CHAPTER 6: A MAN HAD TWO SONS

6.1 Introduction

Before proceeding with a detailed analysis of this parable, traditionally called the parable of "The Prodigal (or Lost) Son", we need to engage two preliminary questions. The first question, touched on in chapter 5 above (5.1), concerns the nature of metaphor, the second the naming of the parable. Both questions form an integral part of the analysis that is to follow.

The approach throughout this study has been that of interpreting Luke's narrative within a metaphorical paradigm, metaphor becoming the lens (and thus the model), through and beside which Luke's narrative in general, and his parables in particular are viewed. As with the parable of "The Good Samaritan", most historical Jesus scholars have "hijacked" metaphor in so far as they attribute its use almost exclusively to that of the historical Jesus. Invariably the debate revolves around contrasting allegory and metaphor. It is argued that the historical Jesus used the parables as metaphors, but the evangelists and early Christianity used them as allegories. This is epitomised in Dominic Crossan's analysis (1973:63-36) of "The Good Samaritan", and that of Robert Funk (1996:184-189) on "The Prodigal Son". Despite objections raised, there is little doubt that parables placed in a particular narrativel and socio-political context do have particular referents beyond the story (cf Forbes 2000:51). When these referents are implied by the contextual setting of the parable, the conclusion should not be drawn that the metaphorical nature of the parable has inevitably been lost, and that the parables have been turned into allegories (as defined by Jülicher). More recently such sentiments have also been echoed by Hermann-Josef Meurer. Meurer (1997:646) writes: "In das Evangelium eingebettet, erfüllen sie [die Gleichnisse] einen argumentativen Zweck, wollen sie eine Erkenntnis vermitteln, verkümmern sie zur Beweiskraft eines Belegs."

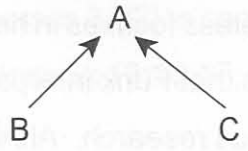
Meurer's conclusion above typifies an analysis of parables, where not

enough attention has been given to the macro-text (both the narrative and the contextual world) in which the parables feature. Furthermore, the process of domestication, in which the metaphor undergoes conceptual development and thereby loses its initial metaphorical thrust, should be considered with caution when the parables are interpreted within their Gospel contexts. The "domestication" which the parables have undergone as they were carried worldwide through the Christian era must not simply be assumed for the Gospel audiences. Such an assumption would be anachronistic. Funk (1996:187) in discussing the parable of "The Prodigal Son", for example, argues that the ambiguity of the parable, and thereby its metaphorical nature, have been resolved by the "single sense that Luke attached to the parable", and that "the details have been buried under an avalanche of familiar meaning." But the "familiar meaning" is the "domesticated meaning" as known to *contemporary* Christianity (today) and not necessarily at all that attached to the story by the Lukan audience. To a Lukan audience the parable may have been just as shocking as it was to the original audience in first-century Palestine, albeit *differently* shocking. It will be shown that the parable of "The Prodigal Son", although contextualised within the Gospel of Luke, has nevertheless not lost its metaphorical thrust, nor its ambiguity. It functions as a true metaphor, diaphoric (tensive) in nature, challenging conventional perceptions of God.

The naming of the parable is directly related to the centrality of the characters and the plot of the parable. Based on the premise that Jesus' parables are characterised by both ambiguity and polyvalence, Funk (1996:187, 190) proposes two models ("categories") for understanding the relationship between characters and plot in Luke 15:11-32. Funk (1996:190) explains: "In the first category, two persons or groups respond to the situation in different and contrasting ways. In the second category, one person responds to the initial situation, and his response becomes the focal point to which a second person responds." Diagrammatically these categories are presented as follows:

Category One

B and C respond to A



Category Two

B responds to A, and C responds to B

In both categories "A" is the central figure. In the first category, he is the person to whom the other two respond; in the second category, his action elicits some response from the other two.

The traditional naming of the parable as that of the "Prodigal Son" indicates the choice of the latter category. The younger son is the main character to whom the others, the father, and the elder son, respond differently. If however the father is seen as the main character, the story is about the relationships of the *two sons* with their father (or of the *father* with his *two* sons), intimating a renaming of the parable as done by Jeremias. Jeremias ([1963] 1984:86) proposes "das Gleichnis von der Liebe des Vaters." Scott (1990:90), from whom we have borrowed the heading of this chapter, follows Jeremias in naming the parable "A Man Had Two Sons". More recently, however, Green (1997:578) again asserts that despite the importance of the father in the parable, "center stage belongs to the younger son." He argues along the lines of Category Two and describes the turning point of the narrative as the respective (diverging) responses of the father and the elder son to the return of the younger son. There is clearly no consensus among scholars. How do we account for these discrepancies?

The answer lies indeed, as Funk (1996:187) suggests, in the ambiguity of

parable and the standpoint from which the parable is read. Funk (1996:187-189) himself, although he on the one hand makes a choice for Category One (the centrality of the father), nevertheless focuses in his analysis almost exclusively on the younger son. The reason is that Funk interprets the parable within the wider parameters of his historical-Jesus research. Although the younger son at literary level refers to the toll-collectors and sinners (Lk 15:1), he also "mirrors the journey of Jesus" as he was perceived socially by those who adhered to purity codes (Funk 1996:189). Similarly, those scholars who interpret the parable exclusively within its immediate co-text (that is, chapter 15, in which the parable forms one of three parables all featuring the "lost") invariably focus on the younger son. If however the parable is interpreted within the macro-text of Luke's narrative, both intertextually and extratextually, the centrality of the father figure is confirmed. Our literary reading of Luke-Acts (chapter 4) indicated that Luke's narrative is to be understood as one of "opposites", with God as the central albeit unseen character (cf Knight 1998:58). Looking at Luke's narrative as a whole, therefore, and at the purpose of this study, Category One seems to be the more appropriate model for interpreting this parable - hence also our re-naming of the parable: *A Man Had Two Sons*. The father in the parable is not just one of two characters who respond to the return of the younger son, he also responds to his elder son, who refuses to enter the house and join in the celebrations. Indeed not only is the younger son lost, but the elder son is lost as well.

6.2 A background of tension

In analysing and interpreting the parable of "A Man Had Two Sons" most scholars highlight the literary unity of chapter 15 which features three distinctive parables. The literary unity of this chapter is ascribed to Lukan redaction as all indications are that in their historical context they featured separately (cf Forbes 2000:112). Lukan redaction is evidenced by a number of typical Lukan characteristics (Scott 1990:101): First, the connection of two short sayings by the word "or" (verse 8)

followed by a longer parable (verse 11), is found elsewhere in Luke's Gospel (see Lk 13:1-9). Second, the threefold pattern of action by Jesus (verse 1), attack on Jesus (verse 2), and response (verses 3-32) is common in Luke, especially in the central section of Luke's Gospel (see Lk 13:10-17; 14:1-14). Third, verses 1-2 are almost a replica of Luke 5:29-30:

Luke 5:29-30	Luke 15:1-2
v. 29: a great crowd	v. 1: all
v. 30: toll-collectors and others	toll-collectors and sinners
murmured	v. 2: murmured
the Pharisees and scribes	the Pharisees and scribes
saying - sinners - you eat	saying - sinners - eats

The similarity between these two passages is further highlighted by the conclusion of Luke 5:32 which could also feature as the conclusion of chapter 15: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

The impetus for casting the three parables in a literary unit is provided by their strong verbal and close thematic relatedness (cf Green 1997:568-569; Barton 2000:201-202). They all share the common theme of the return of the lost (a sheep, a coin, a younger son). Certain key words and phrases recur in all three parables: "repentance" (verses 7, 10, 18); "joy", "rejoice", "make merry" (verses 5-7, 9-10, 23-24, 32), and "because the lost is found" (verses 6, 9, 24, 32). Despite the length of the third parable, there is also a close structural resemblance between all three parables (see Bailey [1976] 1983:144-158). The unity provided by Luke is further underscored by the common audience and setting (verses 1-2), with no narrative markers designating a change of scene until chapter 16:1 (Green 1997:568).

Based on the thesis that Luke's narrative is one of "opposites", our intention is not to identify and explicate the common themes of this chapter, but to interpret

them within the *contrasts* in which they are presented. As indicated above, chapter 15:1-2 provides the new setting given to the parables by Luke. This new setting reflects the well-known juxtaposition of two different and contrasting points of view, that of the toll-collectors and sinners, and that of the Pharisees and scribes. These two groups of people mirror the two main opposition groups that run throughout Luke's narrative, Jesus and his witnesses on the one hand, and the Israelite leaders and those who submit to their ideology on the other (see chapter 4 above).

From an Israelite socio-religious perspective the toll-collectors are categorised with the "sinners" (see Herzog 1994:178-189 for an extended social description of toll-collectors and Pharisees; see also Scheffler 1993:69-71). Scholars have endeavoured to define the exact identity of the "sinners" in Luke 15:1, in particular their relationship to the עם הארץ as either two distinctive or homogenised social groups (cf Barton 2000:202-203; Forbes 2000:109-110). But within Luke's narrative the toll-collectors and sinners present an *ideological* category (a "code"; Herzog 1994:178, 191) which from the viewpoint of the Pharisees and scribes represents those who as a result of their deliberate and consistent violation of the Law and temple purity regulations are excluded from the Kingdom of God. In particular the toll-collectors are equated with the group of "sinners" both as a result of their occupation, their contact with Gentiles, and their failure to tithe (Barton 2000:203). They are rendered unclean, and indeed corporatively so (see "all" in Lk 15:1). As such, they are classified as outsiders excluded from God's salvation.

The Pharisees and scribes constitute a group of people at the other end of the spectrum. The Pharisees in particular saw themselves as God's chosen ones. By strict adherence to the purity regulations they set themselves apart from those who threatened the holiness of God and God's people, such as the toll-collectors and sinners (cf Barton 2000:202). Together with the scribes, they appear in Luke's narrative as monitors of Jesus' legal observance. From their point of view

they are the insiders, included in God's salvation.

In typical Lukan style, Luke presents these two groups in strikingly different ways, resulting in an ironic reversal of roles. Chapter 14 concludes with the admonishment: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Ironically in Luke 15:1 those gathered around to "hear" Jesus are not the Pharisees and scribes, but the toll-collectors and sinners (cf Forbes 2000:110). The Pharisees and scribes in contrast "murmur" (Lk 15:2; cf Lk 5:29-32). Their murmuring is a subtle allusion to the stubborn Israelites in the desert who during the exodus from Egypt continually complained against Moses and Aaron, God's representatives at the time (cf Barton 2000:202). This casting of characters follows a similar reversal of roles in Luke 7:39-30 (cf Green 1997:570). Ironically the toll-collectors are some of those people who "justified God", whereas the Pharisees and scribes represent those who have "rejected God's purpose for themselves" (see also Lk 3:10-14; 5:27-32; 7:35, 36-50).

By casting his characters in unconventional roles, Luke turns the world of conventional Israelite wisdom upside down: The insiders (Pharisees and scribes) are out, and the outsiders (toll-collectors and sinners) are in. This introductory line indicates that the parables which follow, including that of "A Man Had Two Sons", are not mere illustrations of a given truth, but present a challenge to conventional perceptions, that is, they are diaphoric in nature.

The casting of characters raises awareness of the background of tension in which the parables of Luke 15 are set. This background, however, can and needs to be explored further, both within the contextual and co-textual (including the intertextual) worlds of Luke-Acts. The contextual world refers to the socio-historical circumstances within which the text is set. The co-textual and intertextual world refers to the larger textual units surrounding the text (Luke's narrative) as well as the frame of reference on which the text draws (Israelite literature, in particular the Hebrew Scriptures).

The text of Luke 15 provides us with two indicators. The first indicator

forms part of the setting given by Luke to chapter 15. Verse 2b summarises the problem Jesus presents to the Pharisees and scribes: "This man receives sinners and *eats* with them." Reference to "eating" places all three parables against the tense background of conflicting customs and prohibitions governing first-century Mediterranean *table fellowship*. The second indicator follows from the introductory line of the parable of "A Man Who Had Two Sons". Verse 11 refers to "A certain man had *two sons*" (verse 11). The story that follows falls structurally into two clearly defined parts. The first part (verses 12-24) relates the actions of the *younger* son; and this is contrasted in the second part (verses 25-31) with the actions of the *elder* son. The introductory line of the parable therefore sets the parable against the tensions attendant on the theme in the Hebrew Scriptures of *younger and elder sons*.

6.2.1 Table fellowship

Although scholars have noted points of contact between chapter 15 and the surrounding narratives, in particular the setting of the table in chapter 14 and the issue of hospitality in chapter 16 (cf, inter alia, Donahue 1988:162-169; Green 1997:568-569), there has been a general failure to explicate these themes in detail when interpreting the parable of "A Man Had Two Sons". This failure can be attributed to the fact that the setting of this chapter is not a "meal" as such but what seems to be a normal gathering of people around Jesus. But the accusation levelled at Jesus that he welcomes sinners, and "eats" with them immediately calls to mind the numerous references in Luke's narrative to table fellowship.

Luke's interest in meals and table fellowship is immense and clearly exceeds that of the other evangelists. Markus Barth (1988:71) notes that in "approximately one-fifth of the sentences in Luke's Gospel and in Acts, meals play a conspicuous role." Realisation of Luke's interest in meals and table fellowship has led to a number of related works being published (cf, inter alia, Smith 1987:613-638; McMahan 1987; Esler 1987:93-109; Moessner 1989; Elliott

1991a:102-109; Neyrey 1991b:361-387; Just 1993; Moxnes 1997:17-175). Each of these works highlights different aspects of what has become known as a "literary motif" in the Gospel of Luke (Smith 1987:613-638). David Moessner (1989) develops the thesis that the travel narrative of Luke's Gospel initiates an understanding of Jesus as the "journeying guest". Within the travel narrative, the disciples of Jesus (as messengers) are sent on ahead to prepare for his arrival. But on arrival Jesus is invariably rejected both by the Samaritans (Lk 9:53-56) and the Judeans (Lk 10:8-16), culminating in his final rejection in Jerusalem (Lk 19:45-23:49). After his crucifixion and resurrection, however, Jesus is received by the disciples on the way to Emmaus and becomes the "Lord of the Banquet" (Lk 24:13-53). At this banquet, that is, the banquet of God's kingdom, everyone who accepts his invitation is welcomed. Craig McMahan (1987) in turn identified and explicated four "meal type scenes" in Luke's narrative, highlighting Luke's frequent references to meals: Meals with women (Lk 4:38-39; 8:1-3; 10:38-42; Ac 6:1-6), meals with outcasts (Lk 5:27-32; 15:1-2: 19:1-10; Ac 11:1-8), meals with Pharisees (Lk 7:36-50; 11:37-54; 14:1-24), and meals with apostles (Lk 9:10-17; 22:14-38; 24:13-35; Ac 27:33-38). Not included in this list are a number of passages with no direct meal setting, but with extensive use of the meal *metaphor* (cf Just 1993:128-195). The meal metaphor, for example, constitutes the backdrop to Acts 10, Peter's visit to the gentile Cornelius, and Acts 15, the council in Jerusalem, both of which are key passages in Luke's table fellowship matrix. An extensive list of all references to food in Luke's Gospel has been compiled by Robert Karris (see Neyrey 1991b:361-362). Based on the frequent occurrences of meals and meal metaphors in Luke's narrative, scholars have drawn the conclusion that according to Luke, Jesus' table fellowship practice was one, if not the main reason, why he was put to death by the Pharisees and priests (his main antagonists) in Jerusalem (cf Just 1993:128).

Within Luke's narrative and within first-century Mediterranean society, meals are not just about supplying nourishment. Anthropologists have shown that

meals and table fellowship are highly complex social events. Mary Douglas (cf Elliott 1991a:103) has argued that food is a "code" communicating a multi-layered message:

> If food is treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries .... Food categories therefore encode social events ... the ordered system which is a meal represents all the ordered systems associated with it.

This tells us clearly that food and meals relate to and replicate patterns of and rules of social systems. There is a correlation between with whom one eats, what one eats, when one eats, how one eats, and to what community, group, or kinship one belongs. Furthermore, the food codes are a potential source of information about a group's symbolic universe, that is its traditions, cultural values, norms, and worldviews. Meals therefore form part of a community's effort to structure its world, to create order in what otherwise seems to be chaos. The facets of a particular community's symbolic universe in and through which the meaning attributed to meals and table fellowship can be studied, are numerous. Valuable work has been done by Neyrey (1991b:362-374) who developed a model for this purpose based on the four basic maps of the first-century Mediterranean cosmos: maps of persons, things, places, and times. Our focus falls not on all facets of this model, but on the potential of meals to serve as social boundary markers, that is to set people apart from others. The boundaries are, of course, not set or defined by the meals, but they reinforce or bolster the already existing boundaries that define a group or institution (cf Neyrey 1991b:363; Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:367). Our focus falls on two particular aspects: ranking at tables, and the

limits of table fellowship, both of which are central in fostering conventional exclusive perceptions.

The basic pattern of ancient meals were similar in most first-century Mediterranean cultures, whether the meals were designated secular or sacred. As a result of the material available, many studies have focused their attention on the traditions and rules of etiquette associated with a Greco-Roman banquet. These constitute the social contexts in which Israelite and later also Christian meal practices developed in form and function (cf Smith & Taussig 1990:22). In many ways meal customs became standardised and had much common. Most traditions were attached to the evening meal or banquet. The banquet was a special occasion for a special social gathering. The norm was that some individual person would host such a banquet, to which he would invite his friends and associates. As the guests entered, a household servant would wash their feet (cf Lk 7:44; Jn 13:1-11). Distinction between servants and guests provide the first form of ranking (cf Neyrey 1991b:364). Status is symbolised by who reclines and who serves. The one who reclines at table is greater than the one who serves (cf Lk 17:7-10; 22:27).

Another form of ranking is provided by seating arrangements. Although there are examples of guests being "seated" (in an upright position) at a table, the general posture at *formal* or *festive* meals during the first century was that of reclining. The couches were arranged in numerous ways. The most common arrangement was that of the "triclinium", the couches being arranged in a u-shaped formation around a central table (Smith 1987:617). Once the guests had arrived and their feet had been washed, a position at the table was allocated to them. The position mirrored the guest's status within that group, and served to affirm his social rank (cf Neyrey 1991b:364-368). The ranking order would start at the highest position (occupied by the host) and continue from the right hand to the lowest position. Traditionally the "right hand" was always the place of highest honour (cf Lk 20:42; Ac 2:33). This feature helps us to interpret, for example, the

reference in John to the disciple who dined "lying close to the breast of Jesus" (13:23) or the reference in the parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" to the position of Lazarus after death in "Abraham's bosom" (Lk 16:22). Both enjoyed the highest honour. Besides the practice of ranking through positions at table, ranking was also practised by providing different quantities or qualities of food (Smith 1987:635). Some Roman sources even describe meals at which guests of different social rank are seated in different rooms (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1993:368).

In a culture where honour is the pivotal value of society, ranking one's guests appropriately was a tricky and often embarrassing procedure. This is evidenced by Plutarch's description of such an instance in *The dinner of the seven wise men* (see Smith 1987:617-618). A certain man felt insulted at the position he was offered. One of the wise men present counselled the acceptance of one's table position: the man who objects, is not only objecting to his host, but also to his neighbours, causing shame to both.

These and similar instances often provided typical discussion topics for the *symposium*. The word "symposium" is used in more than one sense. It is used in the general sense to refer to the social institution concerning the dining traditions at a Greco-Roman banquet. On the other hand it is used in the restricted sense to refer to the "second course" of the banquet, the symposium *proper* (cf Smith 1987:614). The first course (at times preceded by an appetiser) was the meal itself. This was followed by what is termed in short as the "drinking party" (Smith & Taussig 1990:25). The "drinking party" provided leisure entertainment for the guests in various forms, including party games, musical items, and dancing. In the philosophical tradition however, the entertainment was often devoted to elevated conversation and discussion, hence called the "symposium" (cf Smith 1987:620-623). This tradition was widely adapted for use in most first-century Mediterranean cultures. Tradition also determined discussion topics, which were restricted to such as were appropriate to the occasion, that is, to "table talk". There would be discussion on the meal itself, meal etiquette, the

"friendship character" of the meal, and so on (Smith 1987:621). As a result, the symposium was the appropriate and most common place to discuss issues relating to table ranking.

Plutarch's *Table talk* recounts a number of such discussions. On one occasion diners debate the pro's and con's of ranking at table (see Smith 1987:619). One diner argues for the custom on the grounds that table ranking is an instance of good order, and good order is necessary for a pleasurable banquet. Another diner argues for the custom to be abolished on the grounds that equality at meals would enhance the notion of "friendship". On another occasion the issue is discussed whether the host himself should arrange the placing of guests or leave it to the guests themselves (see Smith 1987:618). The discussion is introduced by an anecdote in which Plutarch's brother, Timon, decided to break with custom and allow guests to recline wherever they wished. Unfortunately, when an especially distinguished guest arrived late and discovered that no place worthy of his honour remained at the table, he was insulted and left. These accounts provide a clear picture of the first-century mind-set, according to which everything had to be ordered for it to correlate with the honour rating attributed by society to a person concerned.

Although Plutarch recalls events at actual meals, his style of writing has been identified as one falling into a specific literary tradition (genre), also referred to as the "symposium", used frequently among ancient writers (Smith 1987:615-616). Luke probably utilises the same tradition. Scholars have pointed out that apart from the Passover meal (Lk 22:7-38) at least three other Jesus' meals reflect the symposium form (Lk 7:36-50; 11:37–53; 14:1-14), all of which are embedded in the central section of Luke relating the conflict between the Israelite authorities and Jesus (cf Smith 1987:630-623; Neyrey 1991a:376-377). Placed within a setting of conflict, the symposium tradition is used by Luke to *challenge* conventional perceptions: although meals are expected to reinforce the role assumed by status among members of a group, Luke uses the literary tradition of

table fellowship to challenge convention.

Ranking at table provides the conversational topic in Luke 14:1-10. The passage shows remarkable resemblance to Plutarch's accounts referred to above (cf Smith 1987:618-619). In this particular instance the host does not arrange the placing; but the guests themselves choose their "place of honour" (Lk 14:7). This setting implies the customary behaviour of guests seeking a higher place. Earlier in Luke's Gospel the Pharisees had already been singled out as those who "love the first seat" (11:43). The tussling for better positions is noticed by Jesus and provides the impetus for the ensuing symposium. The symposium is introduced by the parable of a guest who seeks the first (highest) place, but is then humiliated by his host, who requests him to give up his seat to a more distinguished guest who arrives later. The parable challenges the Pharisees and the scribes to act in a radically different way. Instead of seeking the highest place, they should seek the lowest place. The conventional world is again turned upside down. In God's Kingdom, those who exalt themselves are humiliated, whilst those who humiliate themselves are exalted (Lk 14:11; see also Lk 18:14).

The issue of ranking also surfaces among the disciples of Jesus: "A dispute arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest" (Lk 22:24). The question and Jesus' response are given added emphasis by Luke's use of the literary device of placing them in the meal setting of the last Passover (Smith 1987:620). In contrast to Jesus' response in Mark and Matthew, the disciples are addressed by Jesus in Luke not as those who wish to become great, but simply as those who are leaders and are to assume positions of leadership in the church (cf Tannehill 1986b:257). Leadership positions as such are therefore not questioned (see Lk 17:7-10), but the attitude prevalent among the secular leaders as "lording over others" is denounced (Lk 33:36). Within God's Kingdom the greatest are to be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves (Lk 22:26). Conventional roles are reversed: The one who serves is deemed greater than the one who rules (Lk 22:27). The first mention of this

occurs in Luke 12:35-37 (cf Neyrey 1991b:379). The disciples of Jesus should be like servants waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast. On his arrival, the roles are radically reversed: the servants recline at table, and the master serves them (Lk 12:37). Thus it is that conventional worldview of status as replicated in "table ranking" is challenged and subverted by Luke. In the Kingdom of God, participants at the (messianic) feast are characterised by an attitude of humility replicated in, and through, Jesus' own actions (Lk 22:27).

Even more striking and disconcerting was Jesus' association with people deemed to be unclean by conventional Israelite wisdom. Again Luke makes extensive use of the table fellowship motif. Although meals in antiquity might include people of differing social rank, that would not normally occur. There were *limits* to table fellowship. The communal meal designated a special relationship between the participants. It served to exemplify group identity and solidarity. Eating together implied the sharing of a common set of ideas and values (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:367). The question of who eats with whom was therefore central.

Within Israel, table fellowship gained special emphasis through the *religious* significance attributed to the meal. Making reference to Jeremias, James Dunn (1983:12) notes that for the people of the "house of Israel" table fellowship meant fellowship with God. If people ate a piece of a broken bread, they all shared in the blessing which the master of the house had spoken over the unbroken bread. This is highlighted by a saying of rabbi R Simeon (*m. Ab.* 3.3; cf Dunn 1983:12): "... if three have eaten at one table and have spoken over it words of the Law, it is as if they had eaten from the table of God, for it is written, 'And he said to me, This is the table that is before the Lord'" (Ezek 41:22). A devote Israelite would therefore never exercise table fellowship casually. There were clear limits to table fellowship, determined partly by the explicit laws in the Torah (particularly those relating to unclean foods) (Lv 11:1-3; Dt 14:3-21), and in differing degrees by the oral traditions concerning ritual purity and tithes (cf Dunn 1983:12-13).

Limits to table fellowship were also directly related to food. Based on the concept of "holiness", no devout Israelite would consider eating any unclean food. Malina (1993:162) provides a detailed description of the categories of unclean animals. The issue of eating unclean food was a central issue during the Maccabean rebellion. In the course of the rebellion, many Israelites resolved rather to die than defile themselves (1 Macc 1:62-63). That this attitude was not restricted to the Maccabees is evidenced by Peter's reaction to the vision in Joppa (cf Elliott 1991a:105-106). Peter is commanded to sacrifice and eat unclean animals or food. Twice it is stated that Peter objected with the words: "No, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean" (Ac 10:14; cf Lv 11:4-7). Apart from certain categories of food deemed unclean, Israelites also refrained from eating any food which had been sacrificed to idols (Ac 15:29, 29; 1 Cor 8-10), or the meat of animals from which the blood had not been drained (Lv 3:17; 7:26-27; 17:10-14; Dt 12:16; 23-24; 15:25). Adherence to these laws were central, as it marked the Israelites as God's chosen people, distinct from all other peoples.

From his studies on rabbinical traditions, Jacob Neusner (cf Dunn 1983:14) concludes that of the 341 individual rulings, 229 (that is 67%) apply directly or indirectly to the practice of table fellowship. Proper tithing and ritual purity were two major concerns. These concerns can be traced back to the practices of the חברים (the associates) (cf Sanders 1985:180-181). Within first-century Palestine those were a small group of lay people who took voluntary upon themselves the observance of some of the priestly laws of purity. It is a programme that gained support from the Pharisees, and was generally accepted by the rabbis after 70 CE (Sanders 1985:187). In opposition to the Sadducees, who controlled the temple, the Pharisees advocated that all temple regulations should also be applied to the *outside* world, a sphere where the Pharisees could exercise control (cf Dunn1983:14; Van Aarde 2001:129-230). The "house" became a "replica of the temple". It was thus forbidden to eat, at home, any food that had not been previously tithed (cf Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:382-383). Furthermore,

preparation of meals and the slaughtering of animals had to proceed according to temple purity regulations. Also hands, perceived to be especially liable to uncleanliness arising from unintentional touching of a defiled object, had to be washed before each meal (cf Lk 11:38; see also Sanders 1985:185-186).

Because of the emphasis on ritual purity it was common for persons to form closely knit associations with whom alone table fellowship was practised. In order to avoid pollution a חבר would, for example, never accept the invitation to a meal from the עם הארץ - the common people (cf Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:367). As Sanders (1985:182) notes, the עם הארץ were not irreligious. They presumably kept most of the Laws most of the time. But they were not as scrupulous as the Pharisees in applying temple purity regulations to their households. They could thus not be trusted to provide tithed and consistently pure food. If conversely such a person was invited to the home of a חבר, he was required to put on a ritually clean garment provided by the host (see Mt 22:11). Because of the ritual purity attached to table fellowship and the notion that table fellowship epitomises group identity, any devout Israelite took special precaution in ensuring "cleanliness" at a meal or banquet.

Table fellowship with *known* sinners was taboo. The Gospel writers frequently refer to "sinners" as a description of a group of people with whom Jesus shared meals. Sanders (1985:177) distinguishes the "sinners" from the עם הארץ as "those who sinned wilfully and heinously and who did not repent." Although not exclusively, they can be seen as "professional sinners". This explains why "sinners" and "toll-collectors" are often mentioned together. The toll-collectors who collaborated with Rome to collect taxes of all the people (both Israelites and Gentiles) clearly fall by their very profession into this category of people referred to as "sinners" (cf Lk 15:1). Both the profession itself, as well as fellowship with toll-collectors, is perceived as a wilful rejection of God's holiness. Excluded from table fellowship were however not only those people (sinners) who through unethical or immoral behaviour clearly disobeyed the Law, but indeed everybody

who was defiled through the lack of "wholeness" (Neyrey 1991b:370). This included all those with a physical defect, such as the eunuchs, the lame, the blind, the deaf, and indeed any one with any physical defect (cf Malina 1993:159-169).

Within Luke's narrative Jesus crosses every conceivable boundary. On one hand he dines with the Pharisees, who within their own culture are classified as holy, separated people (Lk 7:36-50; 11:37-44; 14:1-10). On the other hand however he also dines with those who are regarded as sinners and outsiders, who have excluded themselves from the Kingdom of God (Lk 5:29-32; 15:1-2; 19:5-7). In a conventional Israelite mind-set these mixed signals caused confusion. And this led to the extensive criticism of Jesus. For the Israelite the world was no longer ordered as it had long been.

In the first meal setting, the feast with Levi the toll-collector (Lk 5:29-32), the Pharisees and the scribes complain and ask: "Why do you eat and drink with toll-collectors and sinners?" (Lk 5:30). The question stresses right away the confusion caused by Jesus' table-fellowship practice, and it results in a stinging attack on the "holiness" of Jesus himself in the succeeding passages. What is remarkable here is the conclusion drawn by the Pharisees and scribes: Jesus, being a "friend" of toll-collectors and sinners, is himself a "glutton and drunkard" (Lk 7:34). Both the description of Jesus as a "glutton and drunkard" and a "friend" of toll-collectors and sinners set the tone for the ensuing attack on him.

Historically there is no evidence of course that Jesus was in fact a "glutton and drunkard". The remark stigmatises Jesus as an "undesirable" in a society where labelling one's opponent formed part and parcel of the dynamics of Mediterranean culture (cf Malina & Neyrey 1991b:97-124). The code represented by the reference to Jesus as a "glutton and drunkard" is that "meal habits represent lifestyles in a large sense" (Smith & Taussig 1990:44). Somebody who eats with sinners is therefore himself characterised as a "glutton and drunkard". Jeremias and other scholars (cf Just 1993:147; Funk 1996:193) have postulated that this phrase is derived from Deuteronomy 21:18-21. On the strength of this

connection Jesus is stigmatised as a "rebellious son", who by Law deserves death. But any retrospective allusion to a "rebellious son" deserving death immediately prepares the reader for the coming allusion between Jesus and the younger son in the parable of "A Man Had Two Sons". The younger son is described as one who "scattered his [father's] wealth in wild living" (Lk 15:13). That Luke clearly intended this allusion is very plain.

Important here too is the reference to Jesus as a "friend" of toll-collectors and sinners. The description is again based on the social code that those who dine together belong together. In the use of the term "friend", Smith (1987:636) sees a connection with the Greek philosophical tradition of social bonding specifically referred to as "friendship". Friendship therefore also provided the guests at a meal with an appropriate and frequently exploited topic during the ensuing symposium (Smith 1987:636). Luke thus makes use not only of the symposium tradition in general but also of the notion of "friendship". By eating with toll-collectors and sinners, Jesus was classified as their "friend".

The "symposiums" in Luke's narrative show that Jesus' selection of table companions is not a mere lack of regard for the customs of his day. Being a "teacher" (Lk 3:12; 7:40; 9;25; 11:45; 12:13; 18:39) Jesus' choice of table companions, both Pharisees and scribes, as well as those regarded as sinners, clearly forms part of his message. And this choice of table companions holds a code for Jesus' message concerning the Kingdom of God. The underlying question is: Who forms part of God's Kingdom? The answer provided by conventional Israelite wisdom is inherently *exclusive*: only those who adhere to Israelite purity regulations are included. Luke presents Jesus as one who proclaimed an alternative, inherently *inclusive* vision of salvation. Part and parcel of this proclamation is Jesus' choice of table companions. He eats with *everyone* who *accepts* him. This inclusiveness of God's kingdom is presented in Luke by his utilising the "meal". In typical Lukan style this occurs in the juxtaposition of opposites. Elliott (1991a:102-109) describes the juxtaposition as that of

"household and meals vs. temple purity". Whereas only the *whole/holy* could enter the temple, everybody *receptive* of Jesus' message (including the outcasts and sinners) could enter the household and partake in the (messianic) feast. The temple symbolises an exclusive community governed by adherence to purity regulations and social rank. The household and the meals symbolise an inclusive community governed by a social relationship of mutual sharing, generalised reciprocity, generosity, love, and mercy. This message is consistently demonstrated in the meal settings of Luke's narrative and the ensuing "symposiums".

In Luke 7:36-50 Luke narrates the visit of a "woman living in sin" entering the house where Jesus was reclining with a Pharisee. She proceeds to anoint Jesus. Conflict first appears when the Pharisee both rejects the woman and makes an unfavourable remark about Jesus, who cannot be a prophet for not recognising the sinfulness of the woman. The scene proceeds with the juxtaposition of contrasting points of view about the woman and Jesus (cf Tannehill 1986b:116-117). The woman is rejected because of her sinfulness, and Jesus for associating with her. Ironically however, the ensuing symposium reveals that the "righteous" Pharisee failed to provide the culturally proper reception for a guest (water for the feet, kiss), which the sinful woman as a result of her love had provided. The symposium supplies a vision of God's kingdom in which the rigid observation of purity regulations, which leads to separation, is subverted by the notion of a love which bridges all cultural, social, and religious distinctions.

Even more striking in Luke's ideology of the inclusiveness of God's kingdom is the symposium following the meal setting in Luke 14. The issue of ranking at table, provoked by the quest for higher honour, prompts Jesus to initiate a second symposium debate on the question of who should be invited. Whereas the Pharisees and scribes generally engaged in "balanced reciprocity" (cf Neyrey 1991b:372) inviting those who could and were obliged to return the favour (creating exclusivity), Jesus admonishes them to invite "the poor, the crippled, the

lame, the blind" (Lk 14:13). The ensuing parable of the Great Banquet (Lk 14:15-23) in part demonstrates the inclusiveness of God's invitation, with the messengers being sent out to invite to the banquet not the élite, but the non-élite, "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" (Lk 14:21). The criteria for banquet admittance are not social status, or adherence to purity regulations, but acceptance. Those who accept the invitation "enter" the banquet (cf Lk 18:17). As noted by Resseguie (1982:44-48), the whole chapter is characterised by the juxtaposition of two opposing points of view with the intended purpose of evoking a new vision of reality in general and of God's Kingdom in particular. The new vision is not a total rejection of the notion of "holiness" as defined in conventional Israelite wisdom, but a redrawing of its conventional maps so as to include the social outcasts and sinners (cf Neyrey 1991a:289-292). For the Lukan Jesus, holiness is not so much a matter of separation from sinners, but rather openness to the God who is drawing near (cf Lk 14:25-33); it is not "a status to be possessed and hedged around for self-protection, but a relationship to be celebrated and shared" (Barton 2000:203).

The parables of Luke 15 are, at literary level, an apology for the attack upon Jesus for "welcoming" sinners and "eating" with them (Lk 15:2). The encoded message of Jesus' table-fellowship practice is: sinners and outcasts are included in the Kingdom of God. Their inclusion should not be resisted, but celebrated. All three parables in Luke 15 stress the need for celebration at the return of the lost, and contain an implicit and open-ended invitation to join in these celebrations. In so doing, the parables reveal the shocking attitude of not only the Pharisees and scribes who show displeasure at the actions of Jesus, but also the rabbinic belief that God delights in the downfall of the wicked, echoed in the following line: "And when the wicket perish there is exultation" (*b. Sanh.* 11b; Forbes 2000:123, footnote 71). This belief stands in stark contrast to Ezekiel 18:23 and 33:11 where God categorically denies any joy in the destruction of the wicket, but instead declares his joy in their return. "Joy" also resonates in Luke's

narration of Jesus entering the house of the chief toll-collector Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10). The scene is set in such a manner that Jesus' presence demands response. Zacchaeus at once "receives" him with "rejoicing". The result is that "salvation" (used as a metaphor for the Kingdom of God) enters the house of the despised chief toll-collector (cf Moessner 1989:166-171).

Table fellowship between Jesus and Israelite outcasts and sinners constitutes the immediate co-text of "A Man Had Two Sons". At first-order reference, the parable features as part of the challenge to Pharisaic exclusivity as practised within Palestine among fellow Israelites. Whereas Pharisaic table-fellowship practice serves as a vehicle to demonstrate this exclusivity, Jesus' table fellowship with all who will accept him, demonstrates the inclusiveness of God's kingdom, turning the first-century Palestine word upside down.

The context of Luke's narrative however extends beyond the physical realms of Palestine and the relationship between fellow-Israelites. Luke's narrative is addressed to the "Lukan community" (the implied audience) which consists not only of Israelites (living in the Diaspora), but also Gentile converts (Greeks and some Romans). At second-order reference, the parable of "A Man Had Two Sons" therefore also reflects the tension-filled relationship between Israelites and Gentiles, again epitomised in Luke's narratives, particularly in Acts, in and through the practice, or non-practice of table fellowship between devout Israelites and Gentiles.

The refusal of devout Israelites to practise table fellowship with sinners and outcasts applies even more where the Gentiles were concerned. The general tendency in and around the first century was to avoid any form of social intercourse with Gentiles as far as possible. These convictions were in part based on the example of the faithfulness and success of Israelites who refused to eat the food of Gentiles (Dn 1:8-16; Tob 1:10-13; Jdt 10:5; 12:1-20; 3 Mac 3:4). The exclusivity in table fellowship was fuelled by the immense fear by the devout Israelite of idolatry and impurity (cf Dunn 1983:18). A Gentile was by definition an

idolater. Most tractates in the Mishnah on idolatry are therefore also concerned with defining permissible relationships with Gentiles. Israelite exclusivity is further epitomised by a number of rabbinic sayings in which the uncleanliness of Gentiles has taken on axiomatic qualities. Gentiles are simply "unclean persons" (*Mak.* 2.3); or the dwelling place of Gentiles are by nature "unclean" (*Oholot* 18.17); or a Gentile is in every respect like a man who "suffers a flux" (*Eliyah R.* 10) (cf Dunn 1983:18). In the light of these views, and of the message that table fellowship encodes, no devoted Israelite could even consider participating in table fellowship with a Gentile.

Despite the categorical nature of these views, exceptions were made, and this allowed for some form of table fellowship. Such exceptions were extremely rare. The exceptions applied to Gentile converts and Gentiles who showed themselves sympathetic to the Israelite religion. In each case minimum requirements were set, which initiated a wide debate within conventional Israelite wisdom often resulting in major disputes among the rabbis. Early Israelite religion was not totally exclusive, but always revealed a positive attitude to the non-Israelite stranger (גר) living within Israelite borders (see, inter alia, Ex 20:10; 21:21; 23:9, 12; Dt 1:16; 5:14). Dunn (1983:19) however shows that in and around the first century these commands concerning the גר, referring to the foreigner in general, were being applied almost exclusively to the proselyte, that, is the Gentile convert to the Israelite faith. Indeed in the LXX the regular translation of גר is προσήλυτος. As a proselyte, the Gentile undertook to observe the whole Law, including circumcision, and was thus regarded as more or less a full Israelite. Although the stigma of being a proselyte remained, once the initiation process was complete the same limits of table fellowship applied as to the native-born Israelite.

The second group were the so-called Godfearers. Israelite relationship to the Godfearers was more complex. The Godfearers were not converts, but sympathisers with the Israelite religion. They attended the synagogue, prayed to the God of Israel and gave alms to his people (Ac 10:2; 13:16; cf Tyson 1992:36-

37). What is not clear is the extent to which Godfearers kept, or were expected to keep, the Law - including the traditions in respect of tithing and ritual purity. Based on various passages from Josephus' works, Dunn (1983:21-23) draws the conclusion that the commitment varied from occasional visits to the synagogue to total commitment bar circumcision. Invariably this commitment was mirrored in the degree to which the dietary laws were being observed. The devout Israelite would continue to avoid table fellowship with Godfearers as far as possible, with the less scrupulous occasionally accepting invitations to meals where such Gentiles would be present. But whatever the case may be, the strictness with which the Law was observed determined the limit of table fellowship, the dietary laws in particular serving as boundary markers between insiders and outsiders. The greatest concern of the devout Israelite remained the degree to which the purity regulations had been followed. Within an exclusive mind-set such as was conventional Israelite wisdom, the debate on where boundaries were to be drawn, in other words who was to be included and who excluded, prompted continuous debate.

In Luke's narrative the conventional boundary markers that distinguished the devout Israelite from the Gentile, the righteous from the unrighteous, the clean from the unclean, are redrawn and replaced by new maps. In Acts, Luke traces the advance of the Gospel from Jerusalem and Judea *to Samaria and the end of the earth* (cf Ac 1:8). Judean exclusivity is progressively replaced by ethnic inclusivity, that is, people of "all nations" are included in God's salvation irrespective of their ethnicity and nationality. In drawing this new map, Luke again makes extensive use of meal metaphors. As early as Luke 10:7-8 the seventy(-two) messengers who are sent ahead of Jesus are commanded to "eat and drink what they (the hosts) provide: and "eat what is set before them". No concern is to be given to whether foods are clean or unclean. Moessner (1989:138) comments:

> The messenger could have taken their own undefiled provisions along or bought them selectively along the way (cf. John 4:8) or

even have relied upon Jewish friends. But the fact that they are not to take provisions (v. 4a) nor carry money (v. 4a) or rely on sympathizers (vv. 4b, 6, 10-12) indicate the importance of sharing even "unclean" food with their hosts.

These directives strongly suggest that the mission of the seventy(-two) is not restricted to the "people of Israel" but will take them into regions of unknown ethnicity. That they are to "eat what is set before them" clearly signals (encodes) an inclusive sense of mission.

The inclusiveness of Jesus mission becomes most apparent in Acts 10. This chapter is characterised both by the way the two themes, food and people, are carefully woven together as well as by the repeated juxtaposition of a Gentile (Cornelius) and an Israelite (Peter). This is illustrated by Neyrey's (1991b:381) broad structural analysis of Acts 10:

A Cornelius' dream and summons of Peter (10:1-8)
B Peter's dream of *all foods* clean (10:9-16)
C Peter's vision and the reception of Cornelius' men (10:17-23)
B' Peter's declaration of *all peoples* clean (10:24-29)
A' Cornelius recounts his dream about Peter (10:30-33)

The theme of clean and unclean *food* clearly symbolises the issue of clean and unclean *people*. The episode is narrated against the increasing tension resulting from the association of the Jesus movement with Gentiles, in particular the crossing of ethnic boundaries and the continuing validity of conventional Israelite purity regulations. However "all" conventional boundaries are crossed. "All" foods are declared clean (10:15) and the Holy Spirit falls on "all" people in Cornelius' house (10:44). The crossing of boundaries paves the way for the central message, of both this chapter in particular and Luke's narrative in general: "God

shows no partiality, but rather in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34-35). The importance of the redrawing of the conventional maps with new ones is symbolised by the fact that the vision and conversation with Peter happened "three times" (10:16), the entire episode being rehearsed again in Acts 11:2-10 in response to some concerned disciples, the so called "circumcision party" (cf Neyrey 1991b:381). Peter is characterised as a devout Israelite who fervently rejects association with the "unclean", but is overwhelmed by a vision sent from God.

Part and parcel of the redrawing of old maps is the shift in scene from "temple" to "house", noted especially by Elliott (1991a:102-109). Luke uses temple terminology. Peter is commanded by God to "sacrifice" (θῦσον) and eat" (Ac 10:13). The term θύω refers to the slaughtering of an animal in a ritual manner as a sacrifice to deity (cf Ac 14:13; Louw & Nida 1988: 534). Similarly Cornelius' prayers and alms are described as "a memorial (μνημόσυνον) to God" (Ac 10:4, 31). The word "memorial" has cultic overtones recalling the sacrifices offered in the temple as a "memorial" (אזכרה) to God. Elliott (1991a:107) notes that the "implication is that Cornelius' prayers and alms in his home are equivalent to or a replacement of the 'clean' sacrifices at the temple." Temple exclusivity is replaced by the inclusivity of the house, and temple sacrifice is exchanged for deeds of mercy (alms) and prayer.

In Acts 11 the controversy concerning the boundaries of ritual purity is presented as an internal controversy within the Jesus movement. The controversy breaks out anew in Acts 15. The occasion narrated by Luke is at the council in Jerusalem. The council is initiated by the demands of some (the circumcision party) that, "Unless your are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Ac 15:1). Circumcision is used here not in the restricted sense (to refer solely to the act of circumcision) but as a code to denote the Law of Moses in its entirety, including circumcision. The demand however is unanimously rejected by the council (Ac 15:7-19). The succeeding verses, however, indicate

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practices and beliefs (worldview).

6.2.2 Younger and elder sons

Whereas table fellowship provides the tense background to the three parables in Luke 15, the reference to a man having *two sons* in the introductory line of the parable of "A Man Had Two Sons" (Lk 15:11), provides the narrator with the repertoire from stories concerning younger and elder sons to be found in the story tradition of Israel. Such stories are common in the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly in the patriarchal narratives: Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Reuben and Josef (and Benjamin), and Manasseh and Ephraim (Syrén 1993). The tensions here arise from the fact that (despite the importance attributed to the first-born in the Israelite tradition) God often shows favouritism to the younger son. This motif persists, in part, beyond the patriarchs: Aaron and Moses are elder and younger sons; David and Solomon are both younger sons who become God's anointed king (cf Scott 1990:112). Gideon and Judas Maccabaeus are also younger sons (see Donahue 1988:159)

Although various scholars have noted the tensions in the relationship between younger and elder sons, it was Bernard Scott (1990) in particular who recognised and demonstrated the importance of this motif in analysing the parable of "A Man Had Two Sons". Indeed, before the work of Scott this motif largely went unnoticed, or its use was misguided. An example is the parable interpretation of John Donahue. Donahue (1988:159) makes a connection to the biblical motif of the "younger child". But in contrast to Scott, he focuses exclusively on the "younger child" and fails to interpret the parable within the tensions commonly buried in the relationship of younger and elder sons. The elder son plays no role in his interpretation at all. For Donahue (1988:159), the motif of the "younger child" merely serves to stress or to illustrate the gratuity of God's favour. Donahue (1988:159-160) therefore also sees a number of contacts here with Pauline theology. Paul argues that Israelites and Christians are descendants of the

younger son (Jacob) who are chosen not because of their works but because of God's promise and his call (Rm 9:6-13; cf Gl 4:21-31). The parable presents in narrative form Pauline theology concerning the justification of sinners.

More recently the same sentiments have also been echoed by Stephen Barton (2000:209-210). Like Donahue, he focuses on the younger son, and states that "biblical stories about younger brothers were a classic source of reflection on the unpredictability of God's ways - in particular, of *God's refusal to limit the measure of his grace* to human ways of seeing and doing things" (Barton 2000:209, author's emphasis). The parable, then, is seen as an "illustration" (an epiphor) of God's unpredictable grace.

Although both Donahue's and Barton's interpretations hold some truth, they present only one side of the coin. They are in effect a reduction of the parable in which *two* sons, a younger and an elder, feature. The dynamics of the story are provided by the tension resulting from the favouritism shown to one of the two sons. According to conventional Israelite wisdom, as will be shown below, the election of one brother (the younger) invariably leads to the rejection of the other brother (the elder).

As noted above, for Donahue there is little doubt that Paul made use of the motif of the "younger child" in developing his theology of God's unmerited grace. Despite the fact that Donahue (1988:159) recognises the same motif in the infancy narratives of Luke where God takes the side of the "lowly on earth" (a priest of one of the minor grades, a childless couple, or shepherds), he does question whether Jesus or Luke in composing the parable of "A Man Had Two sons" was conscious of this part of their Israelite religious heritage. These sentiments are in part shared by Kenneth Bailey. Bailey (1992:118) questions whether Luke, if indeed aware of this motif, made use of it. Making direct reference to Scott, he argues that the parallel drawn between the younger son in Luke's parable and the younger son in the Israelite tradition is rather weak. He points out that with the exception of Jacob, not all younger sons in the Israelite tradition were rogues in

their youth, and can therefore hardly be set aside the "prodigal". But again like Donahue, Bailey focuses almost exclusively on the younger son. Whether the younger son is indeed a rogue, is not critical. More critical are the expectations of the audience, who would expect favouritism to be shown to one of the two brothers - and indeed, based on Israelite tradition, to the younger son. However, it can hardly be denied that even if not *all* younger sons are presented as rogues who trick their fathers into receiving a (special) blessing, there is in most cases, as Scott (1990:112) notes, "something slightly scandalous or off-colour in their [the younger sons] stories." Within conventional Israelite wisdom, this very fact can only serve to demonstrate the unmerited quality of God's grace to Israel. Whether Luke made use of the "two-sons" motif depends largely on two factors: (1) the widespread use of the motif in the story tradition of Israel, and (2) whether its use would fit the literary style of Luke.

The use of this motif within the patriarchal narratives has been explored in depth by Roger Syrén (1993) in *The forsaken first-born: A study of a recurrent motif in the patriarchal narratives.* As the title of this book attests, it is a motif which features repeatedly. Indeed from one perspective the history of the patriarchs is along the lines of two sons, an elder and a younger son, with favouritism shown to the younger one. That Israel's line of heritage should run through the younger son is of course in direct tension with the privileged position attributed to the first-born in the ancient cultures of the Near East. Central to an understanding of the privileged position of the first-born is the term בכרה (birthright), which features in the story of Isaac and Jacob in Genesis 25:31-35. Syrén (1993:88) traces its origin back to ancient agricultural rites in which the first-fruit and the first-born were sacrificed to the gods. A version of this practice is described in Numbers 3:40-43. Moses is to count the first-born males, but then, instead of sacrificing them, he is to redeem them by consecrating the Levites to Yahweh as his special property. The reason for this is traced back to the slaying of the Egyptian first-born during the Passover (Nm 3:12-13). Although ancient

rites laid a cultic obligation on the father, the birth of the first-born was also proof of the father's procreative power. Reuben, for example, is praised by Jacob as his first-born, his "might", the beginning of his "strength", and his highest "honour" and "power" (Gn 49:3).

The first-born enjoyed special rights and privileges, which evolved in a well-defined hierarchy within the family (cf De Vaux 1978:41-42). During the lifetime of his father, he took precedence over his brothers (Gn 43:33). After his death he became the head of the family and received a double share of the inheritance as witnessed in Deuteronomy 21:17. The Deuteronomy passage as a whole (21:15-17) is concerned with safeguarding the birthright of the first-born in cases where fathers had sons by two wives, and showed a greater love for one of his later wives. Determining who should be the lawful first-born, accentuates the importance attributed to him. Scott (1990:112) believes that this passage is designed to protect the eldest son from any favouritism which might be shown to a younger son. If that is so, the Deuteronomy passage features as a "small" or "contra narrative" (*petits récits*), written against what in Israel had become the "grand narrative" (*métarécits*) (Lyotard 1984; cf Breytenbach 1997:1169-1180). This contention needs to be explored further.

Within the patriarchal narratives, the line of Israel's inheritance runs, then, through the younger son. From Abraham, the line runs to Isaac (not Ishmael), from Isaac to Jacob (not Esau), from Jacob to Joseph (not Reuben), and from Joseph to Ephraim (not Manasseh). An early indication of the subversion of the birthright of the first born within the story-tradition of Israel, is the story of Cain and Abel, where without any apparent reason Abel's offering is accepted and Cain's rejected (Gn 4:3-4). A detailed exposition of the patriarchal passages has been undertaken by Roger Syrén (1993). Our focus here falls on some textual perspectives, on the relevance of the motif, and especially on the historical *Sitz im Leben* of the motif, that is, the historical context in which this motif was utilised. For this short overview we will follow almost exclusively Syrén's (1993) work and

the conclusions he draws.

It is not uncommon that stories within the tradition of a country or nation are used for specific purposes. In doing so, certain aspects and factors are highlighted rather than others and systematised in a unified whole. This unified whole then constitutes the "grand narrative". But as already noted in chapter 2 above, the grand narrative is not a particular narrative, but rather the "red line" (a theoretical construct) which runs through all the stories and acts as an interpretive tool revealing the singular truth inherent in the many narratives of that culture (cf Breytenbach 1997:1169). It is in this perspective that the work done by Syrén is most enlightening. The question is not whether the "two sons stories" in the patriarchal narratives are in all respects similar. Syrén's textual analysis shows that there are indeed many differences, and that those features that they have in common, need to be searched for.

A point in common is that the "forsaken first-born" is never totally excluded from Yahweh's blessing. Both Ishmael and Esau are explicitly designated to be become "a [great] nation" (Syrén 1993:140). In the case of Ishmael the promise comes from God and recurs no less that three times (Gn 17:20; 21:13, 18). For Esau it is proclaimed in the oracle, Genesis 25:23. Although the biographical information on Manasseh and Reuben in Genesis is restricted, both receive a blessing of some kind. Manasseh is promised that he too will become a great people (Gn 48:19). Reuben is included in the blessing which his father Jacob extends to his sons (Gn 49:2-27), resulting in the coming to birth of the twelve tribes of Israel (Gn 49:28).

Invariably, the promise given to the "forsaken first-born" leads to a distinguishable group of people. In its earliest stage the Ishmael-Isaac story reflects a family feud (see also Scott 1990:112). Whether the Ishmael tradition existed separately from the Isaaic tradition is uncertain (Syrén 1993:54-58). Whatever the case may be, the role of Ishmael is regarded as important enough to be included in the Abraham and Isaac cycle: within this cycle of stories, the

blessing takes the form of a tribal oracle, a *Stammesspruch* (Syrén 1993:20, with reference to Westermann). The story of Ishmael serves to explain the history of the "Ishmaelites", as a nation separate from Israel. The Esau passages too reflect a development along similar lines, running through various stages, and culminating in the formation of a separate nation. Apart from the earliest stage ("conflict within a family") two other stages are identified (see Syrén 1993:66-94). In the first of the two stages, Jacob and Esau represent types of social division. They typify the shepherd and the huntsman and relate their continuing struggle for primacy. In the last stage, the early typologies are "nationalised", Jacob and Esau becoming Israel and Edom respectively - again, two nations that are distinguished from one another.

The primary interest in the patriarchal narratives rests within the context of the last stage. It is there, Syrén (1993:141) concludes, that the "two-sons stories" receive a distinctive meaning, described by the word "blessing". The blessing is identified as the one element that comes the nearest to a common denominator. The word "blessing" expresses the specifically *Israelite* element of the stories. Notably, the blessing not only brings fortune with it, but inevitably also the final renunciation of the first-born, leading to the formal announcement of his demotion (Syrén 1993:141). From then on he is forsaken, his task being to fulfil the future described to him. This decision is communicated in different ways. Sometimes harshly as with Esau, who is openly declared as someone "without grace" in his fathers' house, or less harshly as with Manasseh. But in each instance the result is an inferior rank in relation to the ancestors of Israel. Ishmael, Esau and Reuben have in common their association with a concubine. As a result, they threaten to subvert the original intention of the call made to Abraham. The function of the blessing is evidently to abort this threat. Syrén (1993:141) notes that in "these instances the blessing is really an act of dissociation *from* the 'blessed'."

Although it is difficult to trace the origins of the motif of the "forsaken first-born", the meaning and relevance of this motif within the patriarchal narratives

point in two directions (Syrén 1993:142-143). On one hand they set out the formation of the nations and races on earth under the auspices of the God of Israel. This is based on the original promise made to Abraham that he would become a father of many nations (Gn 17:4, 5; cf 12:2). On the other hand they underline Israel's consciousness of its own standing as God's elected people. This is based on one particular covenant, the one covenant between Isaac and Yahweh (Gn 17:19, 21).

Of special interest to us is the historical *Sitz in Leben* of the motif. This is important in so far as it helps us to determine whether there are points of contact with the context of Luke's narrative, which would in turn warrant Luke's use of this motif. Luke's context was explored above in chapter 4 as one characterised by opposition and fear of persecution. Syrén (1993:54-65; 143-145) asserts that the historical *Sitz im Leben* in which the motif of the "forsaken first-born" would fit the best, is that of the postexilic community. For the exilic and postexilic community the loss of identity was a burning issue. It is against this background that the stories of Abraham and his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, are especially relevant. Abraham's story, as narrated within the patriarchal narrative, is one of an enduring threat. First, he is confronted with the threat that he may have no offspring; then that his offspring may be blotted out. Genesis 15:1-2 reflects the early fear over the procreativity of Abraham. "Abraham said: 'You have given me no children, and so my heir must be a slave born in my house.' Then came the word of the Lord to him: 'This man shall not be your heir; you heir shall be a child of your own body.'" Once this threat is overcome with the birth of first Ishmael and then Isaac, both sons are threatened with imminent death. Abraham is commanded to send his older son, Ishmael, away into the desert (Gn 21:10). Abraham's concerns are however overcome when God reconfirms his promise to him by pledging that his offspring will be reckoned through his younger son *Isaac* (Gn 21:11-12). But once again Abraham's procreativity is threatened when he is commanded to sacrifice Isaac, his only son, whose life is spared only at the very last moment (Gn 22).

The exilic and postexilic community closely identified with Abraham's fear. In many ways their story was Abraham's story and became a "model" (a lens) through which they could view and interpret the events surrounding their own lives. The greatest threat to their identity was the Babylonian exile. That they could survive the exile and return to their land was to them a sign that God after all was keeping his promise to Abraham and Isaac. This is reflected in Isaiah 41:8-9: "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I take from the ends of the earth and called from its farthest corner." But not only the returned Israelites appealed to Abraham. Back in Judah the struggle for true Israelite identity escalated into an intense rivalry between the returned Israelites and those who possessed the land (see also 5.2 above). This is evidenced by Ezekiel 33:23-24. This reflects on a claim made by those who remained behind *against* those who had returned from Babylonia: "Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many: the land is surely given to us to possess."

For the returned exiles, foreign presence among and within the ranks of the Israelites was a direct threat to national unity. In the interests of national unity a line had to be drawn between Israelites and non-Israelites. Syrén (1993:141) argues that the conflict between Ishmael and Isaac served as a perfect "model" to make such a clear distinction and promote a policy of "separateness". This is done primarily by stressing that God's covenant was established with *Isaac* (Gn 17:20). Israel therefore needed to be safeguarded against the influx and influence of foreigners. This was to be done by embarking on a strong *exclusivist* course, which finds expression first and foremost in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (cf Syrén 1993:59-62). Both books present the radical, religious view that there can be only one Israelite nation: the returned exiles. The others are foreigners. Survival is to be ensured by initiating the highest degree of national and religious "purity", of which Ezra's uncompromising attitude towards mixed marriages serves as a code (see Ezr 9-10).

That Israel should separate itself from the other nations emerges as the "grand narrative" of the postexilic community. This is evidenced by the recurring motif of the "forsaken first-born" and the sometimes vindictive attitude of some prophets and psalmists against the other nations. Invariably Esau serves as the primary "model". The classical examples is provided by Malachi 1:2-4. Within this "grand narrative", a heightened sense of religious purity, distinctiveness and apartness are the key to the proper interpretation of the patriarchal narratives. The two brothers, the younger (being Israel) and the elder son (the other nations), are to be separated.

Although dominant, grand narratives seldom remain totally unopposed. Within the story tradition of Israel there is some evidence of an *inclusive* line of thought with its roots clearly traced back to the patriarchal narratives (see Syrén 1993:57-48). A more universalist attitude is, for example, proclaimed by Deutero-Isaiah, who welcomes proselytes in the assembly of God (Is 56:3-7). Together with Deuteronomy 21:15-17, referred to above, this constitutes part of what can be termed the "small", "contra-narrative" of the post-exilic community. Deutero-Isaiah shows awareness of the threat which the exile posed to Israel's continuing existence, but his view of history is that the threat was self-imposed: the people of Israel were suffering as a result of their disobedience to God's commandments and their rejection of the prophets (see Is 48:18-19; cf Gn 22:17; 13:16; 15:5). Ironically, God uses the hands of the "foreigners" to turn events around. Syrén (1993:58) notes:

> Deutero-Isaiah's view of events provides the general background for understanding the "Ishmael theology" of Genesis 17 and 21. The priestly writers/redactors had to ponder the future of the holy people in the midst of the many foreign groups that surrounded them - some of whom, on crucial occasions, struggled for dominance over the whole region.

The existence of other nations, as well as the presence of foreigners among the "people of Israel", could not summarily be done away with. Israel's heritage *does* follow through the line of the younger son. But the "blessing" of the first-born as "also-people" (also a [great] nation) paves the way for an understanding that the other people around Israel also have some standing in God's plan. A corrective criticism (within the patriarchal narratives themselves) against a policy of separateness is possibly provided by Genesis 32-33, Jacob meeting Esau (Syrén 1993:144).

There is however little doubt that the "grand narrative" of post-exilic Israel is that of separation. The "two-sons" stories, in particular the gratuitous favouritism shown to the younger son, provided the leaders of post-exilic Israel with the necessary model for the propagation of segregation between the nations. The model functions to explain that (1) the "people of Israel" alone are heir of the promise made to Abraham; and that (2) God has continually chosen his people even when they have apparently wandered from his way. In sum, the fact that Israel's heritage runs through the younger son shows that God chooses freely. The grand narrative concludes that his choice is *for* Israel and therefore *against* the nations, from whom Israel must separate itself.

The widespread use of the motif to describe the fate of Israel is further evidenced by its use in at least two passages from the *Midrash on Psalms* (cf Scott 1990:112,123-124). The first one is a commentary on Psalm 9:1

> R. Berechiah said in the name of R. Johnathan: .... The verse means therefore that God has set love of little children in their fathers' hearts. For example, there was a king who had two sons, one grown up, the other a little one. The grown-up one was scrubbed clean, and the little one was covered with dirt, but the king loved the little one more than he loved the grown-up one.

The second one is a commentary on Jeremiah 3:18-9, explaining why Israel receives a land desired by other nations:

> Can *sibe'ot goyim* [desired by the nations] mean anything else except that the land of Israel was desired and coveted by all the nations? Consider the parable of a king who was seated at his royal table. He had many children, but he loved the youngest one the most. He was about to apportion their inheritance. Among the parcels of land there was one of great beauty, which all the children coveted, and so the king said: "Let this parcel of land remain as my own portion." As Scripture says, "The Most High apportioned to the nations their inheritance" (Deut. 32:8), but to whom did He finally give His own portion? To His youngest child, for the next verse says, "The Lord's portion to His people, to Jacob the lot of His inheritance."

Both quotes make use of the "two-sons" motif, with the younger son enjoying the favour of his father as a code of God's love and election of Israel.

As noted above, Paul also makes extensive use of the motif. Indeed, as Donahue (1988:159-160) asserts, Paul uses the motif to accentuate God's unmerited love and argues on the basis of the younger son, the "son of promise", that the Gentiles are part of God's grace (cf Rm 9:1-18; Gl 4:21-31). Ironically, Paul uses the motif *against* the "Israel of flesh" to argue for the *inclusion* of the Gentiles. What is important for us at this stage is that Paul's use of the motif further verifies that the motif was well-known in the first century and that it was a powerful interpreter of the fate of Israel in relation to other nations. The probability of Luke not only being aware of the motif but also making conscious use of it, is therefore highly probable.

Bailey (1992:119) disqualifies the use of the motif on the basis that the

favouritism shown to the younger son "evaporates as the parable comes to its conclusion." But this argument hardly disqualifies its use. If the motif was used, as we contest, in order to subvert conventional perceptions, such a result is to be expected. The exposition of the parable will proceed to show that by the very use of the motif, favouritism to one of the sons at the expense of the other is subverted. In contrast to conventional perceptions, God does *not* make a choice between the two-brothers. Both are welcomed to join in the celebrations. The story of the "forsaken first-born" and the "favourite younger son", separated from one another, becomes the story of a father's love for *both* his sons.

6.3 Parable exposition

The parable of "A Man Had Two Sons" consists of two acts juxtaposed. Each act is introduced by one of the two sons referred to in the introductory verse: Act One, verses 12-24 (νεώτερος), and Act Two, verses 24-32 (πρεσβύτερος), the father forming the combining factor.

It is to be noted that in contrast to the other two parables in Luke 15, "The Lost Sheep" (verses 4-7) and "The Lost Coin" (verses 8-10), both of which are introduced in the second person, "What man of you", the narrator introduces the third parable in the third person, "A certain man had two sons" thereby blocking the audience's immediate identification with the man (Scott 1990:102). The audience is thereby forced to identify with one of the two sons. Because of the ranking system in ancient families - first father, second elder son, and third younger son - Bailey (1992:112) believes that it would have been quite shocking to the Mediterranean mind that a story should commence with the actions of a younger son. This will however have hardly been so, as the announcement that what is to be told is a story involving two sons will have immediately called to mind the well-known story tradition in Israel, in which the younger son is often regarded as the favourite (see 6.2.2 above). Indeed, no story teller would normally commence a story in which identification with the first character is immediately

blocked. Identification with the younger son is intended. Despite the privileges and rights attributed to the elder son in ancient Mediterranean cultures, the younger son is here nevertheless favoured. The well-known story tradition in Israel would therefore not only make identification with the younger son plausible, but would also guide the audience into what would seem to be the likely ending of the story: the younger son will receive the father's blessing, the elder son will be rejected.

Within the story tradition of Israel, scandalous behaviour is often associated with the younger son. This anticipated behaviour is confirmed in the parable when the younger son requests his portion of the property (verse 12). Reference to property evokes another element in the Israelite repertoire: that of the legal codes concerning inheritance. Evidence about inheritance practices is not altogether clear. According to Deuteronomy 21:7 the first-born had rights to a double share of the inheritance, the younger son therefore receiving a third. The property could be left either by means of a will, which would become effective on the death of the father, or it could be given as a gift during his lifetime (cf Jeremias [1963] 1984:87). Based on this information, various scholars have argued for the commonality of the younger son's initial request. Donahue (1988:153), for example, writes that "the request of the younger son should not be considered as rebellion or a desire for unwarranted freedom" (see also Linnemann 1966:75). But that the son's request is hardly conventional is evidenced by the following passage from a third-century source reflecting earlier Israelite custom (cf Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:373):

> If one assign in writing his property to his children, he must write, "from today and after [my] death." ... If one assign in writing his estate to his son [to become his] after his death, the father cannot sell it since it is conveyed to his son, and the son cannot sell it because it is under this father's control .... The father may pluck up

> [produce] and feed it to whomsoever he pleases, but whatever he left plucked up belongs to his heir.
>
> (*m. B. Bat.* 8.7)

The situation described in this passage is that of man who wishes to protect the inheritance rights of the sons of a first marriage. By assigning the property to the sons, their inheritance (after the father's death) would be guaranteed. Sirach 33:19-30 however contains a strong warning against such an early division of property (cf Scott 1990:109):

> To son or wife, to brother or friend, do not give power over yourself, as long as you live; and do not give your property to another, lest you change your mind and must ask for it. While you are still alive and have breath in you, do not let any one take your place. For it is better that your children should ask from you than that you should look to the hands of your sons. Excel in all that you do; bring no stain upon your honour. At the time when you end the days of your life, in the hour of death, distribute your inheritance.

Although both passages clearly indicate the possibility of property being divided during the lifetime of a father, the strong warning issued by Sirach indicates that it was *not* the norm. Indeed, Sirach's warning reflects on bitter experience. Two issues are especially striking. First, even if property is divided during the lifetime of a father, disposition of the property should only come into effect *after* the father's death. The second issue is the reference to honour: The degree of irregularity in the son's request only becomes apparent when seen within the social dynamics of "honour-and-shame" and "challenge-and-response" of first-century Mediterranean culture (see Malina 1993:28-62).

Honour was the pivotal value in the Mediterranean society, much as money

is in our Western society today. It is understood as the status one claims in one's community together with the all-important recognition of that claim by others (see Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:309-311). Honour is either ascribed or acquired. Acquired honour is the honour that a person can build over his or her lifespan and is the result of skill in the never-ending game of challenge and response. That means, in order to gain honour, someone needs to challenge another person, be it positively by means of a compliment (gift), or negatively by means of an insult. If someone succeeds in the challenge, honour is gained. If however the other person successfully counters the challenge, honour is lost. Ascribed honour, in contrast, is the honour attributed to a person by birth or genealogy. Although honour can also be ascribed, for example, to a governor by the king, it is in most cases directly related to family status. The latter is evidenced by the fact that ancients referred to themselves as "son of", thereby referring to the honour status of that family. The main bearer of the family's honour was the father by virtue of his being the head of the house. After his death, his honour is attributed to his eldest son as he is the one who stands to inherit the greater portion of the family property. But family honour was never confined to the individual. Every member of a family shared in the honour of that family. Although family honour was ascribed, it could nevertheless be challenged, resulting in a loss of honour.

Because the honour of one's family played a crucial role both in one's societal status and interaction (determining whom one could marry, do business with, eat with, and so on), it needed to be protected at all costs. Children were therefore at an early age socialised into being loyal to the family and taught what was honourable behaviour according to the set norms of their society (cf Hagedorn 2000:111-113). Because loyalty kept a family together, disloyalty to one's own family was unthinkable. This would include failure to respond to an attack on the family, the possible result of this being a permanent loss of honour. But ill-disciplined and ruffianly behaviour also threatened family honour, the severity of the crime being reflected in Leviticus 20:9: "If anyone treats his father or mother

with contempt, he shall be put to death. He has condemned his father and mother, his blood guilt is upon him."

As the quote from Sirach 33:12-23 illustrates, giving away one's property out of hand was tantamount to relinquishing one's own power and honour. The father ran the risk in fact, of losing his whole livelihood. In the story under consideration, however, what is shocking is not the division as such, but the fact of the son *asking* for it (Bailey 1992:112-113; Green 1997:580; Forbes 2000:132-133): no Mediterranean son would ever ask his father for his share of the property. Bailey (1992:113) quotes Ibn al-Tayyib who comments: "This is an illegitimate request! The son has no right to make such a request." Bailey ([1976] 1983:176) refers to rabbinic legislation, stating that inheritance, even as a "gift" while the father is still alive, is invalid if the gift has not been given voluntarily, free of all duress. It is therefore not surprising that in ancient texts the question of a son, elder or younger, *requesting* his inheritance is never discussed (Bailey [1976] 1983:164; Bailey 1992:114). Such a request would amount to a direct challenge to the honour of the father. He is wishing his father dead. The father would be expected to explode in anger and rage culminating in a public humiliation of the son (cf Dt 21:18-21). Indeed, in a situation like this, it would also be expected that the elder son defends his father's honour. But he is conspicuously quiet.

By acceding to the request of the younger son, the father places his family honour in jeopardy, indeed he gives up his own "life". This is confirmed by the Greek text. The younger son requests his portion of the property (οὐσία) and the narrator remarks that the father divided his life (βίος) among them (Scott 1990:111).

The intertwining of the two repertoires, the two-sons stories, and that of the Israelite legal code concerning the division and disposition of property, puts the audience in a complex situation. On the one hand, the story tradition of "two-sons" leads it to identify with the younger son. On the other hand, the younger son goes clearly too far. This tension is intensified in the next verse (verse 13). The

division of an estate during the lifetime of a father is one thing. But actually disposing of one's inheritance is quite another. In ancient Israelite writings there is no precedent for the right of disposal during a father's lifetime (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:373). The verse outlines a series of acts which lead from one infamy to the next, witnessing to a break with all familial ties. The younger son leaves for a foreign country. Jeremias (1963]1984:87; see also Meurer 1997:658) maintains that there was nothing amiss with the son emigrating to a foreign country to seek more favourable living conditions. But χώραν μακράν indicates alienation from the family (Forbes 2000:134). This is confirmed by the son squandering his inheritance in wild living as though he was a Gentile. In squandering his property, the younger son both ignores the claim that the father still had on the property and violates Israelite law by refusing to maintain his father from the property in his old age (cf Mk 7:11-13; Scott 1990:115; Forbes 2000:133).

With reference to Daube and Rengstorf, Bailey ([1976] 1983:167-169; 1992:121-125) draws attention to an ancient Mediterranean ceremony, called the *qetsatsah*, which literally means "a cutting off". It refers to an offending person being cut off from his community. The ceremony was enacted when a man married an impure woman or sold his land. Relatives would bring parched corn and nuts, place them in a jar and break the jar in front of the people declaring that the offending person is now cut off from his inheritance. That the younger son hastily (μετ' οὐ πολλὰς ἡμέρας) departed to a foreign country could indicate the fear of the *qetsatsah* ceremony being enacted. If he returns and buys back the land, all could be forgiven. But by spending it amongst Gentiles, he has blocked all avenues for his return, lest the *getsatsah* be performed then.

In verses 14-16 the audience's patience with the younger son is tested to the limit. The famine might have introduced some sympathy from the audience, as it could indicate that the younger son is not alone responsible for the downward turn in his fortunes. But he does what from a Pharisaic point of view is the worst thing he could do. Rather than facing up to public shame on returning to his

father's house, or at least seeking help within an Israelite community, he attaches himself to a foreign family. By doing this, the break with his family is complete.

But even worse is to follow. In feeding pigs, the younger son also breaks with his religion. That the pig was considered to be an unclean animal for the Israelite is well-known (Lv 11:7; Dt 14:8). Indeed, Israel's loathing for the pig was especially strong. In Leviticus 11:4-7 the pig is listed neutrally among other unclean animals. But in the second century BCE it became an especially unclean animal because of its use as a sacred animal by outsiders (Malina 1993:165). The height of Antiochus Epiphanes' abomination was the sacrifice of a swine on the altar of the holy temple (cf Dunn 1983:13). Israelite antipathy to the swine continued, attested by the refusal in the Mishnah to allow an Israelite to rear swine *anywhere* (*m. B. Qam.* 7.7; cf Dunn 1983:13). The abhorrence of rearing or feedings pigs is further endorsed by the rabbinic maxim: "Cursed be the man who would breed swine, or teach his son Greek philosophy" (*b. B. Qam.* 82b; cf Scott 1990:114; Forbes 2000:134). In this aphorism, "swine" is equated with "Gentile", an allusion which resonates throughout our parable. In herding pigs, the younger son is practically forced to abandon his religious customs. He can no longer keep the Sabbath (Jeremias 1963] 1984:87). The audience is shattered.

Verse 16 highlights the sorry state of the younger son. He does not only feed the pigs, but wishes to eat their food. Most scholars understand κεράτιον to refer to the pod of the carob tree known as Saint John's Bread (*ceratonia siligua*) which was sweet and widely eaten (cf Jeremias [1963] 1984:87). In his earlier work, Bailey ([1976] 1983:172-173) however contends that the carob referred to here was another variety which was wild, thorny and bitter, devoid of nourishment, eaten by animals and the very poor alike to bridge periods of severe drought. It is difficult to ascertain what variety is assumed in the parable. The lack of nourishment in the "wild and bitter" variety would explain why the younger son could "not fill the stomach" - suggesting that he never felt nourished. In his later work, however, Bailey (1992:128-129) again leans towards the *ceratonia*

siligua, based on a Talmudic reference that it was readily chopped up by the Israelites for cattle feed. Bailey (1992:128) assumes that after the carob molasses were extracted, the coarse pulp was possibly fed to the pigs, the younger son not having the stomach to digest it. Whatever the case may be, the younger son is reduced to a state in which he envies a pig.

Also uncertain in our parable is the meaning of the phrase that "nobody gave to him". Forbes (2000:135) argues that this phrase cannot refer to the carob pods, as the younger son could have helped himself to these. Conversely, the younger son may have been too closely monitored to steal from the pod. In the literary perspective, this phrase serves to contrast the lack of food the younger son is experiencing (verse 16) with the abundance of food of the servants at home (verse 17). All in all, at this point the tension created by juxtaposing the theme of the favourite younger son in the Israelite story tradition with the rebellious younger son in the parable, has reached so close to breaking point that any identification of the two is nigh impossible. Despite all this, the audience will have expected either the younger son to have turned from his ways or for someone else to restore him to his previous state and status. Hopes of this may have been raised with the reference to the carob. A rabbinic maxim states: "When the Israelites stand in need of carob-beans, then they return (to God)" (cf Linnemann 1966:76).

The long awaited turn in events is covered in verse 17-20a. The actual turning point is introduced by the phrase, "he came to himself" (verse 17). Whether this phrase can be equated with repentance, based on the assertion that it reflects an underlying Semitic phrase signifying repentance (Jeremias [1963] 1984:87), has become a much debated issue (cf Bailey [1976] 1983:173-176). Green (1997:581) asserts that the phrase "does not on its own signify repentance." Repentance is rather to be deduced from the co-text, in which the act of repentance (μετάνοια, μετανοέω) is twice highlighted (Lk 15: 7, 10). Bailey (1992:129-133) fervently rejects the notion that at this point in the narrative the younger son shows true repentance. He argues that *if this* is repentance, the

parable conflicts with the meaning of repentance in the two preceding parables, where repentance is not defined as an active act on the part of the repentant, but the "acceptance of being found". For Bailey (1992:132) it seems more probable that at this point the younger son's actions are motivated by his predicament. Returning to his father and working as a slave is seen as a cunning way out of his dilemma, with true repentance following only after the acceptance of his father. Bailey (1992:132) finds support for his argument in the fact that the sin of which the son apparently repents is in no way defined. Bailey's arguments, however, seem to be controlled by theological presuppositions (cf Barton 2000:210). That the sheep and the coin are simply "found" may, for instance, be ascribed to the nature of the sheep and coin when compared to the human character (Forbes 2000:137). Bailey (1992:132) is however correct in asserting that it was not remorse for his sins, but rather the fact that the younger son was in need and had to eat, that initiated the turn in events. This is confirmed by a rabbinic proverb, "When a son (in need in a strange land) goes barefoot, then he remembers the comfort of his father's house" (in Forbes 2000:137). Bailey's polarisation of repentance and prudence is however unnecessary (cf Barton 2000:210-211). The diaphoric nature of the events narrated, lies not foremost in the dichotomy between repentance and prudence, but between conventional Israelite expectations concerning actions surrounding repentance and those narrated by Luke in verses 20b-24. In this parable the emphasis is not on the repentance of the son (whether true or simulated) but rather the (compassionate) actions of the father. The critical question is: How will the father, who together with his family were shamed by the younger son, react if he should return?

The purpose of the rehearsed speech in verses 17-20a is to highlight the low status to which the younger son has sunk. He is no longer "worthy to be called a son" (verse 19a). The phrase indicates an awareness on the part of the younger son that his actions have destroyed the father-son relationship (cf Hultgren 2000:77). Instead of returning as a "son", he is prepared to take the

status of a μίσθος (verse 19b). For Bailey ([1976] 1983:176-178; 1992:133-134) this forms part of his cunning behaviour. With reference to Oesterley, Bailey ([1976] 1983:176; see also Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:372; Pöhlmann 1993:183-184) distinguishes between:

- bondsmen (δοῦλοι), who as slaves were part of the estate and indeed almost part of the family
- slaves of a lower class (παῖδες), who were subordinates to the bondsmen
- hired servants or day-labourers (μίσθοι).

For Bailey ([1976] 1983:176-177), it is critical that the hired servants were free men, which would allow the younger son to live independently of his father. As such, he could earn his own money, pay back his debt, and maintain his pride. Bailey however fails to see that the honour of the younger son is intrinsically linked to that of the father, and that in contrast to the bondsmen and other slaves, the hired servants were, viewed from the standpoint of the father, *outsiders* - not part of the family. Based on the shame he has caused his father, and his inability to rectify the situation, the younger son realises that he cannot gain full access to his family again. If at all, he can only work as a hired servant. He has no other option. Scott (1990:116) notes that the younger son views his situation in legal terms: having lost his status as son, the younger son expects his father to stand in judgement of him and *expects* everything to be earned. In verse 20a he stands up to return to the father and do what he has resolved to do.

Verses 20b-24 relate the extraordinary events that follow on the younger son's return. Although the son's coming to himself and rising to return to his father may still have raised the audience's hope that the favourite younger son may be restored to his expected place in the family, the events narrated are most unusual and unexpected, epitomising Luke's use of diaphoric approach and language. According to conventional Israelite expectation, any restoration of the son can only

follow once certain preconditions have been fulfilled by the sinner. Bailey ([1976] 1983:179) shows that the idea that repentance is a "work" is found throughout rabbinic literature. A Midrash on Psalm 18:3 reads: "Three things can cancel evil decrees; namely, prayer, almsgiving and repentance" (in Bailey [1976] 1983:179). Bailey's reference to repentance being a "good work" is of course based on theological considerations. From a social perspective it is a matter of repentance being tangible (cf Forbes 2000:295-296): If everything that happens in a first-century Mediterranean village is everybody's business, repentance needs to be not only visible but also measurable. Repentance therefore becomes inseparably bound up with restitution and reparation. Verbal repentance does not suffice. For the father to regain his lost honour, the shame caused by the son needs to be atoned for. Making reference to Montefiore, Bailey ([1976] 1983:180) argues that after the destruction of the temple, the atonement element in repentance had become dominant to the degree that it replaced the sacrificial system. Restitution now formed part of the proof of genuineness, of being truly remorseful, with no want of readiness on the part of the community to receive the penitent until he had sufficiently proved himself (Linnemann 1966:78). From a conventional Israelite standpoint the expected narration of events is: (1) the son runs to the father, falls at his feet, and confesses his sin; (2) he declares his determination to make restitution; and (3) proves himself by being a faithful servant. All these events find full expression in the rehearsed speech of the younger son

The actual narration of events turns the world of the first-century Mediterranean upside down. The father sees his son at a distance, has compassion, runs, embraces, and kisses his son (verse 20). Like the younger son, the *father* now goes too far. It is beneath the dignity of an oriental to run in public (Linnemann 1966:77). The father's running towards his son and not waiting for the son to come to him, violates his honour. That he "runs" is in itself undignified. According to ancient tradition, the way "a man walks shows what he is" (Sir 19:30). For the father to run, he must pull up the robe, exposing his legs,

which is considered shameful in Semitic culture (Bailey 1992:144-145; Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:372). Bailey (1992:142-143) notes the implications of the father running. He does not run to welcome the boy, but to protect him from hostile village reaction (see also Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:372). By (publicly) kissing and embracing his son, he signals that the son is under his protection. Kissing is also a sign of reconciliation (see Gn 33:4; 45:14; 46:29). The kiss on the cheek, in contrast to kissing the feet or the hand, is the sign for unreserved acceptance to one's own social status. The verb ἐσπλαγχνίσθη gives insight into the father's character. Notably, his response is similar to that of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:33).

In the confession to his father (verse 21) the younger son follows his rehearsed speech, except that he omits the last line where he asks to be treated as a μίσθος. Most commentators conclude that the speech is interrupted by the father, as he has heard enough and is convinced of the genuineness of his confession (see, inter alia, Green 1997:532; Hultgren 2000:79). But this is hardly correct. Bailey (1992:152-153) suggests that the son has come to true repentance and has realised that serving as a hired servant would not heal his father's broken heart. More likely however is that within the social dynamics of the first-century Mediterranean word, a request to serve as a hired servant (in the light of the unexpected acceptance of the son by the father) would be tantamount to another challenge and would constitute an insult to the father's love.

Verses 22-24 contain cultural clues designed to alert the audience to the restoration of the *son's* honour (Scott 1990:118). Shockingly the emphasis is not on the father's honour being restored, but that of the son - the son who had snubbed and abandoned his father. The son receives a robe, which in the ancient world was a special way of honouring somebody. Jacob honours his younger son Joseph with a richly ornamented robe (Gn 37:3). The adjective πρῶτος (first, best) could refer to the robe of the father himself which would indicate the full restoration of the son's familial honour (Bailey 1992:154). The ring is probably a

signet ring, signifying the bestowal of authority (Jeremias [1963] 1984:130). The shoes distinguish a free man from a slave, who walked barefoot (Forbes 2000:140). The father's actions culminate in the slaughtering of a fattened calf. The calf indicates that this is not just a small party with friends, but a full-blown banquet to which the whole community is invited. The banquet signals the community's "acceptance of the father's wish to bring his son back into the family and the village" (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:372). It is intended to reconcile the younger son with the community and restore his honour. The banquet, in a word, signifies table fellowship with a known sinner who has failed to adhere to purity regulations and shamed his father (see Lk 15:1-2).

The reason for the celebration is elaborated on in verse 24. The younger son who had slandered his father is nevertheless again the "son of mine". From the point of view of conventional Israelite wisdom, he is a sinner, who should be rejected. But from the father's point of view he was dead and now is alive, he was lost and now is found. Forbes (2000:141) draws attention to the perfect participle ἀπολωλώς indicating the complete state of loss, which in turn confirms the suitability of νεκρός. A seemingly irreversible situation has been reversed. The father and the younger son are truly reconciled.

Verse 25 marks the beginning of the second act of the parable. This act is not just a lame appendix. In typical Lukan style, opposites are juxtaposed. The explicit reference to the "elder" son, recalls the well-known Israelite story tradition of "two sons" (Scott 1990:119). Based on this story tradition, the audience expects the elder son to be rejected.

This section (verses 26-30) is marked by numerous spacial markers and contrasting points of view. Although the elder son in contrast to the younger son stayed at home, he is not in the house, but in the fields, *far* from the father. Like the younger son returned home, the elder son now approaches the house, but does not enter. The natural reaction for any son who hears festivities in the house would be to enter and join in the celebrations (Bailey 1992:166). Instead, the

elder son calls a servant (παίδος) and seeks information (verse 26). The servant's answer summarises the events of the first act. The direct speech of the servant serves a dual purpose. First, it highlights family relationships: "your brother", "your father" - one would have expected the servant to refer to the actions of "his master", and the return of the master's "son". Second, it prepares the reader for the family confrontation that is to follow.

The scene for the confrontation is set when the elder son reacts in anger and refuses to enter the house (verse 28). The reason for his anger is not immediately stated. The return of the younger brother would, of course, have meant that he would be supported from the proceeds of the property (now belonging to the elder brother) as long as the father still lived (Scott 1990:120). In a limited-goods society (cf Malina 1993:71-93) this could only be at the cost of the elder son. What is now striking is that the events described, clearly parallel the actions involving the younger son earlier in our story, both concerning the shame caused of the father, and the father's reaction to his son's behaviour.

The elder son's refusal to enter the house in which the father hosts a public banquet is a direct challenge to the father's honour (cf Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:310). It is an insult of the highest degree, equal in magnitude to the insult caused by the younger son in requesting his property. It is a scene that can hardly be imagined within ancient Mediterranean culture. The elder son shows an utter disregard for the feelings and personal dignity of the father. His challenge, in fact, amounts to a break with the family. Within ancient cultures, such a challenge to the father's honour cannot be ignored: it calls for an appropriate response - one of dismay and condemnation. The expected scenario would be for the father to publicly discipline his son.

As with the younger son, the father in his response, ignores all cultural expectations. Risking humiliation and shame, he leaves his guests behind in the house, and approaches his elder son outside. Instead of rebuking him, he pleads with him to come inside. Forbes (2000:142) observes that the imperfect παρεκάλει

corresponds to ἤθελεν, indicating that the elder son's persistent refusal is met with the father's persistent pleas. This provides the elder son with the opportunity to give air to his frustration (verse 29-30). In his complaint he contrasts his own actions (verse 29) with those of the younger son (verse 30). An important aspect of the elder son's complaint centres on the demands of honour. He had always honoured his father by serving him and never breaking a commandment. In contrast the younger son had brought shame on the family by squandering the "life" of the family, not through circumstances beyond his control (famine), but by wasting his life with prostitutes. This reference to "prostitutes" does not correspond with the description of the younger son's life earlier (Bailey 1992:122-124; Hultgren 2000:81; Forbes 2000:143). The narrator observed that the younger son scattered his property living wastefully (verse 13). The elder brother accuses him of immorality (verse 30). This accusation is tantamount to "negative labelling" in ancient cultures. Hultgren (2000:81) argues that even the word "prostitution" is too formal. By implication the younger son is being accused of having had sex with "gentile whores, pigs!"

Ironically, when the elder son should have protected his father's honour by denouncing his younger brother's request for the property to be divided, he was quiet. Now he speaks: but his complaint turns to a scornful attack directed, not against his younger brother, but against his father. When he addresses his father, he fails to name him "Father" (Green 1997:585). This is in stark contrast to the way the younger son addressed his father (see verses 12, 18, 21). The elder son then publicly, on the occasion of a banquet, accuses his father of showing favouritism - by failing to give him a goat to celebrate with his friends, yet slaughtering the fattened calf for the younger son.

What is vital for an understanding of this parable are the contrasting points of view which in typical Lukan style are repeatedly juxtaposed (cf Scott 1990:121):

The elder son sees the younger son as

- this son of yours
- who squandered your property
- with prostitutes

The father sees the younger son as

- one who was dead and is alive
- one who was lost and has been found

The elder son sees himself as

- a faithful slave of the father
- never breaking a commandment

The audience (led along by Israelite tradition) most probably see the elder son as

- selfish and a self-righteous pretender (expecting his rejection)

The father, however, sees the elder son not as a faithful *slave* but as

- a companion ("always with me")
- as a co-owner of the farm ("all that is mine is yours")

As in his reaction to the younger son on his return, the father's response to his elder son is staggering and most unconventional (verse 31-32). The father does not reprimand his son, as the audience will have expected. Instead, he confirms that he inherits everything. Lovingly he calls him τέκνον, (child) which in the vocative always denotes affection (Scott 1990:121). Although the parable maintains a careful cultural view, the cultural titles are dismissed by the father in his behaviour towards his two sons, with whom he deals as children. The loving response to the elder son as "child" correlates with the embracing and kissing of

the younger son. Contrary to conventional Israelite expectations the father does not choose between the two. He embraces *both*. With regard to upholding his honour within the set rules of society, the father is a failure; but in showing mother-like compassion for his children, he is a success (Scott 1990:121).

Notably the parable is left open-ended. It closes with words of the father, the central figure in the parable. Nothing more is said about either son. Bailey (1992:190) has outlined, what he believes to be the way the storyteller wants the parable to end:

> And the elder son embraced his father
> and entered the house
> and was reconciled to his brother
> and to his father.
> And the father celebrated together with his *two* sons.

But it belongs to the very nature of metaphor that the end is not spelled out. Whether the elder son goes in or stays outside, remains an open question, challenging the audience. Notably this challenge is repeated in the closing chapter of Luke's narrative. The narrator notes that Paul welcomed "all" (πάντες) who came to him (Ac 28:30).

6.4 The challenge of a God who does not choose between his sons

With the exception of Scott (1990) the importance of the two-sons motif in interpreting the parable has largely been overlooked. That does not mean that the parable does not draw on other features as well. But the use of the motif highlights the rich symbolism of the parable and accentuates its dynamism at all levels of interpretation. Central to an understanding of the parable is the question whether it supports or challenges, confirms or subverts the two-sons motif as it featured within conventional Israelite wisdom up to and including the first century.

In 6.2.2 above we showed that within conventional Israelite wisdom the two-sons motif was used to explain why God chose Israel above other nations, even when Israel wandered from God's way. The answer given in the two-sons motif is: It has nothing to do with what Israel did; as with the younger son, God simply favoured Israel. Indeed the motif was used not only to explain Israel's *election*, but also the *rejection* of the other nations. Although the patriarchal narratives refrain from using exclusive language, such terms are definitely to be found in post-exilic Israelite literature, best illustrated by Malachi 1:2-3: God not only declares God's love for Jacob, the younger son (Israel), but also God's *hatred* of Esau, the elder son (the other nations). We described the use of the motif as the "grand narrative" of post-exilic Israel.

Paul's use of the motif in his letter to the Romans (9:1-18) and Galatians (4:21-23) constitutes an interesting "contra narrative", also referred to above (6.2.2). Whereas conventional Israelite wisdom used the motif to confirm the privileged position of Israel, Paul uses it to argue *against* the Israel of flesh so as to include the Gentiles in God's salvation. No longer is Israel of the flesh identified with the younger sons; the role falls to the Gentiles as the children of promise: "Now we, brethren, like Isaac [the younger son] are children of promise" (Gl 4:28). In doing so Paul has subverted the symbolic universe of Israel by reversing the two-sons motif. God's sovereign choice is confirmed, but it is not based on "works" (adherence to purity and other regulations), which formed an integral part of Israelite identification, but on mercy (cf Rm 9:12, 16). Paul engages in what Crossan (1973:5) in analysing the parables of Jesus has termed a "polar reversal" of roles. The Malachi maxim is turned upside down. The Gentiles are identified with Jacob (the younger son), who is loved, and Israel of the flesh is identified with Esau (the elder son), who is hated (cf Rm 9:13).

The central question for us is: How did Luke use the two-sons motif? There is little doubt that part of the scandal attaching to the parable derives from the reversal of roles. But then again Lukan ambiguity allows for choice - for a

number of different peoples being associated with the two sons, depending at what level and from whose point of view the parable is read.

Robert Funk (1996:192-194), reading the parable within the context of the historical Jesus, postulates that the younger son mirrors the life of *Jesus* as he was perceived by his opponents. The description of Jesus' opponents that he is a "glutton and a drunk" (Lk 7:34) correlates with the description of the younger son in the parable who "scattered his [father's] wealth in wild living" (Lk 15:13). In telling the parable, Jesus was, therefore, telling his own story. Although the audience's patience (that of Jesus' opponents) is tested to the limit, the younger son (Jesus) is nevertheless accepted by his father. Thomas Wright (1996:126-131) argues that the parable only makes sense as a profoundly subversive retelling of Israel's story. As such, the younger son does not only mirror the life of Jesus, but that of Israel itself. There is a marked resemblance between the description of the younger son who goes off in disgrace into a far country and then returns home to find his welcome being challenged by an elder brother, and the story of Israel's exile and restoration. Although the people had returned from exile, the great prophecies of restoration had at the time of Jesus not yet been fully realised. For Wright (1996:127), indeed, the subversiveness of the parable lies in the assertion of Jesus that the restoration of Israel is being fulfilled in his own ministry, without his opponents realising it. Jesus, the perceived outsider, is the insider.

It forms part of the Lukan ambiguity that these referents are not blocked. Indeed Luke himself in constructing his narrative allows for a number of different referents. At literary level, the immediate co-text of the parable, Luke leads us to make an association between the toll-collectors and sinners and the person of the younger son; and one between the Pharisees and scribes and the elder son. This association is provided by the setting of the parable in Luke 15:1-2. The Pharisees and scribes are indicted by Jesus' receptiveness of "toll-collectors" and "sinners" who have come to hear his word and with whom he shares table

fellowship. Various diaphors accentuate the lost state of the younger son, intimating the life of toll-collectors and sinners. Being "joined to one of the citizens" recalls the deplorable act of toll-collectors enlisting in the service of Gentiles (Linnemann 1966:76). In response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus asserts the divine necessity of joyous responses to the recovery of the lost. His answer, based on the actions of the father, is however not only a self-defence of his table fellowship practice. The Pharisees and scribes are invited to find themselves represented in the elder son who refuses to join the feast. The claim of the elder son never to have disobeyed a command (ἐντολή) of the father reflects the seemingly responsible and obedient attitude of the Pharisees and scribes (see Lk 18:18-21; Hultgren 2000:81). But such Pharisees and scribes fail to identify with the redemptive purpose of God, the βουλὴ τοῦ θεοῦ. The roles of the two-sons are reversed: the apparent insiders (Pharisees and scribes) are outsiders and the outsiders (toll-collectors and sinners) are insiders.

Luke, however, has clearly used this story within his own larger story. As the focus shifts to the macro-text of Luke-Acts, still at literary level, the referents change again. An association is evoked between the younger son and "Gentile" believers, with the Israelites who oppose Israelite-Gentile table fellowship mirroring the attitude of the elder son. An interesting parallel exists between Luke 15 and Acts 15 (the council of Jerusalem) (Wright 1996:128). In both stories people are being welcomed in from beyond certain existing socially and religiously defined boundaries. In the parable (Lk 15) the "rebellious" younger son is welcomed home, with the elder son being challenged to join in the feast. In Acts 15, Gentiles are accepted into the community of believers, the Israelite believers challenged to engage in fellowship and ensure Israelite-Gentile commensality (cf Neyrey 1991b:382). Notably however, the role of the Israelite believers has now been reversed. Within the immediate literary setting of the parable, the Israelites (toll-collectors and sinners who have returned home) were identified with the younger son (outsiders who have become insiders). Now, however, the believing

Israelites, perceiving themselves as insiders, are placed in the role of the elder son (insiders who have become outsiders).

This ambiguity highlights Luke's unique use of the two-sons motif. Central to Luke's subversion is not the reversal of roles in one way or the other, but the *unity* of God's family and the all-inclusiveness of God's kingdom. Indeed, as Scott (1990:125) points out, the parable's scandal derives from its subversion of the two-sons motif to resolve between the chosen and the rejected. Luke is not engaged in a "polar reversal" of roles, whereby those initially elected are rejected, and those initially rejected are accepted. Both are accepted.

The dynamic of the parable lies in the tension it creates by the extensive use of diaphoric language, leading the audience in one direction only to shock it by the father's unconventional behaviour. The two-sons motif leads the audience to identify with the favourite younger son. Once it has identified with him, it is put under severe strain by a string of improbable events. Just when identification with the younger son reaches breaking point, the father enters the plot and accepts the younger son, even before he can show tangible proof of repentance. Despite his actions, he is not an outsider, but an insider. The audience then anticipates the elder son's rejection. As the audience sees it (contrary to conventional perceptions) he is the outsider, who does not enter the house and so shames his father. But again, the father does not reject him. He is not hated. The father neither banishes him - "I am always with you" - nor is his inheritance taken away from him or reduced in any way - "all that is mine is yours". To the dismay of the audience, the father does not decide between this two sons. He rejects no one, but chooses both. So it is that the focus shifts away from the two sons to the attitude and behaviour of the father. Here Luke's telling of the parable paves the way for a revised vision of God.

God therefore is not one who separates, but one who unites. He does not reject one for the other, but chooses both. The relationship between the two brothers is not to be determined by conventionalised interpretations of the Law

and Israelite temple purity regulations, but by the father's view of both - a view elucidated by mercy, the very heart of the Torah. Although the word "mercy" does not feature explicitly in the parable itself, it constitutes the background to a father who is repeatedly shamed by his two sons, but nevertheless does not reject them. Thus it is that the world drawn by Luke in this parable correlates with the world drawn by him in telling the parable of "The Good Samaritan" (Lk 10:30-37). It was noted above (5.4) that in the parable of "The Good Samaritan" Luke juxtaposed the mercy of God with the Israelite view of God as a God who practises ethnocentricity, that is, as one who chooses one nation (Israel) and rejects the other (Gentiles). In and through the actions of the Samaritan, however, a view of God is fostered which (based on "mercy") is not exclusive but inclusive in nature. Both parables illustrate Luke's *universalism* (cf Duling & Perrin 1994:360-371). Boundaries between clean and unclean, insider and outsider, Israelite and Samaritan/Gentile, all epitomising elements in the conventional Israelite worldview, are broken down. The Kingdom of God is not something that decides between two parties but unites. Barton (2000:214) summarises: "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 reconciliation."

One such practice is table fellowship both with toll-collectors and sinners as well as with Gentiles. Attention has already been drawn to the association of Luke 15 with Acts 15. This association is important in determining the extratextual meaning of the parable, that is, the meaning for Luke's community. Wright (1996:128) focuses on the quotation from Amos 9:11-12 as the central passage in Acts 15. Amos foretells that Yahweh's return will result in the rebuilding of David's dwelling, in order that *all other people* may seek him, even *all the Gentiles*. This quote seems to legitimise the Gentile mission. Esler (1987:105), however, argues that "the phrase 'the mission to the Gentiles' is something of a misnomer", as the Gentile mission had already been sanctioned (cf Gl 2:7). The main issue

is not the "Gentile mission" as such but rather the Gentiles becoming part of the "Christian" communities, that is sharing in table fellowship. From a conventional Israelite point of view, Israelites could only eat with Gentiles at the price of denying their *ethnos* and faith (see 6.2.1 above). It was this objection that constituted a major stumbling block to the spread of "Christianity" in the Diaspora, causing uncertainty within Luke's community (Lk 1:4). Esler (1987:93-109) advances the thesis that there was a stage early on in the spread of Christianity through the Diaspora when such fellowship was permissible. However, at some time in the middle of the first century there was a Judean reaction against this practice, prompted by Peter's action in Antioch (Gl 2:11-14). Acts 11 and 15 indicate that the believers in Jerusalem were never reconciled to Israelites eating with Gentiles in the "Christian" community. Against this background, the Cornelius narrative and subsequent council of Jerusalem play a prominent role in Luke's narrative, both being recorded in great detail. In the light of criticism of Israelite-Gentile table fellowship, the role played by Peter in these narratives is of central importance. Indeed Israelite-Gentile table fellowship is traced back to Peter himself, who - prompted by the vision in Joppa - ate with a Gentile, Cornelius. That not Gentile mission, but table fellowship is the main bone of contention, is confirmed by the complaint raised against Peter by members of the church in Jerusalem: "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them" (Ac 11:3). Also in Acts 15 the central issue, although not mentioned explicitly, is that of table fellowship. Again Peter is the main spokesman. The principle result of the council is that a reduced list of prohibitions would be imposed on the Gentiles (Ac 15:19-20). Esler (1987:106) comments that this list represented "the core of a compromise agreement" reached between Israelite and Christian believers, with the Gentiles undertaking to adhere to these listed prohibitions, and the Israelites in return re-establishing table-fellowship (see also Neyrey 1991b:382). The *restoration* of table-fellowship, that is both brothers joining in the celebrations, seems vital for Luke in order to legitimate and promote the commensality among

the believers in his community, which consisted of both Israelites and Gentiles. The parable of "A Man Had Two Sons" forms part of the symbolic universe created by Luke. It challenges conventional perceptions of fellowship that were rooted in Israelite ethnicity.

We opened this chapter by arguing that not one of the sons, but the *father* is the main character in the parable. The parable is about a man who had two sons. Both sons shame their father to a point at which identification with them become near impossible. The younger son is an outright scoundrel, who breaks both with his family and religion, declaring his father to be dead. The elder son lives, as it seems, in accordance with familial and communal regulations, "never having disobeyed your command", but nevertheless mirrors the younger son in shaming his father. As a result, conventional categories of insider and outsider are blurred. Between the two sons stands the father, who has love and compassion for both. Conventional perceptions of forgiveness and repentance, indeed of God himself, are turned upside down. There is no talk of retribution or restoration. There is no talk of one being elected, the other being rejected. The father's love for both sons is unconditional. The two sons represent in code the two opposition groups that characterise Luke's narrative, at all levels of reading, both intratextually and extratextually. Being open-ended it constitutes a challenge to its audience to "enter" the house, join in the celebrations, and accept the all-inclusiveness of God's Kingdom. The dynamism of the parable is enhanced by placing it within the setting of first-century Mediterranean table-fellowship and by drawing on the repertoire of the two-sons motif. The parable is a classical example of how story telling, metaphorical and subversive in nature, can be used to challenge conventional views of God. In doing so the parable works for reconciliation.