

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

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Abstract

As is the case with other works of literature, the importance of the context in understanding 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 from the traditional understanding of the paper. The paper begins by examining the traditional understanding of the parable by looking at four authors. After this, the contexts of the parable as furnished in Luke 15:1-3 and 15:4-10 are examined both linguistically and culturally in the light of the 1st Century Palestine to bring out the contextual implication. In treating the context, words like 'tax-collectors,' 'sinners,' 'Pharisees,' and 'scribes' are examined to reveal what class of people they stand for. Having seen that the listed groups are samples of the two classes of people representing the socio-religious divide of the Jewish community in the days of Jesus and that they are all Jews, the principle of application is then applied to limit the application of the parable in the conclusion. In an earlier paper, "A Yoruba Reading of the Parable of the Prodigal Son" I have already stated that since all the members of the classes are Jews, as Edward also has done, interpreting the parable to apply to a believer versus an unbeliever situation as it is still done to date cannot be sustained. It points rather to a situation where two groups of Christians are involved with one class backsliding and the other thinking it is steadfast. Thus, this examination of the context and relevant literature sustains the earlier stand that the context of the parable cannot sustain a believer and unbeliever polemic.

Keywords: New Testament: Parables; Hermeneutics; Context; Application

Introduction

Since the death of allegory, which was championed by Adolf Julicher in 1888 in his book *Die Gleisrreden Jesu*, the study of parables has grown tremendously. This is corroborated by Snodgrass when he states that:

Although others before him had argued against the abuses of allegorizing, Adolf Julicher's two volumes on the parables of Jesus in 1888 and 1899 sounded the death knell for theological allegorizing as a legitimate hermeneutical tool and radically affected the interpretation of Jesus' parables thereafter¹.

Though one has to state that with the influence of literary criticism, from the 1980s, there have been calls for a return to allegorical interpretation as reflected in Craig Blomberg's *Interpreting the Parables*. It has to be noted however that such calls are still being rejected or at best modified. For example, Snodgrass reacts to Blomberg as follows:

Craig Blomberg in *Interpreting the Parables* (1990), for example, argues that we need to recognize that Jesus' parables are allegories, and that a parable may have more than one correspondence between an image and the reality depicted. A parable, in fact, can be expected to have at least as many correspondences as it has main characters. His argument is legitimate if one accepts that allegory is a LITERARY GENRE. In my opinion, however, it is better to view allegory as a LITERARY MODE rather than a genre, and so to view parables as proportional analogies (Capitals mine)².

It is also important to note that Hultgren did not list the parable of the Prodigal Son as an allegory when he states that only "three parables within the Synoptic Gospels are decidedly allegorical through and through"³.

It is worthy to note however that out of all post-Julicher approaches to parables (that is, from C. H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias to Bailey), only the aesthetic approach seems to have played down the importance of the context in the understanding of a parable. It is also important to note that even within the aesthetic school; there are few dissidents, like Dia Via and G. R. Osborne, who admit that the context could be blended with the aesthetic for a better understanding. Presenting his view on the role of the context in biblical interpretation, Osborne points out that the context provides the situation behind the text and thus provides the scaffolding upon which we can build the in-depth understanding of a passage, without which the edifice of interpretation is bound to collapse⁴. He went further to narrow down the role of context in

interpreting parables when he declares 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”⁵. 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 interpreted in the light of their context. If this is done, new meanings would emerge and traditional understanding would be rejected. In this paper, one seeks to study the context of the parable of the prodigal son and apply it to the overall meaning of the parable.

I. Context in Contemporary Studies

The call to realize the importance of the context of the parable in its interpretation can be traced to the work of C. H. Dodd (*The Parables of the Kingdom*) and Joachim Jeremias (*The Parables of Jesus*). Dodd was the first to hint that before a parable could be interpreted correctly, it must be seen within its own context. He was also the first to mute the position that each of the parables as they stand today has two contexts: one being its context in Jesus’ ministry and the other being the context in the ministry of the gospel writer⁶. Jeremias however worked extensively from where Dodd has stopped. According to Snodgrass:

He provided historical and cultural evidence for understanding the parables and, guided by the canons of form criticism, sought to ascertain a parable’s original form by stripping away the allegorical features and other additions that had been supplied by the early church⁷.

At any rate, both Dodd and Jeremias “viewed the parables as realistic first-century peasant stories and sought to explain the cultural setting of the individual parables”⁸.

The works of Dodd and Jeremias did not go unquestioned. Having been criticized for curtailing or losing the beauty and the power of Jesus’ parable entirely, an aesthetical approach was developed. Though most of the scholars in this area tried to subdue the influence of the historical context in interpreting parables, they were not successful as some of their exponents resorted back to it. For example, Linnemann in *The Parables of Jesus: Interpretation and Exposition*, placed emphasis on understanding Jesus and his mission. In fact, for Linnemann, she strives most of the time to hear the parable as Jesus’ original audience would have heard it⁹.

Another approach that still stands on the historical context is that coming out of those that are calling for the recognition of the Jewish origin of Jesus' parables. Derrett seeks to show the significance of first century Jewish culture to properly understand the parables and the New Testament generally¹⁰. Bailey interprets the parable with insights from research in ancient Jewish studies and his understanding of the Palestinian mindset while he worked there as a missionary. Flusser also focused on the parable within Judaism and seems to conclude that the parables are reliable as they are set out in the Gospels and he also upholds that the contexts as presented in the Gospels are correct¹¹. It is important to note that Blomberg expects that parables should be read only in the contexts provided by the Gospel writers¹². It is important to also note that even in her defense of the polyvalent nature of parables; Mary Tolbert in *Perspectives on the Parables* admits that the specific contexts of the Gospel parables limit their interpretation¹³. If this assertion from Tolbert who is also an advocate of the polyvalent reading is right, then reading any parable outside the context provided by the Gospel is wrong and would be at the end an eisegesis and not an exegesis, no matter how beautiful the interpretation would be. It is important then to conclude that the role of the context in interpreting any parable cannot be wished away. It is better to conclude that:

The parables are stories with intent in the context of Jesus' ministry, though they also have been framed by the evangelists to speak to the situations that they address. It is legitimate, therefore to ask: To what degree in reading the parables do we see Jesus' intent and to what degree do we see the situation of the early church¹⁴.

Keesmaat also asserts that "after all, one cannot understand what Jesus was really saying without knowing his context and that of his listeners¹⁵".

Traditional Understanding of the Parable of the Prodigal Son

According to its immediate context (Luke 15:1-3), Jesus told the 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 all the while. The parable ended with the father's plea to the elder brother to embrace his younger brother's homecoming.

Most pastors and theologians have seen this story as a lesson to the church to seek the lost and integrate them to the church. For example, in his conclusion on the parable, Tolbert maintains 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 father"¹⁶. While one must commend Tolbert for recognizing that the parable is a message to the critical, self-righteous churchmen, one has also to admit that his failure to identify the prodigals is a big minus and it is a vacuum that has to be filled.

In his own conclusion, like Tolbert, Porter identifies the older son with the Pharisees and concludes that:

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"¹⁷.

From this conclusion, it is clear that Porter also left the outcasts unidentified and thus failed to bring the message home to the contemporary readers.

Barton agrees that Luke 15:1-3 is the context for the parable though he sees it as a redacted introduction. His final conclusion on the message of the parable of the Prodigal Son goes thus:

... it has to do with the reordering of one's priorities and practices in a way appropriate to the coming of God in mercy and justice. It brings heaven to earth, at least in anticipatory ways. It reflects the divine communion that is mediated by Jesus and present among those who commit themselves to him. This is a time not for a separation of withdrawal in the interests of purity ... but of separation for a mission with Jesus for the sake of the "lost". It is a time not for dividing into parties antagonistic to one another, but for uniting in a new kind of solidarity that is grounded on the grace of God and sustained by ongoing practices of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation¹⁸.

Though Barton's conclusion is quite apt, it has however treated the theme of the lost as general as it has always been, that is, those who are not believers and under normal conditions would not be accepted into the fellowship of believers. It has not mentioned anything about those who have backslidden which is a strong focus derivable from the context. The *Life Application Bible*, in its comment on Luke 15:25-31 has this to say:

It was hard for the 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 membership¹⁹.

In this comment, the younger brother has been identified as people who are just coming to repentance. The question then is this: does the context allow the identification of the younger brother as someone just coming to the Lord?

The Inter Varsity Press New Testament Commentaries on the parable as posted on <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Luke/Why-Pursue-Sinners> also worth examining. The message of the parable is summarized as follows:

The parable has two major points. First, repentance means an absolute reversal of status. The lost son has become a family member again. The father's acceptance of the penitent son is total. This is God's grace. This is why God pursues sinners. Second, others should have joy when the penitent returns. Reconciliation involves not only God and the individual but also the individual and the community²⁰.

From the statement above, the commentary still makes use of the term sinner, which linguistically would refer to those that are just coming to the Lord as the *Life Application Bible* also indicates. This statement cannot be used to make a case for the returning backslidden church members that the context makes case for here.

A Study of the Context of the Parable of the Prodigal Son

This is one of the parables where Jeremias' submission that parables have two contexts comes into play. These are the context in the

ministry of Jesus Christ and the context in the ministry of the writer of the Gospel. These two contexts would now be examined.

The Context of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Lukan Ministry

Most of the scholars after Jeremias have agreed that the Gospel writers have often created a context for the parables. Even those who are of the opinion that the context of the parable in Jesus' ministry is hypothetical do agree that the context in the Gospel may be easily discerned. For example, Hultgren comments on the importance of the context of the parable in the Gospel records as follows:

That means that the parables need to be studied within their contexts, the canonical Gospels. We do not have Jesus at hand as a conversation partner, allowing us to ask him what he meant in the various parables. What we do have at hand are the Gospels, which are the basis for proclamation in the church. The church regards the canonical texts of Scriptures as authoritative, not the Jesus of one's own reconstruction. When the parables are taken out of their contexts within the Gospels, there always lurks the danger of making them what one will in the way of hermeneutical experiments, finding in them as 'inexhaustible hermeneutical potential' comparable to that of the patristic writers in their use of allegory²¹.

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, two different Lukan contexts can be easily discerned. These are called, the wider context and the immediate context.

The Wider Context

The Lukan wider context is the section in Luke called the Travel Narrative, which spans Luke 9:51 to Luke 19:27. This section of Luke has a total of fifteen parables²² and these are mostly Lukan parables, that is, parables found only in the Gospel of Luke. The Travel Narrative opens with the notice that "the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up and so he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). Apart from this indicator, several verses within the narrative restated this journey to Jerusalem as Jesus' goal (9:53; 13:22; 13:33-34; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11 and 19:28). Hull describes the Travel Narrative thus:

When Luke is placed besides Matthew and Mark it is immediately apparent that the third Gospel departs completely from the order and much of the content of the two in a lengthy central section (9:51-18:14). As any synopsis will show, whenever these chapters in Luke contain materials also found in Matthew (Q) and or in Mark, it is invariably arranged in a different sequence. In other words, here, the Evangelist either modified his source (Q and Mark) or supplied new materials (L) to create a distinctive section unlike anything else in the Gospels²³.

Apart from the statement above, Adewale says that “a thorough examination of this section reveals that the accounts here are neither geographical nor chronological²⁴” as it is difficult to follow the course of the journey or determine at most points of the narrative just where Jesus is on the journey. Morris points out that:

From 9:51ff Jesus appears to be going by the shorter route through Samaria, but later we find him passing through Jericho (19:1) which lay on the longer route through Perea. In 10:38 he is at the village of Martha and Mary, that is, Bethany, only a couple of miles from Jerusalem. But in 17:11 he is between Samaria and Galilee²⁵.

The fact that no journey can be traced here, coupled with the high concentration of teachings and parables within this section makes most scholars to conclude that the Travel Narrative is an artistic creation by Luke to hold most of the teachings and narratives that are peculiar to him. In fact, Marshall concludes that “the real importance of the section lies in the teaching given by Jesus²⁶”. Thus, the placement of the Parable of the Prodigal Son within this Travel Narrative points to the fact that the message of this parable is of great importance to Luke.

The Immediate Context in Luke (Luke 15:3-10)

The immediate context of the Parable of the Prodigal as placed in the Gospel of Luke is 15:3-10 as the parable itself begins in verse 11. The first important verse to note is verse 3, which reads:

Luke 15:3-10 (SBLGNT)	Luke 15:3-10 (RSV)
εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς αὐτοὺς τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην λέγων·	So he told them this parable saying;

Two things are immediately clear from this passage. The first is the primary or direct recipient of the parable and the second is the introduction to the parable. The use of the third person personal masculine plural pronoun αὐτοὺς indicates that it is to be identified with an earlier mentioned noun which would serve as the antecedent to the pronoun. In this passage, the only noun that can serve as the antecedent would be the Pharisees and the scribes mentioned in verse 2 as grumbling at the action of Jesus. Thus, the parable is Jesus' response or an explanation of his action to the religious aristocrat of his days.

The main issue however is the response that is given in feminine singular accusative noun, τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην (this parable). When the structure of Luke 15 is examined, one would discover that verses 4-7 contains the parable of the Lost Sheep; verses 8-10 contains the parable of the Lost Coin and verses 11-32 contains the parable of the Prodigal Son. One therefore wonders why Luke uses the singular demonstrative pronoun this when he knew quite well that three parables would follow the introductory statement of verse 3. This implies that for Luke, the three parables unite together to form what would be called a parabolic discourse. This is why Hultgren says that "the three parables have a thematic unity"²⁷. This thematic unity is reinforced by the use of common language in the three parables. Hultgren analyses the commonality as follows:

In each of them, as well as in the introduction (15:1-2), the noun 'sinner' ... or the verb 'to sin' ... appears: the noun in 15:1-2, 7, 10; the verb in 15:18, 21. In each of the parables also the verbs 'to lose' ... and 'to find' ... appear: 'to lose' at 15:4, 6, 8, 9, 24, 32 and 'to find' at 15:4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 24, 32. The one who has lost and found rejoices (15:5, 6, 32) and then either invites others 'to rejoice with' him or her (15:32; cf. 15:24). Finally the verbs of rejoicing are echoed also in the appended sayings to the first two parables concerning the 'joy' in heaven (15:7) or before the angels (15:10) as a consequence of a sinner's repentance²⁸.

In order words, the parables of the Lost Sheep (15:4-7) and the parable of the Lost Coin (15:8-10) are the immediate context for the parable of the Prodigal Son as far as Luke is concerned. By implication, apart from the historical context in Jesus’ ministry (15:1-2) the two earlier parables also form the basis by which the parable of the Prodigal Son must be understood. To take these two parables away, the door for misinterpretation would be opened for the parable of the Prodigal Son. The influence of these two parables would be drawn later when the context of the parables in Jesus’ ministry is examined.

The Context in Jesus Ministry (Luke 15:1-3)

Though the parable of the Prodigal Son is actually found in Luke 15:11-32, the context in the ministry of Jesus is found in 15:1-3 and it reads thus:

Luke 15:1-3 (SBLGNT)	Luke 15:1-3 (RSV)
<p>Ἦσαν δὲ αὐτῷ ἐγγίζοντες πάντες οἱ τελῶναι καὶ οἱ ἁμαρτωλοὶ ἀκούειν αὐτοῦ. 2 καὶ διεγόγγυζον οἱ τε Φαρισαῖοι καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς λέγοντες ὅτι Οὗτος ἁμαρτωλοὺς προσδέχεται καὶ συνεσθίει αὐτοῖς. 3 εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς αὐτοὺς τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην λέγων·</p>	<p>Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." 3 So he told them this parable:</p>

The proper understanding of the context demands a close study of the following words: tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees and Scribes. It would also be of importance to examine the socio-religious divide in Jesus’ days, that is, first century Palestine. These put together would then give a true picture of the context from which inferences could be drawn for the contemporary application.

Tax Collectors (τελῶναι)

The Greek word translated tax-collectors is τελῶναι. On the meaning of this word, Merkel says that at the time of Jesus, the τελῶναι were well-to-do Jews who “had paid for the privilege to collect individual fees (market duties, tolls) or taxes (on business, houses and consumers)”²⁹. Explaining their modus operandi, Michel says that they used the tax farming system mostly, especially from the 57BC. In using this system, an

individual or corporation would pay the tax meant for a particular town and then move to town to collect the money back. In the process, they collect more, which serves as their profit. In Judaism therefore, the rabbis regarded the tax collectors as people who make money from dishonest means and are thus classified as thieves and robbers. Consequently, the tax collectors are denied “the right to appear as witnesses, and they group both them and their families as gamblers or usurers”³⁰.

Another passage that would help to throw light on the identity of the *τελῶναι* is Luke 19:1-10. In this passage, Zacchaeus was called a *ἀρχιτελώνης*, that is, a chief tax-collector. From the Zacchaeus story, the picture of a tax-collector is painted graphically and the following can be inferred:

1. Zacchaeus was a Jew. This can be asserted from Jesus’ statement in verse 9 that he too “is a son of Abraham”. A Gentile would not be called by that name even if he has become a proselyte.
2. Tax collectors were regarded as sinners. This can also be gleaned from the Pharisees’ comment on Zacchaeus in verse 7 that Jesus “has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner”.
3. Tax collectors were corrupt. This is also shown in Zacchaeus’ self-confessional statement in verse 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 the tax collectors as outcasts (despite the fact that they are full blooded Jews) for they are seen as “collaborators who co-operated with the occupying power”³¹ (Robertson, 1983:142). Tax collectors though are sinners are always mentioned as a separate class and joined along with sinners as used here: ‘tax collectors and sinners’.

Sinners (ἀμαρτωλοὶ)

The Greek word translated sinner is *ἀμαρτωλός* (singular of *ἀμαρτωλοὶ*). 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)³².

It has to be noted that this word is very rare in classical Greek. The rarity of this word is attested to by the fact that it has occurred only five times in Greek literature. In the Septuagint (LXX), the word *ἀμαρτωλός* is used to interpret the Hebrew *רשע* (rwts). Thus it can be said that it is the usage of

this word in Judaism and the New Testament that has coloured its meaning. On רשעים (rwts), Rengstorf (1964:321) 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)³³.

The word is used to “denote people who neglect to observe the law according to the Pharisaic ideal”³⁴. Jeremias confirmed that two groups of people are involved in this class who are also called the עַמְּהָרְצָ (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 rights³⁵.

Tactically, it has to be noted that the meaning of the word among the Synoptic Gospels is quite different from the meaning it acquires in the epistles. This is because, though those referred to as sinners in the Gospels cannot be said to have not known God because as Jews, they are partners in the covenant of salvation. Rengstorf also agrees to this as he says that in the epistles, the word sinner has carried a new frontier. The new frontier “being between those who are still subject to sin and those who in Christ are rescued from sin and put in the service of God”³⁶. This distinction is thus important in our understanding of the meaning of the word ‘sinner’. It does not carry our contemporary Christian context of anyone who is not in Christ.

To sum up the first two sets of characters mentioned in verse 1, it can be deduced that the tax-gatherers and the sinners are both Jews who had either because of their profession or their way of life, had not been able to keep the law as expected.

Pharisees

The Pharisees is the designation of a widely known religious movement in the first century Judaism³⁷. Despite the popularity of the

sect, there are controversies concerning the origin of the group and the name. However there are two prevalent positions. Zeitlin traced the origin of the Pharisees to the time of Jonathan the Hasmoneans and to the group called the Hasidim³⁸. This position is said to be supported by Josephus who was said not to have mentioned the group until the time of Jonathan³⁹. The second is to take the origin of the Pharisees from the Perushim which was concerned with “separation by the law... by extension the sanctification of the people by the everyday application of the law”⁴⁰. This position is also supported by Taylor who also admits that the word was a nickname that the Sadducees applied to an unnamed group of Judeans.

The uncertainty surrounding the origin notwithstanding, the aim of this group was “to champion and observe the law within the hierarchy. It thus thinks of itself as the true Israel”⁴¹. Whichever way, the Pharisees were one of religious and political groups or sects that were highly influential in Jesus’ days. Unfortunately, “the biblical references to these people (which would number 99 in all) do not offer an objective analysis of who they were”⁴². The only source left for dependable information in determining who the Pharisees were is Josephus. In Antiquities XVII.41, they were shown as being proud of their knowledge in patriarchal laws and they boasted of their adherence to the law. The law the Pharisees kept so punctiliously include not only the written Torah but also the oral law. It was written of them that they “preserved many commandments not written in the laws of Moses”⁴³. Because of their zeal for the law and purity, 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”⁴⁴.

Scribes

The Greek word translated scribes is γραμματεῖς. The scribes were another distinct socio-religious group that wielded enormous influence during Jesus’ days. This group was actually developed after the mode of Ezra who was described as “a scribe skilled in the law of Moses” in Ezra 7:6. To support this position, Jeremias states that the term ‘scribe’ denotes “the rabbinic scholar or theologian”⁴⁵. On this same issue, Baumbach has this to say:

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 situations⁴⁶.

They actually started out by copying the law and as a result of being conversant with the law, they became authorities in matters relating to the law. It has to be noted that because some scribes were actually members of the Pharisees, some scholar thinks that the scribes and the Pharisees were one and the same group; however, they are two largely distinct groups⁴⁷. The scribes and Pharisees form the second class of the religious arm of Jesus' days. They were the religious aristocrats of Jesus days.

Now, this setting gives us a vivid picture of the incident that led to the parable and also a picture of the socio-religious stratification of the Jewish society in Jesus' days. The religious stratum of the Jewish society presents two poles: on the one end are the tax-collectors and the sinners who are regarded as the *am-ha-aretz*, that is, the people of the land and on the other hand are the Pharisees, the scribes and other religious aristocrats who are regarded as the associates. As at Jesus' days, 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* (foodstuff, that is) wet or dry, or buy from him (foodstuff, that is) wet; and he may not be the guest of an *am-ha-aretz* nor may he receive him as a guest in his own raiment⁴⁸.

Now in Jesus' ministry, unlike the religious aristocrats of his days, Jesus fellowshiped with the *am-ha-aretz*. This is what was indicated by Luke 15:1-2:

Luke 15:1-2 (SBLGNT)	Luke 15:1-2 (RSV)
<p>Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."</p>	<p>Ἦσαν δὲ αὐτῷ ἐγγίζοντες πάντες οἱ τελῶναι καὶ οἱ ἁμαρτωλοὶ ἀκούειν αὐτοῦ. 2 καὶ διεγόγγυζον οἱ τε Φαρισαῖοι καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς λέγοντες ὅτι Οὗτος ἁμαρτωλοὺς προσδέχεται καὶ συνεσθίει αὐτοῖς.</p>

In order to understand verses 1 and 2, it is necessary to examine the verbal construction there. In verse 1 is the imperfect form of εἶμι, the verb ‘to be’ and the present participle of the main verb. This construction is called periphrastic imperfect as confirmed by Wallace that, “this verb form is composed of the imperfect form of the verb εἶμι ‘to be,’ and the present participle of the verb⁴⁹. In this construction, “the participle agrees with the subject of the copula in case, gender and number”⁵⁰.

In verse 1, the imperfect form of εἶμι is ἦσαν and the present participial form of the main verb is ἐγγίζοντες. This is correctly translated as “were drawing near” but the function of the periphrastic imperfect as used here is akin to that of iterative imperfect. On this, Johnson says that, “the iterative imperfect is used to describe action as recurring at successive intervals in past time”⁵¹. Thus it is not surprising that the periphrastic imperfect is used to denote actions that have become habit. Thus Johnson comments on the verse that Jesus repeatedly receives sinners who kept drawing near to him repeatedly⁵². In verse 2, the first main verb is placed in the imperfect: διεγόγγυζον which will thus march the imperfect of verse 1. The picture here then is that “Jesus’ repeated reception of sinners who were drawing near to him was long enough and often enough to bring disdain and murmuring from the religious conservatives”⁵³. This is to say that the murmuring from the Pharisees and the scribes was as strong as Jesus’ acceptance of the tax-collectors and sinners. That this has become Jesus’ habit is reinforced by Luke in other passages: Luke 5:30; 7:39; 19:7

Verse 2 brings out another important dimension and this is the accusation that Jesus eats, that is has table fellowship, with sinners. The importance of this accusation is seen among the ancient Jews. Table fellowship is expected to create social bonding among the diners and at the same time serve as a means of defining social boundaries between the invited and the uninvited ones. Neyrey also admits that even the Pharisees also shared common meals as a major component of their group identity. Therefore Jesus’ action not only implied that Jesus’ companions were the outcasts but signalled that “God extends an inclusive invitation to non-observant and sinful outsiders for covenant membership and for status as forgiven persons”⁵⁴. According to Longenecker, the complaints in Luke 15:2:

... reflects also the symbolic weight accorded table fellowship in Early Judaism and in antiquity generally, where the sharing of a common table was a basic

mechanism for initiating or maintaining sociability and the bonds of a common identity, as well as for marking one group or society off from another⁵⁵.

The audience intended by this context as well as the messages of the two parables that serve as prelude to the parable of the Prodigal Son are important for the identification of the message of the parable.

Having examined the words that are important in these verses along with the socio-religious implications of these words among the Jews, we can summarize the picture we have as follows:

The Jewish society has been polarized among the religious aristocrats and those who have not been able to keep the law punctiliously as the religious aristocrats. And Adewale indicates:

Jesus, unlike the religious aristocrats of his days fellowshipped with these people (the am-ha-aretz). 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 all 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 God⁵⁶.

One bold statement, made above is that the Pharisees and the scribes as well as the tax-collectors and the sinners were Jews. It is also important to state that this fact was also played out in the three parables. The lost items in the three parables belong to a family. In the parable of the Lost Sheep, it is one out of 100 sheep; in the parable of the Lost Coin, it is one out of ten coins and in the parable of the Prodigal Son, it is one out of two sons. If one now compares the socio-religious setting of the parable as expounded above with the link of what has got lost in relation to the family, it is clear that one should uphold Edward's comment that, "because of this setting and because of the 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"⁵⁷.

By this statement, Edward has ruled out any Jewish/Gentile polemics in the overall interpretation of the parable. However, he also fell short by identifying what group the tax-collectors and sinners represent. Therefore, he left it unapplied. However, our position in this paper is that

if the Jewish/Gentile polemics have been ruled out, then the only option left is to see the parable as having a Jewish/Jewish undertone. If there is no Jewish/Gentile undertone in the parable, it would then be out of place to read a believer/unbeliever undertone into the parable.

Conclusion

As have been shown above, most contemporary interpretation of the parable of the Prodigal Son have always seen the parable as addressing the church's mission to the unchurched or the unbelievers. However, if as have been said above, Edward rejected the reading of the parable as a justification for gentile mission, then reading the parable as the church's mission to the unchurched cannot also be justified. This assertion is based on the fact that all the lost items belongs to a family a fact that is more emphasized in the parable of the prodigal Son which is concerned with the children of the same father, that is one family. Now, 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 cannot use the setting or context of this parable 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 in the church between believers, especially where one has backslidden in faith and the other is standing. In this case, the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son would easily identify with the Pharisees and the scribes in the context, while the ones who have committed sin and have become outcasts among believers would be the younger brother in the parable and would easily identify with the tax-collectors and sinners in the context. This understanding would help the church in her dealings and relationships with those who have erred or have fallen short of the standard of the church.

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