



## A New Interpretation of the Prodigal Son Parable [Luke 15:11-32]

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### The Prodigal Son – A Peshet

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The New Testament has been virtually ignored as a possible source for answers to the question of the whereabouts, and / or identity of Israel's lost tribes for two primary reasons. First and foremost is a prevailing teaching within Christianity that the church has replaced Israel<sup>[1]</sup>. Advocates of this view hold that the 'church' represents a 'spiritual Israel' and thus the *allegorical* heirs of the promises made by God to 'physical Israel' in the 'Old' Testament. Secondly is a critical scholarly view of the New Testament documents themselves. This view claims that the Christian Scriptures are historically inaccurate – the product of a church already at odds with its Jewish mother faith, and therefore unable to provide unbiased answers to historical queries of any kind.

While the latter will have to be worked out within the pages of prestigious academic journals, the former is open to debate. Aside from heresies such as those espoused by Marcion<sup>[2]</sup>, Christians have constantly affirmed the authenticity of the Hebrew Bible – if not in deed, at least in word. To do otherwise would be self-destructive.

The New Testament writers are at pains to show that the personalities and events that it describes are a fulfillment of a prophetic scenario outlined in the Hebrew Scriptures. They quote freely from the Law, the Prophets and the Writings<sup>[3]</sup>-more often than not, providing the reader with a running commentary meant to prove that these things were done to fulfill what the prophets spoke. Often the connections between the New and Old Testaments are made by direct quotations from a given text, either as it reads in the Hebrew Massoretic text or from the Greek Septuagint. At other times alluding to a story through the use of similar words or phrases makes the connections. The reader has to be on the watch for both.

The present article is an example of one possible case where a "well known" parable may not be as "well known" after all. The interpretation that follows perhaps uncovers a belief held by Yeshua that has been ignored, or more appropriately gone unnoticed. The parable is called the Prodigal son. It just may contain threads of a belief on the part of Yeshua that the meaning and

goal of Biblical History is the reunion of two brothers, known by the Hebrew prophets as Ephraim and Judah.

## The Parable

11 Yeshua continued his teaching, "A certain man had two sons.

The two sons in this parable represent the two houses of Israel - the house of Judah and the house of Ephraim. The house of Judah became known as the Jews and the house of Ephraim became known as Israel and the house of Joseph. These two "sons" of the father are clearly distinguished throughout the prophets as the two houses of Israel. An important lesson in Biblical interpretation is to recognize the distinction between the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel.

12 The youngest said to his father, 'My father, give me my share of the property which will come to me.' So he divided to them the means of his livelihood. 13 Not many days after that, the youngest son gathered all his belongings together and left for a distant country. There he wasted his inheritance in reckless living, and

The departure of the "younger son" from the house of his father is described in I Kings 11ff. This marks the beginning of the end for the united house of Israel. At any rate, the northern tribes of Israel / Ephraim (the younger son) left the "father's house" and immediately went into idolatrous living (see for example I Kings 12:25ff).

14 after he had spent all he had, there was a severe famine in all that country; and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself to one of the citizens of that country and he sent him into his fields to feed the hogs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the bean-pods that the hogs ate, but no one gave him anything to eat.

This vivid analogy describes life in the dispersion for the scattered northern kingdom. In approximately 722 BCE, the Assyrians conquered the house of Israel. The subsequent scattering was complete - so much so, that the prophet Amos declared that the northern kingdom would be sifted through the nations as corn is sifted through a sieve (Amos 9:9). The famine described herein, is not literally one of bread and water, but of hearing the words of the LORD (see Amos 8:11).

17 Coming to his right senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread in abundance and to spare, and here I am dying of hunger? 18 I will get up and go to my father and

I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am not worthy any more to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired servants.'

The "awakening" pictured in these verses is spoken of by Moses. Referred to there as the "secret things of the LORD", the scattered northern kingdom of the house of Israel will "come to his right senses" and begin to make teshuvah - see Deuteronomy 29-30.

20 So he got up and went to his father and while he was yet a good way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity and ran toward his son and fell on his neck kissing him fervently. 21 The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against you and am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring here the fatted calf and butcher it, and let us eat and be merry, 24 because this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is now found.' They began to celebrate. 25 Meanwhile, the oldest son was out in the field, and as he got closer to the house he began to hear the sound of music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the younger servants and inquired as to the meaning of all these things. 27 He answered, 'Your brother has come home, and your father butchered the fatted calf, because he has received him back safe and well.'

The reunion of the two houses and the return of the "prodigal son" is spoken of in no less than 40 prophetic passages throughout the Hebrew Bible. The connection between this prodigal son in the parable of Jesus and the historical Joseph (whose name represents this wayward house), is made clear with the words in verse 24 above - because this son of mine was dead and is alive again! See Genesis 45:28.

28 This made him very angry and he would not go into the house so his father came out and pleaded with him. 29 He answered his father, 'Look, these many years I served you, and I never transgressed your commandments, and yet you never gave me a young goat so that I could have a merry time with my friends. 30 But as soon as this, your son, came home who consumed your living with harlots, you butchered the fatted calf for him.' 31 The father told his son, 'You are always with me, and all that I have is yours. 32 We had to be merry and rejoice, because your brother was dead to us and is alive again, he was lost and is now found.'

The anger and jealousy exhibited by the elder son (Judah) is spoken of in Isaiah 11:13. The healing of Judah will take place when the father "comes out of his place to plead with him". Notice that Judah claims to have "never transgressed the father's commandments". Judah, despite failures, has maintained the covenant and kept the commandments. It is interesting to note that the father in our parable, consoles the elder son and reaffirms his position in the "house"

with the words, "you are always with me and all that I have is yours". This silences all those who would damn Judah with theories that replace the elder son altogether. Judah and Ephraim will be reunited with the father and the result will astound the world. Indeed the prodigal son is coming to himself in the midst of a famine for hearing the words of God. Countless souls are beginning to return to a Torah oriented lifestyle, seeking to keep the commandments as prophesied in Deuteronomy 30.

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[1] This doctrine, appropriately called Replacement Theology can be found to some degree in almost every denomination of Christianity.

[2] Marcion was a wealthy ship owner who went to Rome circa 138 AD. He rejected the authority of the Hebrew Bible, and even sought to have it removed from the canon of Scripture. He held Gnostic beliefs and opposed anything and everything Jewish. His heresy seems to have attracted many who rallied around his 'free from the Law' banner. Though he was excommunicated in 144 AD, his beliefs appear to have survived-even to this day in some circles.

[3] The Hebrew Bible, referred to by Christians as the Old Testament, was originally divided into three divisions; the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. Jesus makes special reference to it in this way in Luke 24:44-45, when he claims to 'fulfill' certain portions of these texts. Modern Jews have maintained this original arrangement, while Christians have altered the order somewhat.