimes unwilling to admit them to membership.

Though in this comment the younger brother is identified, the identification points to someone who is just coming to repentance. The question then is this, does the context allow us to identify the younger brother as someone just coming to the Lord?

### **A Study of the Context of the Parable**

The parable of the prodigal son is found in Luke 15:11-32 and the context is found in 15:1-3 'Now all (he tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. <sup>2</sup>And both the Pharisees and the Scribes began to grumble saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them". <sup>3</sup> And he told them this parable, saying (NASB).

A clear understanding of the context demands a close study of the following words: Pharisees, Scribes, tax-gatherers and sinners. Also, it would be of importance to examine the socio-religious divide of Jesus' days that is first considered Palestine. These put together would then give a true picture of the context from where we could draw inferences for contemporary application. a. Tax-Gatherers

The Greek word translated tax-gatherers is *τελώνης*. This word is very enigmatic, but in actual sense it refers to someone who had purchased the right to collect taxes from the people. Merkel states that the *τελώνης*; at the time of Jesus was a well-to-do Jew who had paid for the privilege to collect individual fees (market duties, tolls) or taxes (on business, houses and consumers)" (Merkel, 1994:349). Josephus, the most notable Jewish historian, testifies to this usage in Antiquities XII. 177 which is translated by Ralph to read. "Thereupon the king who heard his gladly said he would confirm the sale of the tax-farming rights to his..."

In another passage, Luke 19:1-10, the case of Zaccheus who was called a chief tax-gatherer" (*αρχιελώνης*) is mentioned. This passage pictures graphically who a tax-gatherer is and the following can be referred.

1. Zaccheus was a Jew. This can be asserted from Jesus' statement in v.9 that he too "is a son of Abraham". A gentile would not be regarded as such, even if he has become a proselyte.
2. Tax-gatherers were regarded as sinners. This is also seen in the Pharisees' statement in v. 7 that Jesus "has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner".
3. Tax-gatherers were corrupt. This is also shown in Zaccheus' self-confessional statement in v.8 that "if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much".

As a result of their corruption and the fact that they work closely with the Roman Government, the Jews regarded them as outcasts, (despite the fact that they are full-blooded Jews) for they are seen as "collaborators who co-operated with the occupying power" (Robertson, 1983:142).

#### **b. Sinners**

The Greek word thus translated *ισμαρτώλος*. In secular Greek, it denotes one who misses something and thus can mean intellectual inferiority or failure as well as a moral failure (Rengstorf, 1964:317). The rarity of this word is attested to by the fact that it occurs only five times in Greek literature.

In the Septuagint (LXX), the word *αμαρτώλος*; is used to interpret the Hebrew *rwtš*. So the Jewish concept and *αμαρτώλος*; may be forwarded in the Hebrew *rwtš*. On *rwtš*, Rengstorf has this to say:

He boasts of his portion in the law of God and in God's covenant with Israel, but he does not regard or follow the law as an absolutely binding expression of the will of God (Ps. 50). He persistently breaks the commandment (10:7), shows no sign of repentance and boasts of his wickedness and ungodly folly (49:13), trusting in his own wealth and power instead of in God (49:6), and perhaps even going so far as to ignore God completely in his life (10:4,36:1) (Rengstorf, 1964:321).

The word is thus used to "denote people who neglect to observe the law according to the, pharisaic ideal" (Taylor, 1975:55). Jeremiah confirmed that two groups of people are involved in this class who are also called the *am-ha-aretz* (people of the land) and identified them as:

- a) The people who led immoral life, and
- b) People who followed a dishonourable calling, that is, occupations which involved immorality and dishonesty and are thus deprived of civil rights (Jeremias, 1970:132).

It should be noted that the word 'sinner' as used in the Gospels does not mean the same thing as in the Pauline epistles.

From the consideration of the two words tax-gatherers and sinners, it can be established that they are Jews who become of their profession or way of life had not been able to keep the law as expected.

#### **c. Pharisees**

This was one of religious and political groups or sect that was highly influential in Jesus' days. Though the biblical references to these people (99 in all) do not offer an objective analysis of who they were, Josephus could be cited for dependable information.

In Antiquities (XVII. 41) they were shown as being proud for their knowledge in patriarchal laws and boast of their adherence to the law. These include not only written Torah, but also the oral Torah. It was written of (them that they "preserved many commandments not written in the laws of Moses" (Josephus, 1964). They had frequent clashes with Jesus because they must have found Jesus' behaviour particularly offensive, since it was characterized by disregard for purity and tithing regulations and by association with tax collectors and sinners" (Baumbach, 1994:416).

#### **d. Scribes**

The Greek word here is *γραμματῶν*;. This was another distinct socio-religious sect that wielded enormous influence during Jesus' days. This sect actually developed after the model of Ezra who in Ezra 7:6 was described as "a scribe skilled in the law of Moses ..." Baumbach has this to say about them.

The scribes were exegetes, interpreters of scripture, who established its instruction in a binding way for the present; teachers, who sought to equip the greatest possible number of pupils with the methods of interpretation; and jurists, who as trial judges, administered the law in practical situations (Baumbach, 1994:259).

They actually started out by copying the law and as a result of being conversant with it; they became authorities in matters relating to the Torah.

This selling gives us a vivid picture of the incident that led to the parable and it leads us to see the socio-religious stratification of the Jewish society in Jesus' days. We have the Pharisees and the Scribes along with other religious aristocrats on the one side (they are also called the associates) and the tax-gatherers and sinners on the other side (these are also called the *am-ha-aretz* as indicated earlier).

The situation of this parable in Jesus' ministry comes out more graphically when the relationship between these two religious strata in Jesus' days is examined. The truth is that there existed almost no interaction between these two groups. One of the rabbinical laws guiding the associates reads:

He that undertakes to be an Associate may not sell to an *am-ha-aretz* (stuff, that is) wet or dry, or buy from him (foodstuff, that is) wet; and he may not be the guest of an *am-ha-artz* nor may he receive him as a guest in his own raiment (Barret, 1956:163).

Jesus, unlike the religious aristocrats of his days however fellowshiped with these people. Thus, the parable of Luke 15 is an attempt at bridging the gulf of a social breach between the righteous and the sinners. It is to make the religious aristocrats realize that all Jews, pious or not, are still the children of the covenant, and that if perchance any of them backslides, instead of ostracizing such from the community they are to be helped to return to God.

Having thus set out the situation that led to the parable, another interesting point to look at is verse 3 which reads "and he told them this parable saying".

The pertinent question that comes to mind is the structure of Luke 15:4-32. Verses 4-7 are tagged the parable of the lost sheep; verses 8-10 are tagged the parable of lost coin and verses 11-32 are the parable of the prodigal son. If three parables follow the introductory statement of verse 3, why did Luke use the singular word "this" instead of the plural "these"? This is because Luke no longer see the three parables as different from one another but as constituting one parabolic discourse. If this is true, the first two parables are used as introductions to clear the way for the third - the parable of the Prodigal Son. In the same vein, Ramsey points out:

As we begin to read about a certain man who has two sons, we sense that a connection is to be constructed with the preceding parables. There has been no change of setting announced. Indeed, it seems that a progression may be intended by the narrator: 'a man who has a hundred sheep', 'a woman who has ten coins', and 'a man who has two sons'. Each of the preceding parables closes on a joyful note with a pronouncement about joy in heaven over a repentant sinner, a pronouncement which seems a bit out of place with stories about a lost sheep and a lost coin. We sense that the stage has been set for the third parable (Ramsey, 1990:34).

Technically speaking then, while verses 1-3 give the context of the parable in Jesus' ministry verses 4-10 give us the literary context. Therefore, a simple analysis of verses 4-10 are needed for a wrap up.

The first thing one needs to highlight is that for a group of parables to be linked together to produce a parabolic discourse, something must be a linking string that runs through. If one puts the three parables in Luke 15 side by side something must link them together. An examination of the three parables reveals that the link is the loss of something. In the parable of the lost sheep, one out of 100 sheep got lost; in the parable of the lost coin, one out of 10 coins got lost and in the parable of the prodigal son, one out of two sons got lost. One comparing the socio-religious setting of the parable with the link of what got lost, Edward hints that:

Because of this setting, and because of lost coin, sheep or son was of the same kind as those that were not lost, it is plain that Luke does not understand this teaching as a justification for gentile mission (Edwards, 1980:60).

## Conclusion

This assertion becomes glaring because the parable of the prodigal son is concerned with children of the same father, that is, one family. As a result, one can assert that because no Jew would agree that he belongs to the same family with a Gentile, the parable has nothing to do with a Jewish/Gentile relationship.

If we then cannot use this setting to teach a Jewish/Gentile relationship, by the principles of application, the parable cannot be used to justify a believer/unbeliever relationship. The best it can be used to represent is the situation between believers and a backslidden church member.

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