

A man had two sons. Did the man have a wife? Did the sons have sisters? These questions may interest us, but the only women who figure in this story are those in the jealous imaginings of the older brother.

Nothing indicates that the younger son went beyond his rights in making the request he did to his father. At most he lacked wisdom and probably consideration. A more faithful translation of the transaction reads, "*Father, give me that share of the property falling to me. And he divided his living between them.*"

The word translated "property" means existence, and the word translated "living" means "life." The father gives the son not only his existence but the means to make a living.

The ideal in ancient Israel was to live within the context of an extended family. As time went on, it was impossible to prevent the breakup of the inheritance. In the first century CE, according to Jewish law, it was possible to divide up one's possessions during one's life.

This practice was discouraged, since it was considered undesirable to have aged parents reduced to begging from their children. Normally, the son enriched by this process was held responsible for the welfare of his parents.

By staying in his father's house, the older son would not receive his inheritance until his father's death. The older son's share was, by law, twice that of his brother's. In the parable, the father has free use of his goods right up until the end.

The phrase "gathering all he had" may also mean the younger son converted everything into cash. The phrase "a few days later" is Luke's way of saying the boy was in a hurry to take off.

The younger son's wrong consisted less in his request or his departure than in his misuse of the inheritance from his father. "Squandering his property in dissolute living" means, literally, "living without hope of salvation."

After squandering his fortune, the younger son experiences such severe pangs of famine that he feels lost. He hires himself out to a stranger who sends him to tend to pigs. This son of Israel, already ethically compromised, becomes ritually impure.

Unlike the two parables that precede this one—the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep to find the lost one, the woman turns the house upside down to find the lost coin—the father does not

search for his son. He surely had the resources to find him, to stage an intervention, but he does not do so.

Rather, the father waits. He attempts to go about his business without knowing where his son is or how he is getting on. The boy is not prospering. He falls from the “highlife” into a pigsty. This fall is prefigured in his request: “Father, give me the share of the property *falling* to me.” The weight of responsibility that comes with the freedom granted by his inheritance, proves too great for him to bear.

He falls hard; he hits bottom. Fortunately, the fall doesn’t kill him. Rather, he “comes to himself.” Or, he “comes to his senses,” which is never a pleasant experience in a pigsty. This expression was a part of the religious and philosophical vocabulary of the period. Its root meaning is “come back,” as in a return to God.

The young man no longer even dares think about his status as “son.” What he hopes for at most is to be a “hired hand,” a “worker” on his father’s estate. With such a status he would be better off than being poor, although he would still be very much looked down upon. He has lost his honor, his identity, and even the right to be called “son.”

When the father catches sight of his son still far off he runs to him, which is indecorous behavior for the head of the family. The father falls (that word again) on his son’s neck, hugs him and smothers him with kisses. The son’s fall is from grace; the father’s fall is grace incarnate.

The father interrupts his son’s confession with expressions of paternal affection; he is “filled with compassion.” The Greek verb used here is rare, occurring again in the story of the Good Samaritan. The orders the father gives prove that he refuses to accept the shameful state of his younger son. He keeps or reestablishes him in his status as son.

The ring is a symbol of power, as in the story of Joseph: “Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph’s hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain around his neck” (Gen 41:42). The father completely reintegrates his son into the family.

A celebratory banquet commences while the older son is still working in the fields. The older son hears the sound of music and the noise of the dancer’s feet. He learns from a young servant that his father is serving veal to welcome home his brother.

The father “goes out” to meet his older son as he did his younger. The father’s plea falls on deaf ears. The faithful son becomes angry. Righteous people are often described in the Hebrew Bible as becoming angry at what appears to be favorable treatment given to guilty persons. Jonah is beside himself with anger at God’s sparing of the city of Nineveh.

The older son thought of his life as work. His relation to his father is governed more by duty than by affection. He cries, "I have never disobeyed any of your orders." He feels very strongly that he has been treated unfairly; he has been faithful to his position, and yet he has never had the right to a celebratory meal.

The faithful son asserts "*this son of yours* devoured your property with prostitutes," or so he imagines. The father responds, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because *this brother of yours* was dead and has come to life."

A father had two sons. The younger said to his father, *give* me what is mine. When he squandered his inheritance he found himself in a place where no one *gave* him anything. Upon his return home, his father *gives* him a ring, robe, sandals, and a party.

The older son confronts his father, "You have never *given* me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends." The father *gives* assurance to the older son that everything the father owns belongs to him.

This parable is told in response to the complaint that Jesus, the first born, the older brother, welcomes sinners and eats with them. What the father cannot *give* his first born, the older brother, is the compassion to welcome the younger back as his brother nor the desire to eat with him.