

## Luke 15:11-32: A Man Had Two Sons

Luke 15 (Lucan context): This first-level story has as its purpose the vindication of Jesus' association with sinners. In the first two parables of Luke 15 Jesus directly addresses his opponents. In both stories an object is lost and then found, and then ensues a request for rejoicing. The pattern of lost/found/rejoice appears in 15:11-32, and the banquet is no longer implied but real. The elder brother murmurs against the father's feast exactly as the scribes and Pharisees of the primary story do against Jesus' feast with sinners.

### *A Reading*

Line 1: The story invokes two diverse elements of the repertoire: that of the legal code associated with the family, and the mytheme of two-sons, common and frequent in the Hebrew Bible. See Sirach 33:19-23 on property: the father who gives the right of disposition to a son is a fool, for he may end up losing his livelihood. By surrendering his property, the father chances the loss of his honor, his position, his support, his control. His honor depends on his being embedded in the family, being himself the family's support and representative. The situation described in the parable, though not unknown, is not the norm. The father has put his family honor in jeopardy; he has behaved in a foolhardy way. And the son, in requesting the right of disposition, has in effect pronounced his father dead, because the disposition of the property assumes his death (cf. use of *ousia* and *bios*). From one perspective the Hebrew Bible history of the patriarchs is a narrative of elder and younger sons (despite law of Deut. 21:15-17 designed to protect the elder from favoritism often shown the younger).

Line 2: For a hearer, the son has turned out to be a rogue.

Line 3: The story mounts an important contrast between the son's inheritance and his present state. The metaphors underscore property and capital. Yet his lack is pictured in terms of food. The extreme action of the son calls the audience's sympathy into question.

Line 4: By coming to himself he begins to overcome his self-destructive pattern of behavior. He can no longer be a son, because he has forfeited those rights. His sin is twofold: 1) attaching to a foreigner and feeding pigs – abrogated Judaism 2) loss of inheritance is a sin before his father. The son views his situation in legal terms. The father represents the demands of the law.

Line 5: The father goes overboard, and his behavior is out of character for an eastern master/patron, for it violates his honor. Embracing and kissing are signs of forgiveness, but to kiss affectionately hints of the maternal theme. The father's initial response indicates he will not follow legal or paternal roles; he will play the nourishing role.

Line 6: The father becomes the controlling subject, and the son the object of his affection.

Line 7: The first set of orders moves in the direction of the father as patriarchal head restoring his son to his proper place of honor in a hierarchical system.

Line 10: "He was angry ..." - Major movement occurs in this line. Just as the younger son cut himself off from the father in the first act, so now the elder's anger and refusal violate the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment and so cut him off from the father.

Line 11: An important aspect of the son's complaint is that the father has failed to live up to the demands of honor. The younger brother has brought shame on the family by destroying the family life.

Line 12: The final line unfolds the father's view of his elder son. Whereas the son saw himself as a faithful slave, the father views him as a companion and co-owner of the farm. *Teknon* in the vocative denotes affection. The father combines in himself the maternal and paternal roles. As a father he is a failure, but as a mother he is a success. It is his forgiving, nourishing character that has entranced generations of hearers.

The parable subverts a mytheme by which the kingdom decides between the chosen and rejected. Here the father rejects no one; both are chosen. The parable radically rejects Israel's self-understanding of itself as the favored, younger son. The kingdom is universal, not particularist. The universalism, however, is not based on the rejection of some.