Whom do you welcome, and with whom do you share food? That implicit Pharisaic question summons these three tales—The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Prodigal Son. It is a question of hospitality.

"This Man Receiveth Sinners": Moral Storytelling in Luke 15

By B. W. Jorgensen

THE TEXT

1 Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him.
2 And the Pharisees and Scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them. (Luke 15:1–2.)

LET THE FIRST TWO VERSES OF LUKE CHAPTER 15 stand for the entire text of my sermon; in a sense, they might be the entire text. Here at the outset they remind us where we stand: somewhere "near" enough "to hear him." The question is: Who are we? Who am I, and who are you? Publican? Sinner? Pharisee? Scribe?

As always, I style myself a scribe and not one having authority. As scribe, devotee of texts, I want to hear what the text, which does have authority, says.

I've been paying attention to the three tales in Luke 15, to how they're told, and trying to tell my students about them since the fall of 1986, when in an Honors freshman colloquium one day I stumbled, unplanned, into a retelling and started to hear what was going on in the tales. I've gone on doing that, retelling and talking about the telling (usually without plan but of course with an increasing number of decreasingly spontaneous performances behind me) whenever in a literature or writing class it has seemed pertinent or helpful to try to say what two moral storytellers, Luke and Jesus, do in this chapter. Maybe there are more than two: maybe we should include the lost son and the father in the third tale, and also the shepherd and the housewife in the first two; and why not the servant and the elder son in the third? Tell me: who ain't a storyteller in this world, from Adam and Eve on down to you and me?

"This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." Whom do you welcome, and with whom do you share food? That implicit Pharisaic question is the occasion of these three tales, the ones we call The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Prodigal Son. The occasion and context is a question about hospitality. In attending to the occasion of these parables, I'm glad to discover that I follow the habit of Joseph Smith, who, specifically "in reference to the prodigal son," said he had "a key by which I understand the scriptures. I enquire, what is the question which drew out the answer, or caused Jesus to utter the parable." For him, the Pharisees' saying was "the key word which unlocks the parable of the prodigal son." So: Why does this man receive sinners, and eat with them?

HOW THE TALES ARE TOLD

The first two are didactically told with interpretive conclusions that nail down the message.

YET I won't focus first on that question. Rather than themes or messages or answers, I will attend first to how the tales are told. But that can't be detached from to whom? and to what question? To the Pharisees, and to their complaint with its implied question, which the tales answer: "Why?" Why does this supposed holy man, this teacher and healer, welcome sinners and eat with them? Luke's preceding chapter, which begins with Jesus dining at "the house of one of the chief Pharisees," has been centrally concerned with hospitality, with what to do "when thou art bidden" (14:8, 10) or
Heaven may be a kingdom, with all the structure and hierarchy that the word implies. But with so many other figures Jesus uses elsewhere in the gospels, these tales say heaven is a feast, and Jesus is welcoming us.

"when thou maketh a dinner or a supper" (14:12), with where to sit and whom to invite. But there’s no time for that context here and now.

The main thing, the largest thing, to notice about Jesus’ three tales in this chapter is how different in structure the first two are from the third. I’m assuming, for this discussion, that whether or not all three were told on a single historical occasion, Luke has framed them as he does because he wants us to see their relationships, their continuity and discontinuity, their similarity and difference. (The next chapter is “said also unto his disciples” [16:1], clearly demarcating its contents from these tales told unto the Pharisees, and thus justifying the traditional chapter division.)

The first two tales begin as questions: “What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them . . . doth not . . . go after that which is lost, until he find it?” (15:4); “Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not . . . seek diligently till she find it?” (15:8). The address of such questions to their hearers, Jesus’ Pharisaic challengers, is quite direct, aggressively so with the emphatic second person, “What man of you.” And both of these first two tales conclude with the teller explaining the tale. Of the lost sheep: “I say unto you that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance” (15:7). No mistaking the point here, and no mistaking at whom it aims: those Pharisees who have just presented themselves as “just persons, which need no repentance,” standing apart from the “sinners” whom Jesus “receiveth” and “eateth with.” The explanatory close of the second tale pulls back from that to declare simply, without any comparative “more than.” “Likewise I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth” (15:10). Structurally, tactically, these tales stop just short of the hortatory; despite their aggressive second-person address, “What man of you” and (twice) “I say unto you,” they are not in the imperative, not in the mode of command or of moral exhortation. Just barely. And either by itself might suffice to answer the Pharisees’ implied question: Why do you receive sinners and eat with them? I’m glad to receive and eat with sinners who turn to me. Isn’t God? Aren’t the angels? Wouldn’t you be?

The third tale, on both these counts, is radically different: no second-person address by the teller to the hearers, and no interpretive conclusion to nail down the message; to begin, just Luke’s “And he said,” leading straight into Jesus’ “A certain man had two sons” (15:11); and to end, only silence, both Jesus and Luke (15:32).

But before taking up the third tale, look at some other features of structure and sequence in the first two. Most noticeably, each focuses on a single protagonist—a “man” (shepherd) and a “woman” (housewife)—and on a similar series of acts by each—losing, seeking, finding, calling friends and neighbors to rejoice. Within the teller’s second-person address to his audience, each tale is told in a third-person “objective” point of view, simply the deeds and one speech by each protagonist, which rather directly imply two obvious motives: desire to find what was lost and desire to share joy when it is restored: “Rejoice with me; for I have found . . .” (15:6, 9). Jesus’ reply to the Pharisees’ disparagement of his habits as host and guest should be equally glaringly obvious. Why do I receive and eat with sinners? Why don’t you join us?

The differences between the first two tales seem less important than their shared differences from the third. A sheep may get “lost” by its own straying. Sheep are stupid, and sometimes stupidly obstinate. I learned that one hot, dust-choked summer afternoon in my teens, trying with a couple of cousins to herd a bunch for my Uncle John from the Salina auction pens to his feedyard across the Sevier River, stalled for hours at the bridge till Uncle John, over six feet and maybe 300 pounds but even then carrying an oxygen bottle and respirator mask in his truck, just waded into the bunch and started lugging them across bodily. That’s my one sheepherding story. A coin has to get “lost” by its owner’s carelessness or neglect. Whether that difference should matter when the tales’ protagonists both stand for the God who rejoices when sinners repent, I leave for more authoritative minds to declare. The point this scribe
WITH that point so clearly made in the voice of the teller, perhaps the third tale can stand as it does, bare of direct second-person address and authoritative interpretation; yet an already-established thematic context won't account for all of the last tale's complex difference. We may get closer to that if we move through the first two tales not as thematic prelude or frame but as in themselves a dynamic narrative sequence (which may actually have happened but in any case is here constructed by Luke), an interplay between teller and (silent) hearers which brings the teller to the point where the tale of “a certain man” with “two sons” is his last, best shot, all the more effective for not being aimed so straight at his audience.

It's not clear just where Jesus is when he tells these tales. A couple chapters earlier “he went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem” (13:22); at one point, when he still anticipates a three-day walk to arrive there (13:33), he utters a lament, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets” (13:34), again underscoring the theme of reception or rejection, hearing or not hearing a teller; and two chapters later he’s still “pass[ing] through the midst of Samaria and Galilee” (17:1) on his way to Jerusalem. A chapter before his tales to the Pharisees he has eaten “bread on the Sabbath day” in “the house of one of the chief Pharisees” (14:1). All my fuss at this is to suggest that the setting of Luke 15 might be urban, though not the capital. Supposing that, and reading (perhaps over-reading) Luke's silences about the Pharisees' reaction to any of the tales as strategic rather than mere default, I see something like this: The first tale is too up-country for an audience of town Pharisees; it's a slick story, a shepherder story; in a word, pastoral. So, met with silence as with a blank look, the teller next tries an indoor, domestic setting, a house in a city or village, for a tale focused on a more urban form of wealth and loss, cash. Again I suppose a space of silence after the teller's interpretive conclusion, and then over-read that silence as yet another glum stare from the Pharisees, even though this time he has held back the mild, indirect allusion of “just persons, which need no repentance,” which he may have seen did not go down well the first time. If they get his point, they’re still not taking it.

Still, the trouble getting through to these hard, Pharisaic hearts may not have so much to do with subject or setting or protagonist—first rural, then domestic but feminine—as with narrative moves. Direct address and flat-out interpretation aren't visibly working. Or so I take Luke's silences to say. We are free not to take the silences that way, free not to suppose silences at all, free to take the series of three tales as a single continuous discourse, with the audience sitting as stolidly quiet while the teacher plods on, as in the dullest gospel doctrine class you've squirmed in lately. (This is not the pattern in traditional oral story-telling situations, which often involve lively interplay between teller and audience, and in which the teller acutely watches the audience's reaction and gauges the telling to that.) We are free to respond and interpret as we will—and that, I hope to imply, will be a large part of the point.

I choose to hear brief narrative silences, on Luke's part and on Jesus' part, after each of the first two tales, and I rather aggressively read those silences as signifying that the tales failed. You may doubt me; and to be sure, there's no question these tales do each unmistakably illustrate the teller's explicit theme that there is festal joy in heaven when a sinner repents, so why murmur if Jesus eats with sinners. The first two tales might prove unpersuasive if closely attended to: throw a party because you've found a lost lamb? or spend on a party more than the value of the lost coin you've found? But more, ask yourself: How much did you care about either the shepherd or the housewife? Did you feel with either one's loss, or either one's joy in finding what was lost? Are you ready, after those tales, to "exceed the righteousness of the . . . Pharisees" (Matt. 5:20) by "receive[ing] sinners, ...
The first two tales are formally didactic: the teller's stance is always implicitly or explicitly "I say unto you": the teller has wisdom, has truth, and hands it down. Tales told this way to exemplify flat-out truths leave us flat.

and eat[ing]l with them? If so, welcome. If not, the teller has one more tale to try you with.

The trouble with the first two tales lies in just the kind of success each so obviously and efficiently goes for: the clear illustration of a stated theme. Both tales are formally didactic: concrete illustrations or exempla or figures of the stable, propositional truth that concludes them. In formally didactic tales, the teller's stance is always implicitly or explicitly "I say unto you": the teller has wisdom, has truth, and hands it down, ex cathedra, to the hearers. Its invariably a superior-inferior relation, structurally, with built-in structural resistance to change, and perhaps built-in resentment. It's no surprise if tales told this way to exemplify flat-out truths leave us flat. Right where we started, structurally: inferior, down-here.

THE THIRD TALE
Moral storytelling—giving each agent his due.

The most obvious difference of the third tale from the first two is length: it visibly takes up two-thirds of the chapter, twice as much as the other two combined, twenty-two verses against eight, not counting the two introductory verses. The immensely greater length is largely a function of narrative technique, which in turn is the sign and method of an entirely different mode of moral teaching. All three stories are in one sense "moral"—they seek the moral improvement of their hearers—but they differ in the ways they are moral: the first two are tales told with "morals," told to illustrate the teller's propositional truth; the third (and here I must seem to strain the language for a distinction) is told morally. I'll have to explain, and I can do so in terms of the third tale's substance and especially its greatly more generous narrative technique, its more generous telling. In this tale, Jesus as teller becomes more like the shepherd and housewife he holds up in the first two tales as figures of a divine seeker and finder of the lost, who rejoices and calls others to rejoice when the lost is found.

Two signs of this are the absences I've already noted: no direct second-person address to the hearers, and no authorial interpretation to close, and close down, the tale. Here the teller leaves us free to take up the tale or not, and free to make our own meanings in it. Jean Paul Sartre must feel odd to be brought into Jesus' company at this point, but in the terms of his essay "Why Write?", this third tale declines to coerce or manipulate us and offers itself, rather, as a "gift" or "pact of generosity" between teller and hearer. Jesus as teller in this third instance is again the welcoming host of sinners that Pharisees resent him for being; and here, rather than lecturing them in the mode of "I say unto you," he will welcome them into his tale, to find whatever place they can. He and Luke offer us the same invitation.

The largest narrative signs of the teller's generosity, which result in this tale's greater length, are the tale's much longer, more complex, and more complexly presented action, and its distribution of narrative focus or point of view over three principal characters, the "man" and his "two sons," one "lost" and repentant and "found," the other (so the teller seems to allow) just and needing no repentance. With the hortatory or didactic "I say unto you" stance left behind (unless we choose still to invoke it contextually), the third tale more generously invites us to feel with and be moved by its three principal agents. The greater, and different, success of this method, I think, is sufficiently attested by the needful recourse and loving memory of two millennia of hearers (including St. Augustine in his Confessions, Rainer Maria Rilke in The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, and, I trust, many of us). I think it's a safe guess that "The Prodigal Son" is Jesus' favorite parable among Christians of every variety; in any case, it's my own favorite. Our referring to it as "The Prodigal Son" says much about our moral relation to it—we "identify" most strongly with the "lost" and repentant, "found" and forgiven—though this also may narrow too straitly our possible moral response. It's interesting that three LDS interpretations by prominent general authorities, Apostles James E. Talmage, Spencer W. Kimball (later president and prophet), and Bruce R. McConkie, stress the greater righteousness and greater reward of the elder son. Perhaps lay members of the Church identify most strongly with the errant and returning son, in technical terms, because
the tale gives us a more intimate sense of his inner life, his spiritual trajectory.

The first difference we can notice in this tale, after the absence of a question aimed at us, is that rather than focusing on the loser and finder, it invites us to "identify" with the "lost," and not a sheep or a coin but a younger son (15:12): we're bidden here to look at "lost" and "found" from the other side; the finder's side seems to have failed to persuade us, so the teller tries the "lost." It's also a very large difference that the "lost" here is no item of wealth, neither an animate sheep nor an inanimate coin, a symbolic token of exchange, but a person, an agent like ourselves, a soul of infinite worth lost by his own agency, and lost from the familial—the paternal, filial and fraternal—web of personal relations. This makes an enormous difference, conceptually, in tale-telling: it's one thing to tell of a single self, seeking its lost property, finding it, and calling friends and neighbors to celebrate; it's quite another to tell of a father and sons, brothers, each with his own "agenda" (which every "agent" has), and let each speak in his own voice. In the first two tales, there are no others: the protagonist's voice calls to them, but the teller does not bring them into the tale. Here, in the third tale, the teller enters the dangerous terrain of life as we know it, the real world that is the world of many agents, each with his or her own voice and choice, where all the agents risk everything, and perhaps the teller does, too.

My best move here might be just to tell the tale and fall silent, as Jesus and Luke are confident enough to honor our free intelligence by doing. But I'll continue in my own dangerously analytic mode, with as much brevity and clarity as I can manage. Beautifully proportioned, the third tale breaks near its halfway point, verse 20, where its first phase, the younger son's departure, desolation, and return, modulates into a second phase, the father's welcome. This modulation, by the way, is carried by a deftly chiasmic pattern that balances "And he arose, and came to his father" with "his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran . . ." (15:20): lost and finder converge on the pivot of the chiasm.

The tale's last half itself divides again just short of its midpoint, with a surprising and much more abrupt shift from the merriment of the welcome-home party to the "elder son" and his resentment on hearing the "mussick and dancing" and learning what it means (25, 28). This last phase culminates in an open-ended dialogue between the father and the elder son (28-32)—open-ended in that the teller does not tell its outcome, no more than Luke tells the effect of the tale upon its hearers.7

In the first phase, which also divides sharply near its midpoint (17), we may come to know what it is not to lose but to be "lost," as we follow in the tale's sentences the younger son's request and receipt of his "portion" (one third, the elder brother being entitled to a double share), and then his journey into a far country where he "waste[s] his substance with riotous living," then begins "to be in want" and "join[es] himself to a citizen of that country" and gets sent "into his fields to feed swine" (13-15). The worst loss is not to have "spent all" (14) the cash you turned your "portion of goods" (12) into, but to find that you "would fain have filled [your] belly with the husks that the swine did eat" (16). If you're a Jew, swine are unclean to you. You've sunk as low as you can, to a starving hireling swineherd whom "no man gave unto" (16). So it's a major turn in the tale's plot (as Augustine recognized)9 when "he came to himself" and "said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!" (17). (It's my understanding that "hired servant" would be the lowest possible status in the ancient world; a household servant is part of the household, a member of the familia or oikos, but a hired slave has no such settled status.)11 The teller here takes himself and us about as far into the "lost" as we can go, imagining the private or inner voice of this desolated younger son. Without once addressing us in the second person, the tale is asking us, Can you imagine "lost"? You ever been lost?

This first phase culminates in the son's rehearsal of the speech he will make to his father:

**THE LOST COIN**

8 Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it?

9 And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost.

10 Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.

—Luke 15:8-10
All three stories are in one sense "moral"—they seek the moral improvement of their hearers—but they differ in the ways they are moral: the first two are tales told with "morals," told to illustrate the teller's propositional truth; the third is told morally.

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. (18-19)

What a difference in "say unto" here: the intention of a protagonist, what he means to say and do, his expectation and hope, it arouses our own hope and expectation. As the teller goes on, he seems to confirm the success of the protagonist's intent: "I will arise and go to my father" becomes "And he arose, and it arouses our own hope and expectation. As the teller goes on, he seems to confirm the success of the protagonist's intent: "I will arise and go to my father" becomes "And he arose, and came to his father" (20) ("came" adumbrates the shift in point of view to the receiving father). But the world, life as we might know it, is not so simple, and action isn't at the determination of a single protagonist; there are other agents, other agendas.

So the teller turns his tale on the word "but" and subordinates the tale's first agent to the first one it had named, that "certain man": "But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him" (20). Like the searching shepherd and housewife of the first two tales, here "his father," seeking the lost and found property but of filial relation restored; wider, deeper, more harrowing and joyous, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." (22-24)

With this long speech (the teller really spreads himself) we are still about where we were with the final speeches of the first two tales: the glad voice of the finder calling "us" to "eat, and be merry." But with a huge difference: this is the world not of lost and found property but of filial relation restored; wider, deeper, more harrowing and joyous, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." This son has come home ragged or bare, head to foot, to a richly generous welcome, to be called "this my son."

Even so, all narrative and emotional differences allowed, we are thematically about where we were at the tale's opening. Except that the differences do make an enormous difference, such that our feeling-with these agents has to have richly qualified, if not utterly swamped, our sense of the "truth" the teller already illustrated much more flatter. We're not looking at illustrations or flannelboard cutouts here; we're in the thick of an imagined experience, told and lived in the telling and hearing.

And the teller does not stop. While "they began to be merry" (24), he makes his most surprising shift (dift as any modernist writer's) to focus on the "elder son" out working "in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing" (25), the sound of the merriment, which we now hear as he does, though we already know what it means. If the tale's agents so far, father and younger son, can be likened to finder and lost in the first two parables, to Jesus and the sinners he receives, who is this third agent? Who but the Pharisees, whose "murmur" called forth this series of tales? What but the other relevant point of view already given in the occasion? The teller gives the Pharisees' self-righteousness full
play in the story, as the elder son calls a servant and learns what the “musick” means—Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound” (27); an honest report, if just the bare facts, with a notable stress on fraternal and filial relation in “thy brother” and “thy father.” But hearing the report, this brother “was angry, and would not go in” (28). That’s about where we came in, on Luke’s view of those surly Pharisees standing back from “this man receiv[ing] sinners, and eat[ing] with them” (2).

But “therefore came his father out, and intreated him” (28). Here this tale has folded itself back over the entire episode, if you will: Jesus “intreating” the Pharisees to at least understand why he receives and eats with sinners. I suspect I’m making this all look more narratively self-conscious on Jesus’ and Luke’s parts than you can believe it might have been; yet it’s hard for me not to see these thick interconnections between this complex tale and the urgent occasion it answers to.

Now the teller risks the entire tale’s desired effect by risking the alienation of his hearers when he lets the truculent voice of the elder brother take over (in a speech longer than the father’s), to tell his version of both his and his brother’s stories:

And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. (29–30)

Resentment, accusation, self-praise, and a sharp eye on consumable property are not a very winning combination. The elder son implicitly disclaims his fraternal relation with “this thy son” (negatively echoing the father’s “this my son,” yet ironically affirming the very relation the lost son declared himself unworthy of) and exaggerates

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**THE PRODIGAL SON**

11 And he said, A certain man had two sons:
12 And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that is mine. And he divided unto them his living.
13 And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.
14 And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.
15 And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.
16 And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.
17 And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!
18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,
19 And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.
20 And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.
21 And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.
22 But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:
23 And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it, and let us eat, and be merry:
24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.
25 Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and

dancing.
26 And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.
27 And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.
28 And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.
29 And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:
30 But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.
31 And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.
32 It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

—Luke 15:11–32
Moral storytelling appeals to our freedom to make and know the tale with the teller and to lend our feeling to the agents it imagines; it welcomes all points of view that have any claim on our attention and gives each its due, declining to assert the finality of an authorial interpretation.

that we should make merry, and be glad.”

A MORAL APPEAL

T HAT, I will say, is moral storytelling: appealing to our freedom to make and know the tale with the teller and to lend our feeling to the agents it imagines, generous to all the points of view that have any claim on the teller’s attention, giving all their due, declining to assert the finality of an authorial interpretation. Not even in the voice of a teller most Christians would regard as above all “having authority.” My friend John Bennion says that this one tale is his model for fiction writing. 14 He could hardly do better, and he is not alone and not the first to take this as his model.

Heaven may be a kingdom, with all of structure and hierarchy that the word implies. But with so many other figures Jesus uses elsewhere in the gospels, these tales say heaven is a feast, and we are welcome. May we heed the bidding of the teller whose telling is generous enough to receive all our tales.

NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, History of the Church (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974) 5:261-2; cf. 5:368. I owe the first citation here to James Faulconer, who passed it on to me after hearing me talk about my approach to Luke 15. I should mention, too, that any reader of Apostle James E. Talmage’s Jesus the Christ will recognize my persistent debt to his discussion, which I first read in my teens and early twenties and have re-read in writing the second draft of this sermon. As of this writing, I still have not seen any recent Church-sponsored film treatment of The Prodigal Son. I do recall that Franco Zeffirelli has presented it as told in the company of Peter and Matthew, clearly inviting Peter to be reconciled to the publican. In an unpublished essay, “The Prodigal Son Story in Text and Film: From Lana Turner to Mikhail Baryshnikov and Beyond,” Jay Fox discusses early Hollywood versions as well as a ballet version, Zeffirelli’s Jesus of Nazareth and recent denominationally-sponsored films.

2. Interestingly, Joseph Smith’s discussion takes up the first two parables as responses to the Pharisees’ question but, except for stating that The Prodigal Son is not “national” (apparently this was the substance of the Elders’ questions about it) but “was for men in an individual capacity,” he is silent on the third parable, as if, like Jesus, he wanted his hearers to work it out.

3. Talmage reads the shepherd and housewife as symbolic of the Pharisees and scribes, as stewards of God’s people; in terms of the parables’ application to
their audience this makes perfect sense, Jesus inviting his hearers to act as the shepherd and housewife do. Yet it seems clear in context that Jesus draws a parallel between God himself and the protagonists of the first two tales, the plowing angels of the second tale's interpretation would readily correspond to the housewife's neighbors.

4. I'm thinking, for example, of Sherwood Anderson's account in A Story Teller's Story (New York: Hucsh, 1924) of his father's storytelling habits: "He pushed out little experimental sentences and then watched his audience narrowly." (39).

5. Except for his legendary blindness, that could have been Homer's habit as well.

6. Jean-Paul Sartre, What Is Literature? (1947), trans. Bernard Frechtmann (New York: Harper, 1965), 40–50, esp. 47, 49. Actually, Sartre at one point makes explicit a relation between his literary theory and the Christian story: "The belief which I accord the tale is freely assented to. It is a Passion, in the Christian sense of the word, that is, a freedom which resolutely puts itself into a state of passiveness to obtain a certain transcendent effect by this sacrifice." (44).

7. I'll cite a few fairly obvious passages by book, chapter and paragraph from Augustine's Confessions, trans. John K. Bryan (Garden City: Doubleday, 1960): 1.18 (28); 2.10 (18); 3.4 (7); 3.6 (11); 4.16 (30); 5.13 (23); 7.10 (16); 8.3 (6); 10.31 (45). Most of book 6, culminating in Augustine's conversion in the garden in Milan, might be read as a huge expansion of "he came to himself." It seems to me to justify if not decree, Malte's own damnation-as-despair. The novel's last lines read "He was now terribly difficult to love, and he felt that only One would be capable of it. But he was not yet willing." (260). Malte seems to me a figure of the poet Rilke had to avoid becoming in order to reach the Diano Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus. Interestingly, the German text of Die Geschichte des verlorenen Sohnes (217), the story of the lost son.

1. I can't resist mentioning, too, Karl Marx's angry ironic appeal to the parable of the prodigal son on the first page of part VIII of Capital, where he begins to expose "The Secret of Primitive Accumulation," capitalism's self-justifying myth of the origin of economic inequality: "In times long gone by there were two sorts of men: one, the diligent, intelligent, and, above all, frugal; and the other, lazy hangers, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living... Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort had at last nothing to sell except their own skins."

8. See James E. Talmage, Jesus the Christ (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1915, 1962) 454–61, esp. 460–461, Spencer W. Kimball, The Miracle of Forgiveness (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 307–11; Bruce R. McConkie, The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980) 3:244–53, esp. 251, 253. All three (Talmage implicitly, I think) also accept the elder son's accusation, "devoured thy living with harlots," as true. To these readings the only canonical response I know of is Jesus' searing warning in the Sermon on the Mount: "except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). It seems clear that the elder son's righteousness is Pharisaic, and at the tale's abrupt end, despite the father's "all that I have is thine," we are left to guess whether he joins the party or sulks outside. Read in sequence, these three interpretations might suggest a marked increase in LDS Pharisaic righteousness throughout the twentieth century. Joseph Smith's curt remark on the "nine-and-nine-inch just persons that are so righteous" was "they will be damned anyhow, you cannot save them" (History of the Church 5:262)—which itself might be a bit too pharisaically judgmental toward Pharisees.

9. Here, surprisingly, given his usual contextual care, Talmage extrapolates confidently: "The elder son... stood unmoved by the [father's] emotional and loving outburst" (460); and the "Pharisees and scribes... must have taken to themselves its personal application," yet "They cared not who or how many were lost, so long as they were undisturbed in their righteousness and possession by the return of repentant prodigals" (460).

10. Cf. Confessions 8.7 (10), immediately before Augustine, weeping under a fig tree, hears the voice in the garden: "you, O Lord, turned me back upon myself."

11. In Odyssey 11:489–91, great Achilles in the Underworld tells "shining Odysseus" that he "would rather follow the plow as thrall to another man, one with no land awaiting him and not much to live on, than be a king over all the perished dead" (Lattimore trans. 180). M. I. Finley in The World of Odysseus, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1979), says that a thes, the word Lattimore translates with "thrall," "was the lowest creature on earth that Achilles could think of," since a thes was "no part of an oikos" (37–38). I may be extrapolating too far from the eighth century B.C.E. to the first century C.E., but I suspect not.

12. James Talmage, Jesus the Christ (459), also recognized this.

13. At this point, Talmage sees the son as foregoing his offer to become a hired servant and, because "the father's joy was too sacred to be thus marred," "placing himself unreservedly at that father's disposal" (459). Kimball suggests that "He did not ask for servant status as he had thought to do, perhaps because with such a warm welcome he may have had hopes of total reinstatement" (308). Here, as elsewhere in scripture, our interpretations reveal as much about us as they do about the text.


NEVER A PLACID CHORE

Your axe strokes ring from the ridge
on a warm day with mud thawed and drying.
I was east this time,
poking along a creekbottom
not getting much done—then
from a rhythm so steady
I forget you are working,
a yelp—
straightens me up.
High-pitched cry.
You got hurt?
The mind breaks, drops brush clippers,
crashes to the top running for you.
I wait, poised.
But nothing.
And into that a resumption, axe in action
against wood.
So it strikes me late,
your victory
yip.
And my pleasure when it comes
burstss freely as the log you lay open—
falls in place around me
to the sound of your
continued practice.
—TRINA SCHIMMOELLER