

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

*μηδὲν ὄν*, a slight early corruption of the text from *ὄν* to *ὄν* is so strongly suggested by the context, that I venture to give the translation of the verse with the reading *μηδὲν ὄν* : *For if a man thinks there is something amiss when there is nothing, he deludeth himself.*

Self-examination is the proper corrective to this temper, for it leads each man to glory in the discovery of his own faults instead of another's: and in this way each will bear his own burden; for whatever help we may render in bearing each other's loads (ver. 2), each must still amend his own faults.

vi. 11-18. The final summary of the argument, with its decisive condemnation of the motives, the practice, and the principles of the Judaizers, needs no comment here.

F. RENDALL.

### THE PRODIGAL AND HIS BROTHER.

MOST of the evangelical Parables are, to a greater or less extent, not mere "parables from nature," but stories of human action; and for this reason they admit of external illustration, and give scope for analysis to an almost indefinite extent as regards the outward story, even before we begin to study their spiritual meaning and application. Human nature itself is a complex thing, and it manifests itself under social conditions still more complex; if the social conditions be those of a long past time, their history may need much study before the human action as conditioned by them can be understood.

For, while the human nature of the Parables is that of all time, the social conditions are those of Palestine at the Christian era. These were, indeed, when we understand them, less unlike those of other times and other countries

than we may think ; but they need to be understood, that we may appreciate the significance, whether of the likeness or of the difference. Thus, on the one hand, whatever the difficulties of the Parable of the Unjust Steward, the story is the more readily intelligible to us because the steward's *status* is that familiar in modern society. He is not a trusted slave like Joseph, but a free man, paid on a scale that secures his comfort and should secure his honesty ; if dishonest, he is liable, not to punishment at his master's discretion, but to the ruin that will come from dismissal "without a character." On the other hand, the story in St. Luke xix. of the nobleman who went abroad to receive a kingdom over his own countrymen is quite a natural one, in terms of the political state of the eastern border of the Roman empire in the first half of the first century ; but there has scarcely been any other age of which it would have been intelligible. And whereas the question arises in several parables, whether the human actions which are made images of the Divine are necessarily such as, in men, would be admirable or justifiable, in this case we are forced to think that they are not. In the historical event which suggested the story, we know that St. Joseph's sympathies—probably also those of St. Matthew and his readers—were on the side, not of the claimant of royalty, but of the citizens who would not have him to reign over them.

Thus even in that Parable where the pictures of human relations are simplest, and sure to be most tenderly felt, we may need to study the few hints given us of the legal and social state of things which the story presupposes. Abp. Trench remarks on the keen and cold way in which the younger son makes, in a quasi-legal formula, his demand for the "portion of goods that falleth to him" ; but when he wrote it was not generally understood, as it is or ought to be since the publication of Maine's *Ancient Law*, what

the demand meant and what was the legal effect of granting it. Primitive law had not the conception of a testament that was of force after men are dead, but of no strength at all while the testator liveth. Instead, it contemplated a man, when death was approaching or when his powers were failing, "dividing his living unto" his sons; or, like Laertes he had only one, or, like Abraham, only one by a legitimate wife, "giving him all that he had." In either case, the father abdicated as completely as King Lear: only he retained, like him, a claim to honourable maintenance on the possessions that had been his own; and this was secured to him, if not by the spontaneous piety of his children, by their duty being so obvious, that there was no evading the sanctions whereby human and Divine law enforced it.

While this method of succession is the primitive one in both Aryan and Semitic society, so far as known to us, its development into the right of testation took place, no doubt, in different ways and at different rates in almost every several community. In Homeric Greece we hear how Peleus and Laertes<sup>1</sup> are exposed to wrong and contempt, while their sons and successors, who should and would have protected them, are dead or absent; but we hear little or nothing of why they abdicated in their sons' favour—Nestor did not, nor did Priam. But the laws and customs of historical Greece, and a few hints supplied by legend, suggest that under certain circumstances abdication may have been compulsory. Not only was it necessary for a king of the primitive type that he should have the vigour of body as well as of mind requisite for leading his people to battle. Even for a private and peaceable householder

<sup>1</sup> It is doubtful whether *Od.* xxiv. 205 sqq., where Laertes lives on an estate of his own, is reconcilable with xi. 187 sqq., or with ii. 98, 102, where, though not actually living in his son's house, he appears to be entirely dependent on its inmates. i. 189 sqq. will agree with either.

it was necessary, if he was to manage his own property, that he should know what he was doing; and we gather that dotage or senile imbecility was a good deal commoner, and began earlier, in ancient than in modern times. Thus in historical Athens legal means were provided by which a son could deprive an imbecile father of the control of his property, while public opinion was shocked if a son put the law in force, unless in an extreme case.

But as we approach the Christian era, Greek and, still more, Roman institutions have less analogy to Jewish and throw less light on them than in Homeric times, or even down to the sixth or fifth century B.C. And at the same time we have far less direct evidence of the practical customary law of the Jews during the five or six centuries that separate Nehemiah and Malachi from the Mishna than we have for earlier periods. And when we do come to the Mishna, we find in it not a system known to have been in practical operation, but one which doctrinaires held to have been *de jure* in operation a generation or two before their time. Doubtless it was not a novel invention of its redactors; but it is unknown to us how far it ever was put in ure. Still less have we the right to assume that such of its provisions as were practically obeyed had been in force from time immemorial.

Fortunately the longest and best, and the most accurately dated, of the few Jewish works which we have between the days of the prophets and of the rabbins throws a direct light on the legal question we are concerned with. It suggests that the development of the testament out of the abdication of the father was never thoroughly effected among the Jews, unless under Roman influence. The son of Sirach mentions indeed (iii. 13) the failure of a father's understanding as a not improbable trial to filial duty: but it is not in connexion with this that he discusses (xxxiii. 18-23, xxx. 27 sqq.) the question of the father's abdication of the

control of his property. On the contrary, the father whom he addresses is assumed (*v.* 18) to be a man of consideration and official position, quite competent to take care of himself; and he is exhorted to do so. When death is really imminent, no doubt, he will do well to "distribute his inheritance"; but he is warned "not to put off his shoes before he goes to bed." We can hardly doubt that the prejudice against making a will while in good health, which perhaps is hardly yet extinct, is a "survival" from the time when a will was a real abdication, and there was good reason for deferring it to the last moment.

But the affectionate father in the Parable trusts his sons more than the son of Sirach thought safe or wise; "and he divided unto them his living," as soon as either of them expressed a desire. Now we have already intimated that it is not necessary for the purposes of the Parable that his conduct should in all points be absolutely wise and right; but the general wisdom of the son of Sirach's advice does not prove that there may not have been considerations on the other side, to which, in individual cases, it was well to give weight. Here we may say that it was not likely that the household would go on peaceably, when one of its three chief members wanted it broken up. It was better to let the younger son have his separate "portion of goods," and hope the best of what he would do with it, than to keep him at home fretting against home restraints, and impatient, more or less consciously, for the time when his father should no longer be able to postpone "distributing his inheritance." Besides, it was a risk which could not be certainly avoided, that the father who postponed distribution to the last might after all die without having effected it; and Luke xii. 13 suggests that in such cases it was a fruitful subject of dispute between the co-heirs on what terms they should divide the as yet undivided inheritance, or whether they should not divide it at all, but

remain as joint owners, even as in their father's lifetime they had been joint occupants. St. Jude's grandsons in Hegesippus (*ap. Eus. H. E. III. xx.*) were thus joint owners of their little property; but unless brotherly affection was very strong, it is likely that division was the wiser course; and division, to be effected without dispute, required a divider whose judgment could not be challenged.

But whatever the father's reasons, sufficient or no, for granting the younger son's demand, we see that, when he says to the elder, "All that I have is thine," this is no mere affectionate figure of speech, no mere promise as to the future, but a statement literally and legally true. And if we realize this, it can hardly fail to affect favourably our estimate of the elder son's character. For it is plain that *he* does *not* realize it, that he neither feels himself, nor allows his father to feel, that the mastership of the household has passed from one to the other. The father gives orders and deals with everything as his own; the son, even when he complains of his father, still owns himself dependent on his father giving what, if he were less dutiful, it was in his own power to take. Even in his unbrotherly jealousy, it is for his father's rights that he is jealous: "This thy son," he says, ". . . hath devoured thy living. . . ." The undivided property ought, in his view, to have remained at the father's disposal; or, if it might be conceived that the younger son was justified in wanting to employ his (third?) part of it separately, he ought even so to have dealt with it, as the elder son did with the remainder, as being still the father's property in conscience, and subject to a contribution to his maintenance as a first charge.

Thus far we have dealt exclusively with the outward framework of the story; but as we proceed we shall find that the illustrations we have obtained for this are not without use for the appreciation of its spiritual lessons. Even here we get a confirmation and an illustration of the

view of those commentators who have seen in the prodigal's conduct two stages of apostasy: a covert one in the demand for the separate portion of goods, and an open one in the departure to a far country. The demand might conceivably have been made, not by a prodigal, nor even by an undutiful son, but by an aspiring man of business, who saw his way to serving his father better if he were allowed to do so at his own discretion; it was the departure that proved that it was made in a really selfish and unfilial spirit.

But when we say that the son might conceivably have made from a good motive the demand which, as the event proved, he really made from a bad, perhaps we are less analysing the lesson of the Parable than pointing out the necessary inadequacy of the human relation to image the Divine. No earthly father is so wise, but that a grown up son may conceivably be right in thinking that he can manage things better than his father does; in the spiritual family, the son is already a rebel who conceives the Father's perfect wisdom as open to question.

Yet here the practical difference is less than the theoretical. No one can doubt that the heavenly Father knows better than any of His children what is best for all of them; but they may conceivably, and surely sometimes rightly, think that His will is more truly shown in their own capacities and impulses than in the pressure of external circumstance: so that choosing their own course, instead of accepting one chosen for them, shall appear an act of obedience, not of rebellion. Are we then to say that the son is not necessarily wrong who takes his separate portion of goods for his separate use, provided only that he continues to use them in the Father's service?

Perhaps the human image, when well considered, will suggest the answer. A son who sees things ill managed in his father's house may be right in asking to be allowed to manage them himself; but when things are going on well



enough, it is hardly the filial spirit to assert one's own judgment as to how they might be ordered better. In this household, even after the prodigal had carried off his portion, masters and servants still had enough and to spare; even if he had meant not to squander his portion, but to make a fortune with it for the common good, it does not follow that it was worth while to break up the family for that end.

And to this there is a real analogy among the children of God. Doubtless the greater a saint is the more will his life be regulated by the inward call which he feels in his heart, instead of merely following the path marked out by circumstances as the natural one for him; but the saintlier he is, the more will he feel—the more even will other men see—that he does what he does, not because he will, but because he must. The man who consciously chooses the career that best suits him is not the basest type of worldlyling, but neither is he the highest type of the child of God. It is not the same thing to say, "I see how this or that ought to be done, and I want to be free to do it," as to say, "I want to have this or that, to do as I like with": but the one temper is hardly more Christian than the other. The *heretical* spirit, the spirit that *chooses* for itself, is more akin than it may seem to the worldly or carnal spirit that *desires* for itself. Both alike say to the Father, "Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me"; though the one is not prepared, like the other, to go far away from the Father,—still less, like him, to squander instead of improving the portion he receives.

There is no need for us to follow the details of the prodigal's downward career; they are only too intelligible. The one point open to question is, what amount of gross vice is meant to be implied in it—how far *ἀσωτία*, in the language of St. Luke's day as of Aristotle's (*Eth. Nic.* IV. i. 3-5), suggested, if it did not necessarily imply, *ἀκολασία* also.

Certainly it is both intentional and significant, that the "harlots" spoken of by the elder brother are not mentioned in the narrative itself; that would run as it does if the prodigal were nothing worse than a prodigal—a fool soon parted from his money. But, true as it is that a Charles Surface or a Harold Skimpole is a meaner and more selfish character than he looks, we seem in the prodigal's repentance to find traces of his vices having been grosser and less capable of palliation than these. The question, in fact, while it has some human interest so far as it affects the outward story, becomes almost unmeaning when we come to the spiritual application. It is meaningless to ask, whether sins are spoken of that *only* waste the powers and endowments of the mind and spirit, or whether they are such sins as *also* degrade and pollute the spiritual nature. That pollution cannot be more forcibly described than as

"The expense of spirit in a waste of shame":

to waste spiritual gifts *is* to degrade the spiritual nature, it *is* to exhaust and profane the spiritual life, because spiritual gifts are not things external to and separable from the spirit, as bodily goods are from the body. At most, the silence of the story as to the degree of the prodigal's vice makes its lesson more comprehensive. As there are prodigals who excuse themselves, or are excused, on the plea that they are no man's enemy but their own, so not a few people claim the right to live an aimless and useless life, if it be only a harmless and decent one. The man in another parable buried his talent, and brought it back as he received it; but what these people do with their lives and capacities is to fritter them away, and then claim credit for having spent them innocently. Such people ought to realize that they are not only unprofitable servants, but "prodigal" even if not "intemperate" sons.

Passing on to the first motions of the prodigal's repent-

ance, we learn not to be too exacting in our notions of what an acceptable repentance must be. His repentance is thoroughly genuine; his confession, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee," is just what a sinner's confession ought to be. For it is not meaningless, that in the outward narrative he is made to acknowledge his sin in its double aspect, against God and his father, though in the interpretation of the Parable these are the same. A true penitent would, under the circumstances, feel and confess his sin in both its aspects; and the prodigal is made to do so, that we may recognise his repentance as true. And yet his motive for repentance is not a very exalted one. His sin began with his caring, not for his father or his father's love, but for "the portion of goods" that he could get out of him. Now his repentance begins with his hungering, not for the love of home in contrast with the heartless selfishness of boon companions turned to strangers or oppressors, but for the "bread enough and to spare" which he who was here perishing with hunger had left behind at home. With his real contrition, "I am no more worthy to be called thy son," goes the petition, not for love but for maintenance, "Make me as one of thy hired servants."

These last words, as every one knows, he did not repeat when on his return he found himself prevented by his father's love. He does not repeat them, that is, according to the text of the parable which the Church at large has received; but it is proved by MS. evidence that the clause was repeated in one of the earliest and, in general, purest of the forms in which St. Luke's text was current; and not only so, but the text with the repetition retained its currency to a later date and over a wider area than happened with many of such old but incredible readings. For it really is not rash to pronounce it incredible. Strong as is its external attestation, "intrinsic" and "transcriptional"

probability are alike against it. That the latter is so is plain enough : the presumption is generally for the shorter reading against the longer ; it is almost always for the differentiation of parallel passages against their assimilation. But it seems as though it were the height of rashness to pronounce confidently on the "intrinsic" probability, to undertake to say what St. Luke must or could not have written, or rather—for it comes to this—what the Lord must or could not have said. Yet if the Church be divinely ordained as "a witness and keeper of Holy Writ," we have something surer than our own subjective feelings to guide us, when we observe what is the text that she reads in her daily use, and what perfect fitness is found in it by all her children, from the wisest commentators to the simplest untrained readers. We dare not guess what the Lord would be likely to say, where evidence fails of what He did say ; but there is no rashness but reverence in believing that

"Through the veil the Spouse can see, *for her heart is as His own.*"

In truth, we find ourselves here in what may be almost called the fundamental doctrine, as of the Gospel at large, so of this *Evangelium in Evangelio*. When the prodigal came home and found his father's love waiting ready for him, he learnt what he had never learnt till then—that it is the father's love, not his inheritance, that gives the son pre-eminence over the servant. Unworthy as he was to be called his father's son, yet he was so : even as it is written (in a place where criticism does help us more than usage to discern the full mind of the Spirit), "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God : *and we are*" (1 John iii. 1). But for this very reason—because the fatherly love secured to him a title higher than a servant's—we may say that there was a certain justice in the son's request for a servant's portion : so that Christians who inherited what

we regard as an interpolated text may yet have been able to glean a true meaning from it. When the prodigal turned his back on his filial duty and his father's love, he got the son's portion of goods: now he received the father's love as before, and valued it as never before; but he had no longer the right to ask for gifts such as a father might give a son, only for such hire as a labourer is worthy of. He had had his portion of the father's goods already, and what remained was not his inheritance,<sup>1</sup> but his elder brother's: only if he worked faithfully for his father, he would have bread enough and to spare, instead of the starvation wages given by the citizen of the far country.

And if the prodigal's reformation consists in this, that he learns to desire not his father's gifts but himself, so the elder brother's danger of apostasy lies in the converse process—that he is not satisfied with the father's presence and his love, but murmurs at the withholding of his gifts. Again we leave the question open, whether the human image is adequate to the spiritual truth signified. No earthly parent is a worthy object or a perfect satisfaction for all the desires or aspirations of even the most dutiful child: and a modern moralist may be apt to say, that a parent should recognise and act on this knowledge of his own imperfection,—that here the father would have done more wisely and kindly, if he had encouraged the son who never transgressed his commandment sometimes to make merry with his friends, with his father's sanction, but without his presence. It may even be said, that the heavenly Father does this: that lawful and innocent pleasures, which yet are pleasures of the world and of the flesh—things which we ask God's blessing on, which we thank Him for giving

<sup>1</sup> What the father does give him—the ring, shoes, and robe—are obviously things which would be at his personal disposal, not parts of the family estate. This we may say without prejudice to the question, whether the details of these gifts have any special spiritual meaning or not.

us, and which yet it is not a religious act to enjoy, but rather it is impossible consciously to remember God in the very moment of enjoyment—that these are the kid which He gives us to make merry with.

If we were to press this point, we might say that the elder brother is the picture of a bigoted ascetic—a man who thinks, perhaps rightly, that he is called to an austere life, and is jealous of the admission that any one—especially a penitent—who lives less austere can be a true child of God. Or more generally, we might say that he is one of those “rakes at heart,” who believe profligacy to be really synonymous with pleasure, and regard their own abstinence from profligacy as a renunciation of pleasure: so that he is ready to charge God with forbidding him pleasure which He has not forbidden, because He has forbidden him the profligacy which in the end becomes pleasureless. But such suggestions, though perhaps not quite unworthy of attention if they occur to us, can hardly claim to be regarded as legitimate deductions from the Parable. According to all that the story says, the facts are as the elder son states them, and we have to assume for the purposes of the Parable—what perhaps is not as much against reason as it is out of fashion—the older, sterner view of a father's duty; that though he has neither Divine wisdom to direct his children, nor Divine perfection to reward them, yet he has, as a Divine representative, a Divine right to what he claims from them, without admitting counter claims on their part.

But if we have not to argue whether the father is in all points a kind or judicious father, we cannot waive the question whether we are to regard the elder son as a really dutiful son. We have already rejected the severest view sometimes taken of him: when he says, “Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment,” we have no right to doubt the truth of his words, nor even to brand the many years' service

as heartless or unloving. Only we see that it is in danger to become so now: his uncharitable temper towards his brother leads him into a rebellious attitude towards his father, which is all the more significant, the more opposed it is to his conduct towards him hitherto. Hitherto he has served his father, has (as we said) neither felt nor let him feel that he has become owner of his father's goods: now he speaks as though some grudgingly given share in his father's goods were more to him than his father himself.

But it does not follow that the unfilial temper is fully developed, because it is seen naturally to arise out of the unbrotherly. The father's reply is, "Son, thou art ever *with me*"—that is still the reward for his service that he cares for, more than "all that I have is thine." "If any man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar": but dare we say that any man's love to God is proved to be no more than hypocrisy, if his love towards some of his brethren is very grudging and imperfect? When we say that charity towards the sinful is one of the highest of Christian graces, we rather imply than exclude the possibility, that a man who has not this grace may yet have some Christian graces, real though short of the highest. It has been wisely said in our own time,—

"The world will not believe a man repents,  
And this wise world of ours is mainly right."

To recognise true repentance—to believe that repentance, as yet untested, may be true—is a transcending or even a defiance of experience, which proves a formed habit of walking by faith, not by sight. He who has attained to this has walked with God, has known the fellowship of the sufferings of the Son of God: but it would be a new form of uncharitableness to say, that he who has not attained to it hath not seen God neither known God. Wonderful and admirable it is, to see how the purest souls are most for-

bearing with those who have fallen into the sins farthest from their own nature: but if this is wonderful, must we not tolerate as natural infirmity the hardness which grows in those who have felt and overcome temptation towards those who have yielded to it? Shakespeare's *Isabella* is an immeasurably higher ideal than *Tom Tulliver*; but it were well for the world if there were no worse men in it than he. Let us not be content with thanking God that we are not as other men are—self-satisfied, self-righteous, or even as this Pharisee: but rather implore the infinite Love to forgive us all our offences—misdoings and misjudgments alike—against one another as well as against itself. If we learn each to realize and to return the love of the universal Father, then what is unlovely in each of us is in the way to die out; and then we shall none of us be extreme to mark in his brother what traces of the unlovely temper may as yet remain.

W. H. SIMCOX.

---

*ANCIENT CELTIC EXPOSITORS.*

*COLUMBANUS AND HIS TEACHING.*

THE existence of Greek and Hebrew learning and philosophy in the islands of the Western Ocean has hitherto formed a curious problem. In my last paper, wherein I dealt with the library of the great Celtic missionary whose name heads this article, I offered several clear proofs of that learning; while again as to the sources of it, I think they are far from mysterious, but are easily explained when viewed in connexion with the whole range and movement of monasticism. The monks in their original idea, as established in Egypt, were essentially solitaries. Their one object at first was to get away as far as possible from mankind. With this end in view they fled into the Nitrian