

What the Prodigal Son story doesn't mean

by [Amy-Jill Levine](#) in the [September 3, 2014](#) issue



Rembrandt, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1662

When it comes to parables and to ancient texts in general, our listening skills are not as developed as they should be. Not only do we frequently miss the original provocation, and not only do we frequently default to simplistic interpretations, we also often import ahistorical and anachronistic readings that deform the good news of the gospel into something Jesus would neither recognize nor condone. If the

interpreter knows nothing about Jesus' Jewish context other than the stereotype of "Jesus came to fix Judaism, so therefore Judaism—whatever it was—must have been bad," then the parables will be interpreted in a deformed way.

One common way that parables are interpreted is by drawing a contrast between what Jesus taught and what "the Jews" generally understood. Thus, the Prodigal Son teaches that God loves sinners, whereas the Jews thought God loved only the righteous and didn't give a damn about sinners.

But such a reading should make no sense to anyone who has read in the scriptures about Adam and Eve, Cain and David, and indeed the nation of Israel. God does not give up on sinners; to the contrary, God is always waiting for us to repent and return. Humanity may violate God's covenant, but God remains faithful. Jews knew that God cared about the sinful; were that not the case, there'd be no reason to send prophets to Israel, or Jonah to Nineveh.

For Christian readers ill informed about early Judaism, the parable of the yeast and the parable of the mustard seed become teachings that reject Jewish purity laws and even Jewish identity, as if Jews somehow eschewed baked bread and spices, and we should therefore thank Jesus for allowing us to have a hot dog on a bun with mustard. These parables have nothing to do with purity laws, and to read yeast and mustard as impure is to misunderstand Judaism even as it is to miss out on some excellent food.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is understood as confronting the Jewish view that the rich are necessarily righteous and the poor necessarily sinners—despite the very Jewish view that God is particularly concerned about the poor, widows, orphans, and strangers. The parable of the lost coin, with its prominent female protagonist, is seen to challenge Jewish misogyny, as if Jews never told stories with female protagonists (Ruth, Esther, and Judith would be among those surprised at this claim). Such views make Judaism look hard-hearted and exclusivist, Jewish practice look superstitious and xenophobic, Jewish morality seem tantamount to the worship of Mammon, and Jewish views of gender the height of misogyny. Such teachings not only get Jesus wrong and Judaism wrong, they inculcate and reinforce bigotry.

The message of Jesus and the meaning of the parables need to be heard in their original context, and that context should not be made to serve as an artificial and

negative foil that makes Jesus look original or countercultural in cases where he is not. Yes, today we like what is “countercultural” or “radical” or “unique”—but those are our values and are not necessarily what the parables are conveying. Instead, the parables more often tease us into recognizing what we’ve already always known, and they do so by reframing our vision. The point is less that they reveal something new than that they tap into our memories, our values, and our deepest longings, and so they resurrect what is very old, and very wise, and very precious. And often, very unsettling.

In what follows, I will take one familiar parable—the Prodigal Son—and seek to imagine how it would have sounded in the first century to people who have no idea that Jesus will be proclaimed Son of God by millions and no idea that he will be crucified by Rome. Positioned together in Luke’s Gospel, the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the Prodigal Son are traditionally interpreted to be about sinners repenting and God graciously offering forgiveness and reconciliation. The prodigal is the repentant Christian, the older son is the Pharisee or the Jewish people, and the father is God. Such interpretations not only yank the parable out of its historical context, they lessen the message of Jesus and bear false witness against Jews and Judaism.

In its original context, the parable of the Prodigal Son would not have been heard as a story of repentance or forgiveness, a story of works righteousness and grace, or a story of Jewish xenophobia and Christian universalism. Instead, the parable’s messages of finding the lost, of reclaiming children, of reassessing the meaning of family offer not only good news, but better news.

All biblically literate people would recognize the beginning words, “There was a man who had two sons,” as a convention. They would also be inclined to identify with the younger son, remembering the stories of Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, and Jacob and Esau. But those biblically literate listeners were in for a surprise in this parable when the younger son turns out not to be the righteous Abel, faithful Isaac, or clever Jacob but an irresponsible, self-indulgent, and probably indulged child.

To ask, as the younger son does, for his share of an inheritance indicates a potential lack of wisdom, but it is not a sin. It was not particularly unusual then, nor is it even now. Yet numerous commentators, academic and homiletic, insist that by asking his father for his inheritance the younger son has sinned; he is in violation of the commandment, “Honor your father and your mother.” He has treated his father as if

he were as good as dead is the common interpretation. But as Jewish legal scholar Bernard Jackson trenchantly observes, “Jewish sources give no support to [the idea] that the prodigal, in seeking the advance, wishes his father dead.”

Commentators who see the younger son as violating his father’s honor rarely remark on the father’s complicity. Had the prodigal sinned in asking his father for his inheritance (and that is unlikely), then the father should have reproved the boy. He did not. Instead, he acquiesced. The younger son’s actions may reflect negatively on his father; by failing to discipline his son and by acquiescing to his dishonorable request, the father may be seen as complicit in the son’s debauchery.

We might wonder if this generosity toward the prodigal is designed to remind us of Joseph, just as “the man who had two sons” reminds us of Adam, Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph himself. The younger son mirrors Joseph in his move to a foreign land, his increasing degradation, and then his elevation to an elite position. We might wonder if this indulged son is the child of the father’s beloved wife, as Joseph was Rachel’s son.

Without a word of leave-taking, the prodigal cuts himself off from his family, friends, neighbors, and homeland, and he heads to a region where love of strangers was not in the law code. There he proves himself prodigal: instead of showing reckless generosity, he scatters his property in dissolute living.

“And having spent all, there was a strong famine in that region, and he himself began to be in need. And going, he became joined to one of the citizens of that region, and he sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was desiring to be filled from the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one was giving to him” (Luke 15:14–16).

The prodigal’s location does not, however, harp on Jewish obsessions regarding purity or xenophobia, two stereotypes that commentators typically import into the parables. For example, one commentator asserts, “Jews would immediately recognize that [the prodigal had gone into] unclean gentile territory made up of unclean gentile people.” Being in gentile regions—which means everywhere outside Judea, Samaria, and lower Galilee—was not anathema to most Jews, then or now. Jews in the Diaspora welcomed gentiles into their synagogues, worked with gentiles in the marketplaces, talked to gentiles in the public baths. At the time of Jesus, there were probably more Jews living outside Judea and lower Galilee than there were in

the Jewish homeland; over a million were in Alexandria in Egypt. The prodigal's problem is that he is hungry, not that he is "unclean" amid the "unclean."

Nor should we charge him, as some commentators do, with apostasy. First, the son ate no ham hocks or pigs' knuckles; if he did, he would not be starving. Second, he was sent to feed the pigs, not to butcher them. Third, the son hired himself out to a citizen; there is no indication that he knew his task would be to feed pigs. Finally, the son did what he did in order to live; Jewish law is law by which one lives, not by which one dies. The prodigal is in an impossible situation, but the issue is not Jewish xenophobia or purity. The problem is starvation.

A proverb from the rabbinic commentary Leviticus Rabbah (13:4) notes, "When Israelites are reduced to eating carob pods, they repent." The son's comments fall in line with this idea. Junior speaks of his sin and his desire for restoration to the household, albeit on lesser terms as a day laborer rather than a beloved son. His rehearsed lines sound contrite. Thus, for many readers who, influenced by Luke, see the parable as about repenting and forgiving, Junior is understood to have repented.

And yet first-century listeners may have heard not contrition but conniving. Junior recalls that Daddy still has money, and he might be able to get more. Unlike the sheep and the coin, he has not been "found." Rather, he recovers his true nature—he is described as "coming to himself"—and that self is one who knows that Daddy will do anything he asks. In his planning, the prodigal and the narrator repeat the term *father*: "laborers of my father . . . go to my father . . . Father, I have sinned . . . went toward his father." Although Junior speaks of being treated as a hired hand, his repeated paternal language suggests that he still thinks of himself as his father's son.

Further suggesting Junior's lack of remorse is his line, "I have sinned against heaven and before you." Biblically literate listeners would hear an echo of the empty words Pharaoh mouths in order to stop the plagues: "Pharaoh hurriedly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, 'I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you'" (Exod. 10:16). The prodigal is no more repentant, has had no more change of heart, than Egypt's ruler. Homiletician David Buttrick concisely summarizes the prodigal's strategy: "I'll go to Daddy and sound religious."

In his thoughts, the prodigal also puts himself in the company of the self-absorbed figures in other parables. The rich fool of the same-named parable thinks to himself,

“What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” (Luke 12:17). His conclusion is to build more barns, not to distribute his food to the poor. The dishonest manager speculates, “What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg” (16:3). His conclusion is to draw others into his dishonesty. Even the judge who faces the tenacious widow eventually says to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming” (18:4-5). All four parables use the device of interior monologue to let listeners know what the characters are thinking, and in all cases what they are thinking leads to at best morally ambiguous action.

Before the prodigal gets to his rehearsed speech, his dad runs to welcome him. His compassion need not be taken as a surprising reaction; there is no reason to expect the father to be a detached patriarch who would show neither care nor compassion. Rather, his compassion should remind us of the Samaritan, who saw a wounded man and reacted with compassion; it is the same reaction Jesus himself has when he sees the funeral procession of the only son of a widow. The term indicates recognition that one who might be considered dead could become alive.

Despite the father’s rejoicing, commentators conclude that his actions are at best undignified and even dishonorable. New Testament scholar Luise Schottroff traces this reading to Joachim Jeremias, who saw the father as tossing aside the dignity of an “aged oriental.” Another commentator, asserting that “fathers were remote and figures of authority,” sees the father’s running as not only surprising but also shocking, for “gentlemen of honor do not run except in cases of emergency.” Another suggests that to run, the father would have had to pull up his robes and so expose his legs, “which would have been considered shameful in a Semitic culture.” Still another insists “the father in the parable is playing a role no proper Semitic patriarch would enact. He has left his honor behind, his position, his community standing.”

From these already overstated observations, the comments, not unexpectedly, descend into a negative picture of Judaism over and against which Jesus shines ever more brightly. For example, we are told, “a more expected reaction would have been for the father to rend his garments and declare his son disowned.” Some commentators even propose that the father had participated in a Jewish ceremony known as *getsatsah* and so had legally cut the son out of the family or that “it is

obvious the father never performed the common Jewish ceremony of forever disowning the boy” and that “the typical Jewish father would have forever ‘cut off’ his son with a formal ceremony.” The so-called common tradition, absent from the Mishnah, appears in the relatively late texts Ruth Rabbah (7:11) and the Jerusalem Talmud (Ketubot 2:10; Qiddushin 1:5). Our parable offers no hint of it.

Jewish fathers of the first century were not, at least according to the sources we have (which should be the sources that inform our history), distant or wrathful. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asks, “Is there anyone among you, if his child asks for bread, will give a stone?” (Matt. 7:9). Thus, children ask fathers for bread, and the dads provide. The popular claim, designed to create a feminist Jesus, that “cash is male, bread is female,” and so the father who has “bread enough to spare” is cast in the role of mother, attends neither to the Lord’s Prayer, in which one asks the “father in heaven” for “bread,” nor to Jesus’ example of fatherly concern. We find numerous fathers seeking healing for their children: the synagogue ruler Jairus begs Jesus to heal his daughter (Mark 5:23; cf. Matt. 9:18; Luke 8:41); the father of an epileptic boy entreats first the disciples and then Jesus to heal his son (Matt. 17:14–15; Luke 9:38–42).

Philo remarks that parents often “do not lose thought for their wastrel (*asoton*) children but . . . lavish their kindness on the wastrels more than on the well behaved. . . . In the same way, God too . . . takes thought also for those who live a misspent life, thereby giving them time for reformation, and also keeping within the bounds His own merciful nature.” Thus at least this one Jew sees a father as doting rather than distant, and God as doting rather than distant as well.

As for what “typical oriental patriarchs” might do, today’s scholars sometimes derive their models not from ancient sources but from contemporary Muslim and Christian informants in the Middle East. One major problem with such fieldwork approaches is that the questioners sometimes forget to ask the women. Biblical scholar Carol Schersten LaHurd, reading the parable with Yemenite women, posed the question: “What would your husband do if his son returned home after wasting all his money?” The women unanimously agreed that the father would lovingly welcome the son, especially if he were a child of his old age.

Some commentators today, still regarding the father in the parable as the Father in heaven, want to credit Jesus with inventing a new theology that rejects the supposed Jewish or Old Testament God of wrath in favor of the Christian or New Testament

God of love, a view popularly espoused by the second-century heretic Marcion. Residual Marcionism, the view that God had a personality transplant somewhere between the pages of Malachi and Matthew, is still alive and well in churches today; it is also still a heresy. There is no compelling reason in the parable itself to see the father as God, but even if Jesus' Jewish audience had made this connection, they would have found nothing surprising. The covenant is still in place; God still loves the wayward, from David to Ephraim to Israel.

Rabbinic literature, to which a number of commentators turn in order to find their negative depictions of the Prodigal Son's Jewish context, actually offers a contrary view. Deuteronomy Rabbah (2:24) recounts a parable that opens with a citation from Deuteronomy (4:30), "You will return to the Lord your God." It continues:

R[abbi] Meir said, "To what is the matter like? It is like the son of a king who took to evil ways. The king sent a tutor to him who appealed to him, saying, 'Repent, my son.' But the son sent him back to his father [saying], 'How can I have the effrontery to return? I am ashamed to come before you.' Thereupon his father sent back word: 'My son, is a son ever ashamed to return to his father? And is it not to your father that you will be returning?'"

Pesikta Rabbati (184–85) recounts:

A king had a son who had gone astray from his father on a journey of a hundred days. His friends said to him, "Return to your father." He said, "I cannot." Then his father sent word, "Return as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way to you." So God says, "Return to me, and I will return to you."

For the rabbis, the challenge is not in seeing God's love in a new way; the challenge—an inevitable challenge in every religious system—is to get the wayward to return.

Now that we've cleaned out the negative, ahistorical, and at best unfortunate stereotypes, we can get back to the prodigal.

But for that, we need to keep reading . . .

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