



The weakness is that it only accounts for the first part of the parable. (You could find Cain and Abel in the second part, but this is probably a stretch too far.)

How does this idea change the way you read the story of the Lost Son?

The Way of the Son of God into a Far Country

The last lens through which we can read this parable is completely different. It may surprise you (shock, alarm, etc.), but it is often favoured by scholars. This is partly because it was held by Karl Barth, the greatest theologian of the last Century. He built his view on St Augustine. It flips the parable on its head. It is sometimes called the Christological Interpretation.



Barth pointed out that this story sounded a great deal like Jesus own story.

- He too left His Fathers house.
- He, too, journeyed into a far country.
- He too suffered humiliation, poverty and ultimately death.
- He too returned to his Fathers house with joy and acclamation.

He left on a prodigal (lavish) journey. "Wasting" divine glory and grace on undeserving humankind. The "far country" was one of human sin and rebellion. The humiliation was sharing human frailty and bearing human sin. The return was the ascension.



How do you feel about this?

What problems with this interpretation can you see?



It does not really fit the context of the prostitutes and tax collectors finding faith. And it is the prodigal himself is not seen as a good or wise character. He needs to repent – Jesus does not.



These problems are not quite as big as they seem. Barth's point was not that Jesus was a sinner or rebellious, but that Jesus walked our path, He took our place, He entered our world in order to redeem us. This isn't a story of Jesus "losing" His way; It is one of Jesus overwriting our journey. It is a sovereign act of love. By becoming the "Prodigal," Christ sanctifies human nature.



It is not unusual for parables to be able to flip this way. For example, the parable of the Priceless Pearl can be read as us searching for God or God searching for us. Matthew 13:45-46

Because Christ has travelled the way into the "far country," Barth concludes that there is no place where a human being can go that Christ has not already been.



What positives do you see in this interpretation?

It would be wrong to think of this as the interpretation of the parable. It isn't. This idea sits on top of the traditional interpretation. (It can't replace it because it does not work without understanding the lost son as fallen humankind). We rebelled – and look what Jesus did – he followed our path (without sin) to open the way back. This is a Jesus who lives among the lost. Barth reminds us that if we refuse to welcome those in the "far country," we are actually refusing the Son of God himself,



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FREEDOM

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The Lost Son III - Reading differently



The Bible was over a period of more than 2000 years. This means that the people who wrote the Bible and the characters they record also read the bible. Consequently, the New Testament quotes the First Testament frequently. It does this directly with many quotes, but it also does it more subtly. The First Testament also quotes the First Testament, rarely with direct quotes, but frequently with illusions and echos. For example, Isaiah 61 is a reworking of the Sabbatical laws of Deuteronomy and Leviticus.



When Jesus told the Story of the Prodigal Father and the Lost Son, it is widely believed that He drew on other stories. We call these illusions, and not everyone agrees where they are and aren't found.

Two stories from Genesis stand out. We will look at these and a few other interpretations people have given to this story.



The First is Jacob

This is also a story of two brothers. Jacob steals the inheritance and manipulates his way into the birthrate. This ends up with him being forced to leave home. He goes to a distant country where he is cheated the way he has cheated others. He comes to his senses and returns home. When he does, there is a reconciliation scene, not with the father but with the older brother. In the process, he changes to become a better man and a Patriarch.



What similarities are there?

What are the differences?

Why did he leave home?

Why did he return?

Did he gain or lose while he was away?

How did his father feel about him?

How did his brother feel about him?

There are lots of stories in Genesis and in the Gospels that contrast two brothers.



There is enough here to say that Jacob was the original Lost Son. But there are also significant differences. You could say that Jacob's story is an alternative version. A different ending. It is certainly enlightening to read them together. This may well have been what Jesus intended us to do.

How does this change the way you read the story of the Lost Son?



The Kezazah Ceremony

It is often said that there is a Jewish version of this parable in which the wayward son is not received back with open arms but rather is rejected from the community. Some commentators explain this ceremony in great detail. (meeting at the edge of the village, breaking a pot and getting young children to insult the profligate). They claim that ritual is recorded in the Mishnah/Talmud (Ketubot 28b, Ketubot 2:10, Qiddushin 1:5). In their telling



of this parable, the father runs out in order to get to the son with forgiveness before the community gets to him with hostility. If you read these passages in the Talmud, you will find they say nothing of the sort and have no bearing on this parable. (Ketubot 28a is about priestly marriage.)



The opposite is true; the Midrash Ruth Rabbah 7:11 contains a parable of a king welcoming back a wayward son. The image of returning home is the standard metaphor for repentance in Rabbinic Judaism. The phrase is to return in repentance, (תחזור בתשובה) -Hozar betsuvah). The lost son did this.

Why do you think people are so keen to think the worst of the Jews of Jesus time?



There is an aroma of Antisemitism here. A willingness to believe bad things about the Jews. This is something to be strongly avoided, Romans 11:28-29.

But there is another dynamic here, too. This is one of those cases where someone got carried away while preaching, and everyone has assumed they knew what they were talking about and repeated the story. The bible is true, not every story a preacher tells is.

Any examples?



The Rebellious Son

Read Deuteronomy 21:18-21. cf Leviticus 20:9.

What does this passage say should happen to a rebellious son?

Can you imagine what would cause parents to take such a drastic act?

Did the Lost Son fit this criteria?



He did rebel, although we do not know that he disobeyed or had a history of disobeying his father. He did do wild living, Luke 15:13. It is possible that His brother's accusations of verse 30 are intended to bring this Deuteronomy passage to mind. The point is that the son returned, and this was the opposite of rebellion.

The fifth Commandment is to honour your parents. Exodus 20:12

How do you feel about the Deuteronomy passage?



The Roman world gave this power, without formal safeguard, to the father of a house. He could execute his children for any reason.

Here, this power is vested in the community. There are safeguards; both parents must agree. The Elders must judge the charge and act accordingly. Moreover, this is not the case of a son who won't do what he is told. The point is that he has become a danger, a liability in the community. He cannot be safely managed.

In biblical times, the death penalty was quite rare and usually commuted to something else. For every incident of the death penalty occurring in the Bible, we have another where it should have and didn't.

How does this change the way you read the story of the Lost Son?



The Garden of Eden

The most obvious parallel here is that Jesus is retelling the story of the Garden of Eden.

Adam (and Eve) are in paradise. They have everything they could possibly need. But they want more. Temptation works on the assumption that there is something you want but don't have.

In the account, God has made all the decisions. He is in charge. Where the humans live, what they do, what they eat and what they must not eat are all God's decisions. God has also decided what is good and what is not good.



How does this compare with our lost son?



The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil represents the freedom to make these decisions for themselves. For them to decide good and evil as God decided good and evil, Genesis 3:22.

Eating the fruit is a rejection of God's control. Humans want to make the decisions about what they will do for themselves. They want to choose what is right and wrong for themselves. Eating the fruit marks human independence day.



How does this compare with our lost son?

The riches, the inheritance that the Father gave the lost son, along with the freedom to do what he wanted with it, is mirrored in the freedom God gave humans to take their fate upon themselves.

Do we think of this as riches?

Both the humans and the lost son thought that only good would result in their freedom, but both found that it led to harm.



How?

Why?

So why did God give this freedom?



If you have no choice but to obey God, is your obedience real?

If you have no choice but to love God, is your Love real?

Obedience is only real if you have the choice to disobey. Love is only real if it is freely given. God cannot achieve His purpose in creation if He does not give us this freedom. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is a necessary part of the garden.



Why did God not make us without this ability or desire?

God does not want robots; He wants free beings, and free beings can use their freedom badly. This is a risk God is willing to take. More than this, it appears that God believes that to create us without this freedom would be a violation of our being.

Does this mean that God wanted us to eat the fruit?

No. But He knew it was necessary. If He wanted us to want to love Him and obey Him, this was the only way.



The Garden of Eden, Jacob's story and the lost son are about growing up and becoming adults.

By the way, the account of the fall echoes through Genesis. The accounts of Noah 9:21-26 and Lot 19:31-36 both have similar ideas in them.

What were the results of eating the fruit?

The risk that God took is the same as that the father in Luke took, that we would come to our senses and come home.

Did we?

This is the only way either could have real sons (and daughters).

If God were to take this incredible risk, then He also had to provide a way for the humans to return to Him.



What was it? Revelation 13:8

What other similarities do you see?

What differences are there?



The connection between the two stories is very strong. It is safe to say that in the parable of the Lost Son, Jesus is retelling the story of the fall. And since the desire for this freedom is so strong in humans, He is reminding us that the fall is an ongoing thing. The warning is to come home to the Father.