

Sons of the Father

The Elder Race and the Prodigal Son

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

- ¹¹ And he said, "There was a man who had two sons.
- ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them.
- ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.
- ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.
- ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.
- ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.
- ¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!
- ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.
- ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants." '
- ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.
- ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'
- ²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.
- ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.
- ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.
- ²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

- ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.
- ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’
- ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,
- ²⁹ but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.
- ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’
- ³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.
- ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’ ”

(Luke 15:11-32)

Father and Son

Today I’m going to tell you [the story of God’s family](#), his whole family, and the ultimate plan of God to reconcile heaven and earth. We will be looking at this through the lens of a very old interpretation of the Prodigal Son. In fact, it has been called, “[The oldest exegesis](#).”¹ But we will not get to that for a while.

If we are thinking about a family, a good place to begin would be with [fathers](#). The Prodigal Son has a father in it.

¹ [François Bovon](#), *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. Donald S. Deer, *Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 430.

Fathers are the “seed” of the family, thus the root or origin or cause. For obvious reasons, if we are talking about God’s family, we should begin by considering God as Father. We Christians believe that there is **one God**, one “**divine and infinite Being**” only who is called God. Yet, this God exists as “**three subsistences**”² (**LBC 2.3**) that we more popularly call “persons.”

The first Person of the Godhead is **God the Father**. Why is he first? Paul puts it this way, “**For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist**” (**1Cor 8:6**), or again “**one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all**” (**Eph 4:6**). When the Persons of God show up together in the Bible, the Father is *always* mentioned first.

The second Person of the Godhead is **God the Son**. This makes good sense, for if the first Person is called “Father,” we would expect that in a plurality of a Godhead that he would have a Son. This Son is, as the Creed puts it, “**very God of very God**.” God the Son is God and there is only one God. Yet, God the Son is distinct from God the Father as a

² “Subsist” means “to exist.” It comes from the Latin *sub-* (“under”) and *sistere* “to assume a standing position.” It is like “substance,” from *sub-* (“under”) and *stare* (“to stand”). So a substance “stands under.” Thus, substance refers to the essential nature of a thing. Subsistence became the way the Fathers and Reformers described the three Persons who exist “under” the one divine essence or nature—God.

son is distinct from a father. As the Confession puts it, “of one substance and equal with Him who made the world” (LBC 8.2).

The relationship they are said to have is that God the Son is called, famously, the “only-begotten.” The Greek word is *monogenēs*. It appears in John’s writings (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1Jo 4:9). While John 3:16 is probably the most famous of these, perhaps the most interesting is John 1:18. “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (NASB95). You can hear here there are two Gods in the verse and yet there is only one God. The second God is distinguished as the “only-begotten God.”³ This, John has just said, is the “Word made flesh,” who dwelt among us, and “we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (14).

³ There is a textual variant here that reads, “... only begotten Son.” A scribe must have thought that it was a mistake to have “God” twice, and thus changed it. I do not quote the ESV here, because it does not translate “begotten” as such, but instead goes with the view that “begotten” actually means “only” (i.e. “the only God, who is at the Father’s side...”). In both the OT and NT, the term “God” (*elohim* or *theos*) is used of both the One Uncreated God and other gods. Therefore, the term by itself describes communicable attributes (attributes that other “gods” share with him). I believe those communicable attributes are spirit, family, and rulership, and all the attributes such as intelligence, self-awareness, conscience, etc. that we need in those capacities. God himself is distinguished from the others by his incommunicable attributes (omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, omnitemporality, etc.). And, of course, whatever attribute God possess is equal with what it is to be God; only God has any of his attributes as he has them—in absolute perfection.

What's going on here is that the New Testament is claiming that Jesus Christ is **the Word of God** in **Genesis 1:3** who spoke all things into existence. Let's compare John 1:1 with Genesis 1:1. **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"** (**John 1:1**). The Word is God and yet the Word is with God. Both are true. It's a mind-blower.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (**Gen 1:1**). John is clearly riffing off this verse. But there is something in this verse that gets lost in translation. The word *be-reshith* ("in the beginning") can mean both the beginning in the sense of **time** or the beginning of **preeminence**. Think of a kid in school. **"He got to class first"** (time) vs. **"He was first in class"** (preeminence). So we could translate the first way as something like, **"At the first moment..."** and we could translate the second way as something like, **"In the firstborn..."** The early church has several translations that had one idea or another like this second one, as did the Jewish Targums.⁴ Thus, Jerome could

⁴ **"In the beginning, God became a Son"** (Jerome cites a now lost work of Aristo of Pella, *Dialogue of Jason and Papiscus*) or **"In the beginning, God made for himself a Son"** (*Tertullian, Against Praxeas* 5.1). Both are probably heretical ideas, but clearly there is a way to say it that is not heretical such as, **"Through the firstborn Son, God created..."** Hence, the Targum, **"From the beginning with wisdom the Memra (Word) of the Lord created..."** (*TgNeo Gen 1:1*).

say, “Most people think that in the Hebrew is contained in the Son, God made heaven and earth.”⁵

This is most likely where Paul gets the idea that Jesus is, “The image of the invisible God, the *firstborn* of all creation” (Col 1:15). Jesus is the Son of preeminence, the Firstborn. This does mean he is created, however. For while *monogenēs* conveys the idea of some kind of begottenness, that is simply showing a relationship between Father and Son. The word most likely derives from a root that means “unique” (*genos* (“class, kind” as opposed to *gennaō*—“to beget, bear”). Jesus is the uniquely begotten Son of God. How so? Because, as Paul continues, “*by him* all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created *through him* and *for him*” (16). If all things were made by him, then he can’t be “made” himself. He must be eternal.

You can hear how God the Father is the source of all things (“*from whom* and *for whom*”) and The Son is the instrument of all things (“*by whom*”). Thus the Creed, “... And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light

⁵ Jerome, *Questions in Hebrew*, in Genesis ii. 507. Quoted in *Saint Jerome’s Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, trans. C. T. R. Hayward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 30.

of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.”

Now that we've established biblical Christian orthodoxy, I need to say a word about the [heretics](#), for they will show up again later. When I use the word “heresy,” I do not do it lightly, but refer to teaching that is against the Gospel at a fatal point. That is, the heretical teaching murders the Good News, making it something else. Too many Christians use this word for any possible disagreement that they might have with someone else. Rather, I think the word should only be used with the utmost of care, reserved only for the worst possible confusions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The reason we have creeds at all is because heretics from the beginning attacked the essential truths of the Gospel. Most of them centered on the Son of God. I want to consider just [two heresies](#) here. The first is actually just [the pagan notion of god the father](#) and his relationship to the gods. Most, perhaps all ancient pagan religions, called at least one god “father.” For the Greeks, it was Zeus. For Romans, it was Jupiter. For the Nordic people, it was Odin. For the Canaanites it was El. The thing is, each of these gods himself has a father. Zeus' father was Cronus. Jupiter's father was Saturn.

Odin's father was Borr. El's father is Sky. You can hear from these that the biblical conception of God the Father is utterly unique, for he is uncreated and eternal, without a father, always Father, always King.

Now, each of these father gods all had sons. Each of them, however, only were able to “create” their children with the help of a woman—either a goddess or a human woman. Again, we see the utter difference between these and the biblical God, for our God created all things by the sheer power of his Word-Son who was eternally subsistent with the Father.

The second heresy I want to mention is **Mormonism**. Mormonism is very much like these other religions in terms of both their father god and son-god “Jesus” being created beings. It is very important to understand this, for **Mormonism is really nothing but the older polytheistic religions** come home to roost as a Christian cult. Jesus was the product of a union between Mary and god the “Father” called Elohim. The Holy Spirit did not overshadow Mary. Furthermore, they teach that Elohim was once a man, just like us, until he ascended to the divine and populated our planet.⁶ In

⁶ A third heresy is worth mentioning in a note, as it will come up later. It is **Gnosticism**. Gnostic teachings are quite complicated, but at the heart of it, you have this idea of “the Light” or “Pneuma,” an uncaused “thing” which they refer to as both “Father” and “Mother” (the First

these heresies, you can hear the attack on the eternally unique God of the Bible, and that's why such a word must be used for these beliefs.

The Sons of God

Let's continue with our story. We've set up the vital point that God the Father and God the Son are **utterly unique** and to them all glory belongs in heaven and on earth. They existed for eternity, with the Holy Spirit, as this un-created Godhead. But since the language of Father and Son is used, we can call this the eternal heavenly *family*. But in the fullness of what this Triune God is, they decided to create other sons, both in heaven and on earth, sons who would participate in their royal family. Let's remember here that the Prodigal Son story has two sons.

Earthly sons of God is an idea that most Christians are able to understand and believe. The Bible is explicit about this. For example, **Luke 3:38** tells us that **Adam** was the “**son of God**.” If Adam is son of God, then this means that his

Thought) as it is composed of parts. It is this androgenous sexless thing which produces all these “Aeons” or gods. The highest of these Aeons is the Logos. The God of the OT is Yawheh and he is called the “Fool,” because he runs around saying that he's the only God when in their reality, he is but the product of other Aeons who are higher than him who created him. On the Gnostic (oldest) interpretation of the Prodigal Son, see **Bovon**, 430-31 and notes.

children are also sons of God. Thus, Paul tells the Athenians, using one of their own poets to do it, that “**we are indeed his offspring**” (**Acts 17:28**). Who does this include? It includes all humans in this sense. Because we all—red and yellow, black and white—come from Adam and because Adam is the son of God, we are all sons of God.

There is a *special sense* in which God has sons, however, that is unique only to **some of Adam’s descendants**. The Lord tells Pharoah, “**Israel is my firstborn son**” (**Ex 4:22**). That is, all other nations may be God’s children, but **Israel** is his special son, his firstborn.⁷ This refers to the son of privilege and inheritance. Now, throughout the OT, this idea of the firstborn gets subverted for **God loves to choose the younger rather than the older** in his decree of election. Thus, Israel wasn’t even around at the table of nations to choose them. Rather, he created Israel essentially out of nothing, through a great covenant with Abram, who worshipped other gods until he met the true God.

This choosing of the nation of Israel to be the firstborn was itself a type of **another group of humans** called sons of God, this time in the NT. John again tells us that, “**As many as received him, to them gave he power to become *the sons of***

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God, even to them that believe on his name” (John 1:12 KJV). These children are, however, not born of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (13). That is, they are chosen by God, given faith, and are what the NT calls Christians. Christians, we are told, are “sons of God.” “All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Rom 8:14). “In the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ There they will be called ‘sons of the living God’” (Rom 9:26). “For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith” (Gal 3:26).

A note here. If we are sons of the Father and Jesus is a son of the Father, then we are, in some sense, brothers. And in fact Scripture says that explicitly. “He is not ashamed to call them brothers” (Heb 2:11; cf. Ps 22:22). But, importantly, we are *not* brothers *in the same sense*. Jesus is the unique Son, the Only-Begotten. We are brothers through creation and adoption only, given this privilege as an act of grace.

What is much less understood is that God has another group of beings that he has created whom he also calls sons. These are not human beings, but heavenly beings. The clearest example of this is Job 38:7. God speaks directly to Job out of the whirlwind and confront him with his so-

called knowledge. “Where were you, when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding” (Job 38:4). Now, if we go back to Genesis, we would say that laying the foundation of the earth took place on Day 1. God continues this line of questioning about this day (5-6) until he concludes, “... when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy” (7).

You can hear “sons of God” here. But remember, we are on Day 1 of creation. Thus, these sons of God *cannot be* human beings, for we were not created until Day 6. Rather, these entities are called “stars” and they very clearly refer to heavenly beings. These beings would include the likes of Satan. In that famous passage in Isaiah where we find the Latin translation “Lucifer,” whom we all identify as Satan, the prophet says, “How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven above the stars of God. I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly ... I will make myself like the Most High’” (Isa 14:12-14).

Lucifer is called a star and seeks to set himself above the other stars, that is, the sons of God. He does this on the

mount of assembly, that is, the heavenly divine council “in the sky.” Who sits in the divine council? The sons of God. Psalm 89 says, “Let the *heavens* praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness in *the assembly of the holy ones*! For who in the *skies* can be compared to the Lord? Who among *the sons of God* is like the Lord, a God greatly to be feared in *the council of the holy ones*, and awesome above all who are around him?” (Ps 89:5-7). Again, Psalm 82 says, “God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment ... I said, ‘You are gods, *sons of the Most High*, all of you’” (Ps 82:1, 6).

These sons of God or stars or sometimes “angels” or “gods” (*elohim*) here are those ruling “**princes**” of the King—the Father in heaven. Satan, again, is called the “*prince of this world*” (John 12:31). Another note here. Jesus is also called the Prince of princes (Dan 8:25). If Jesus is a prince and Satan is a prince, and they are both sons of the same Father, then they are in some sense “brothers.” But this is precisely why I mentioned **Mormonism**. Mormonism teaches that Jesus and Lucifer are spirit-brothers. Thus, many who hear what I just said will gasp out loud thinking that I’ve just spewed heresy. But the best heresy is actually mixed with truth. The truth is, they are brothers, but *not equal brothers*. It’s just like

us. We can put it like this. Jesus created Lucifer and as a son, Jesus is unique—the only begotten. Lucifer is, a created son, not biological, given that privilege by God by grace. Mormonism gets it wrong not in thinking *that* they are brothers, but *how* they are brothers and *who Jesus is*. That’s the fatal error. Beware of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, otherwise, you can throw Scripture out and not even know it.

The Bible elsewhere calls these creatures “**thrones**” or “**dominions**” or “**powers**” or “**authorities.**” We saw earlier that Jesus created them. “**By him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and *invisible*, whether *thrones* or *dominions* or *rulers* or *authorities*—all things were created through him and for him**” (Col 1:16). And in the verse right before we saw the Father doing the same thing, Paul said, “**although *there may be* so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed *there are many* “*gods*” and many “*lords*”—yet for us there is one God, the Father ...**” (1Cor 8:5-6). The Bible does not teach that these creatures do not exist. Far from it. It teaches that they do exist, but that many are enemies—fallen ones. “**For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual**

forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). And it therefore teaches that we must not worship them.

The Image of God

Now, this is hard enough for some people to wrap their minds around, because Christianity has been infected with **antisupernaturalism** since the Deists and German Liberals first decided to get rid of miracles and demons and angels and Satan and, well, even Jesus as the God we have described. We prided ourselves that we believed in all those things. But the second we start to be confronted with this kind of stuff, many balk and start to cry, “Heresy!” Ah yes, there’s that word again. If I disagree with it, that’s what it must be, even if it’s in the Bible 1,000 times over.

But if that was difficult to understand, the next one gets even stranger for some people, though, if you can accept what you’ve just heard, it won’t be difficult at all. Recall that the Scripture said that Jesus is “**the image of God.**” “**Image**” is a way of describing a son’s relationship to the Father. But before we move any further, let me reiterate that **Jesus as the image is the Firstborn** (Col 1:15), that is the utterly

unique image of God. As Hebrews puts it, Jesus is “*The radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe the word of his power*” (Heb 1:3). There is no other image of God like Jesus, just like there is no other son like him. All others are but created copies of the uncreated original.

Nevertheless, the first chapter of the Bible teaches that **man is made in the image of God!** What a stunning concept this is. And if we are right, then Genesis 1 is teaching that *as image-bearers*, we are “sons of God.” That’s what Luke got the idea that Adam is God’s son in the first place. He bore the image. Hence Genesis 5:3, “*When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.*” The likeness/image and sonship overlap.

Here is what it says, “*Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them*” (Gen 1:26-27). Notice in the language the difference between the two verses as it regards the

singular and plural pronouns. Vs. 26 says, “us” and “our.” Verse 27 says, “his” and “he.”

It is very clear what is happening in vs. 27. God, singular, is creating mankind. God, alone, made male and female—Adam and Eve. He did so in his image. This is uncontroversial. The controversy comes in the previous verse. To whom does the plural refer? One popular Christian response is that it refers to the Trinity. God the Father is speaking to God the Son and God the Spirit. Now, I do believe that we see the Trinity in Genesis 1. It is in the first two verses (God, the Firstborn, and the Spirit). And while it is theologically possible that this is what is going on, I do not think it is historically or contextually plausible.⁸

⁸ **Going Deeper:** I actually believe the Trinity is present in this verse as well, but only inasmuch as the Son and Spirit relate to the divine council. The Son is clearly a member of the council and the Spirit also surrounds him and it. In other words, there is more here than just the Trinity. Heiser writes, “The most exhaustive scholarly treatment of the plural language and the image is W. Randall Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism* (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 15; Leiden: Brill, 2003). See especially pp. 17–94. Seeing the Trinity in Gen 1:26 is reading the New Testament back into the Old Testament, something that isn’t a sound interpretive method for discerning what an Old Testament writer was thinking. Unlike the New Testament, the Old Testament has no Trinitarian phrases (e.g., “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”; cf. Matt 28:19–20). The triune godhead idea is never transparently expressed in the Old Testament. Since, as we saw in chapter 3, other references to divine plurality involve divine beings who are lesser than Yahweh, we must be careful about attributing the language of divine plurality to the Trinity. Doing so will get us into theological trouble in other passages. As we’ll see in chapters 17 and 18, Israelites and first-century Jewish writers *did* discern a *two-person* Godhead in the Old Testament. I believe that the evidence for a two-person Godhead discussed in those chapters can in places reveal a third person in the Old Testament (see the [companion website](#)). In chapter 33 we’ll see how New Testament writers used the two-person Godhead perspective of the Old Testament to talk about Jesus as God and to articulate the belief that the Spirit was part of the Godhead as well. The answer to the plurality language

We do not find the Trinity expressly stated in the OT, nothing like the NT. It *is* there, but it is implicit and a much better contextual solution makes sense here. Rather than talking to himself, God is talking to the **heavenly sons of God** who watched him lay the foundations of the earth. They are the “us” in **vs. 26**. Why? Because sons bear the image of God, as we’ve just seen.

Probably the main reason why a person would have a problem with this, is because they **presuppose that only humans are created in God’s image**. But the Bible never says that. In fact, the sonship of the heavenly beings clearly makes this impossible. Instead, what this verse does is connect us humans directly to the heavenly sons of God as their younger brothers. As Timothy Alberino has, I think rightly, called them, they are *the elder race*. This is precisely what Tolkien was getting at when he talked about the Elves as the

is also *not* the ‘plural of majesty.’ As Joüion-Muraoka notes, ‘The *we* of majesty does not exist in Hebrew’ (Paul Joüion and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* [Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2003], 2:375–76 [par. 114.e]). The plural of majesty does exist for nouns (see Joüion-Muraoka, par. 136.d), but Gen 1:26 is not about the nouns—the issue is the verbal forms. See also John C. Beckman, “*Pluralis Majestatis*: Biblical Hebrew,” *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, vol. 3 (P-Z) (ed. Geoffrey Khan; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 145–46.” **Michael S. Heiser**, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, First Edition (Bellevue, WA: Lexham Press, 2015).

Overall, I think his point is valid. While I take “reading the NT into the OT” far less seriously than he does, we do have to ask if Moses literally had the Trinity in his head as he was writing this, and if so, why is this doctrine that he so clearly understood never expressed as such by him or anyone else in the OT? But the fact is, there is a different explanation that he would certainly have understood.

Eldar race. “According to *The Silmarillion*, the immortal Eldar (“People of the Stars”) were the first and eldest of the children of Ilúvatar (an adaptation of the Hebrew God Yahweh) and are considered to be fairer and wiser than men, their younger siblings.”⁹ It is an obvious metaphor of what we are talking about.

What is the image of God? In the context, it is a function that God’s sons bear. We serve as the image of God by ruling and having dominion. “Image” and “dominion” are in the same verse. It isn’t until the NT where Paul says we are renewed in knowledge (Col 3:10), righteousness, and holiness (Eph 4:24) after the image of God. But knowledge, righteousness, and holiness are not the totality of the image. Rather, they give us the ability to rule and exercise dominion properly, precisely what Adam and Eve did *not* do. As the image is about ruling, and since heavenly sons of God also rule (again “thrones,” “rulers,” “authorities,” etc.), they share the image.

I said that the context also bears this out. When we go to Genesis 3 and we listen to the slithering temptation of the serpent, he tells Eve, “For God doth know that in the day

⁹ Timothy Alberino, *Birthright: The Coming Posthuman Apocalypse and the Usurpation of Adam’s Dominion on Planet Earth* (Bozeman, MT: Alberino Publishing, 2020), n. 4.

ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be *as gods*, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). I quote the KJV here, which followed the Geneva and all older translations, but which many newer translations have as “God.” There’s all the difference in the world between “being as God” and “being as gods.” Think about it. Who can actually be like God? No one.

But **what is the temptation?** It is “**knowing good and evil.**” Later in the Bible, we learn that this means **to make judicial pronouncements** (cf. 1Kg 3:9; etc.), like a judge does, like the sons of God do on the divine council, like Solomon did as king. In fact, Solomon is said to be “**like the Angel of God**” when he does this (cf. 2Sam 14:17). In other words, it is the hallmark of an image-bearer, for only sons and rulers do these sorts of things. That’s exactly what Satan is tempting them with. Of course, Satan’s temptation was that they would make *a wrong decision*, which they did, and plunged humanity into sin from that moment.

What I’m establishing here is that **God has a family**, and this family consists of **heavenly sons and earthly sons**, royalty who carry out dominion, are made in his image, and therefore we are in fact in a relationship to one another—

elder sons and younger sons, both bearers of the image of God, set over different spheres of God's creation.

This then explains why we've been at conflict with one another since the very first chapters of the Bible. You see, **something happened**. When the sons of God saw that God gave to Adam dominion of this amazing jewel of a planet, they became terribly jealous. They wanted it for themselves. So, a plan was hatched by at least one of them, the Serpent, to cause us to fall and to see if God wouldn't just punish humanity for their insurrection and insubordination. And, in fact, that's precisely what happened.

Even more, the Scripture goes on to teach us that **after the Tower of Babel**, for our massive rebellion, again, against God, he gave humanity over to the gods to rule over them. This is what **Deuteronomy 32:7-8** is about. This is what **Psalms 82** is about. This is what **Daniel 7** and **1Kings 22** and **Daniel 4** and many other passages are about. All the ancients knew it, but **their knowledge was perverted** by the very entities that were given charge over them. And humanity was led into terrible darkness, that Apostles were constantly trying to explain to the Gentiles when they gave their Gospel message to them.

For instance, returning to [Paul at Athens](#), he walks around the city and sees that these people are worshiping all these gods. So he finds a statue to an unknown god and starts to tell them about the True God whom they have forgotten. We are his children and in him we “[live and move and have our being](#)” ([Acts 17:28](#)). But, you Greeks are in darkness ([27](#)) and so I want to tell you about Jesus, through whom God will “[judge the world](#)” ([31](#)) (as the *Son* of God and *Son* of man) for he now commands everyone everywhere to repent ([30](#)) and he has proven this all by raising Jesus from the dead ([31](#)).

One major obstacle that some might have to this is that it can sound somewhat like the ancient stories that it was the gods who made us, as if “[Let us make man in our image](#)” means that [the gods are participating](#) in the creation of mankind. Furthermore, the whole “ancient aliens” thing has latched onto this worldview and just shifted it from gods to aliens. We are the “space seed” of aliens. The fact that “Ancient Aliens” on the *History Channel* has been going for 19 seasons now, and the popularity of movies like *Prometheus*, the prequel to *Aliens*, demonstrate how entrenched this has become in popular culture. But remember, the text does not say that the gods or angels

helped create. Rather, God is talking to the group, like saying, “Let’s go out for ice cream.” But just because you offer a group to come and eat pizza together, it doesn’t mean they all pay. In the text, it is only God who creates. In the analogy, it God who is buying. They rest watch in wonder.

The Prodigal Son

It is into all this that we will now turn to **the Prodigal Son parable** and look at an interpretation that many have not considered. By way of review, the story contains **four characters**: the **father**, the **younger son**, the **older son**, and **the servants**. Curiously, the servants are almost never discussed, yet they are there.

The story begins by telling us that a man had **two sons** (**Luke 15:11**). The younger wanted **the father** to give him his inheritance now, so the father obliged and gave both sons their inheritance (**12**). While this does not have an OT linguistic parallel, it certainly has two conceptual ones. First, in Joshua, God gives Israel its inheritance, that is, the land he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. “**Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them**” (**Josh 1:6**).

Then, “Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the lord had spoken to Moses. And Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments” (11:23). This is well-known.

What is lesser known is that this has a corresponding parallel with the heavenly beings. In Deuteronomy 32:8, the Most High gives the nations their *inheritance*, according to the number of *the sons of God*. Conversely, he gives the sons of God their inheritance at the same time, as vs. 9 demonstrates, for the Lord *inherits* Israel. This is what Paul was talking about with the Athenians when he told them that God determined the “allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (Acts 17:26). That’s our inheritance. According to law, when a Father divvies out his inheritance as a gift, the older son receives the double portion (Deut 21:17). This simply shows that there is a relationship in both the Prodigal Son and the OT sons of God—human and heavenly, that exists with inheritances.

Importantly, Israel and the nations receiving their inheritance exactly mirrors the heavenly inheritance of those sons. The humans receive land and a particular the heavenly creature receives the same land. The two are intermixed so that you have a prince of Greece on both a

human and heavenly level (**Dan 10:20**). You have a prince of Persia on both a human and heavenly level (**Dan 10:13**). You have a king of Israel on both a human and heavenly level (**Dan 12:1**). You can't divorce these from one another. They exist together like a man and his shadow.

At any rate, **the younger son** takes everything he is given and goes to a far country where **he squanders it all** (**Luke 15:13**). After a time, he realizes he can't survive, so he humbly returns to his father's house and begs forgiveness (**14-21**). But the father happens to see his son coming home (**20**), and when he was yet far away, he had compassion on him, embraced him and said to his **servants** to bring the best robe and shoes, and the ring of royalty (**22**). He then threw a great feast for his lost son now found (**23-24**).

But **the older son** is also in the story. He's in the field when, coming in for the evening, he **hears music and dancing**. He calls to a servant and asks what these things meant (**25-26**). The servant told him that his brother had come home and his father had killed the fattened calf because he is home safe and sound (**27**). But **the older brother was angry** and refused to go in, so his father came out and entreated him (**28**). Yet, the brother would have none of it saying that he has served faithfully and never disobeyed his

command, yet the father never gave him a young goat to celebrate (29). Yet, “this sons of yours” came, who devoured your property with prostitutes, and you killed the fattened calf for him (30). But the father answered, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (31). “It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found” (32). And here, the parable ends, with no comment on the older brother’s response.

The Interpretation

So what does all this mean? How should we interpret the parable? The history of interpretation has been long and varied. That means, there is a lot of room in the house of the church for coming to our various conclusions. And yet, we can’t just make it mean anything we want.

We might first ask, do the character represent anyone specific? The modern way of reading most parables, perhaps starting with Calvin, has been to de-allegorize them as much as possible. Before this, that’s what almost everyone did. An allegory is a story with a hidden meaning, where persons, places, and events represent something in the real world.

Like when Paul said, “Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women (Sarah and Hagar) are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar” (Gal 4:24). The other is from heavenly Jerusalem, and she is Sarah (26). Many people use allegory to make the text say anything they want to. Calvin wanted to stop fanciful interpretations, and so he stayed at a very basic level. “If human beings, sinful as we are, can generously forgive our children, should we not expect much more from God’s kindness?”¹⁰ This is a fine interpretation, as far as it goes. I have no problem with it whatsoever.¹¹

But even when trying not to allegorize, nearly everyone ends up doing that to one degree or another. Even Calvin did, because he clearly teaches here that the father in the story is God. That’s an allegory. So if that’s true, then why not the rest of the characters?

When you read the story in the immediate context, it seems that the younger brother probably represents the “tax collectors and sinners” who are drawing near to Jesus (Luke 15:1). This would seem, in turn, to make the Pharisees the

¹⁰ Bovon, *Luke 2*, 434.

¹¹ A modern example shows the same basic interpretation. For example, “In the ministry of Jesus, sinners, who in their need draw near, are finding the free and generous love of the heavenly Father” (John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, vol. 35B, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993], 789).

older brother. This would make nearly all of the family, however, Jewish to one degree or another, as Jesus is after all in Judea and Samaria. Perhaps the occasional Gentile could be seen on this interpretation as repenting.

Understanding the problem with this, that Jesus' kingdom family extends beyond Jews, some Church Fathers, like Augustine,¹² said that the **younger man is the Gentiles**, while the **older are the Jews**. But where are the Gentiles in the immediate context? Others often ended up making this parable be entirely about the church where basically no Jews whatsoever were present.¹³ Some said that the younger brother is the Christian who lapsed while the older are Christians who think the church is not made up of sinners. You can start to hear in this how the original context seems to be getting lost.

Now, **Jesus does have** parables that are clearly **allegorical**. In some of them, he tells us as much. For example, in the parable of the weeds Jesus clearly identifies the characters. The one who sows good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world. The good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one. The enemy who sowed

¹² **Augustine**, *Questions of the Gospels* (ed. Migne) English translation by Google, 33 [lb. 15, 11-32].

¹³ A good summary of the history of the church's interpretation of this parable is **Bovon**, 430-38.

them is the devil. The harvest is the end of that age. The reapers are the angels (**Matt 13:37-39**). That's the definition of allegory.

Does this mean that for it to be an allegory, Jesus must tell us explicitly every time? I don't think so. It is very clear that **the three "lost and found" parables** are directed at those who are listening to him and grumbling about him receiving tax collectors and sinners and that they are meant to apply it to themselves and that they are related to each other. If they apply it to themselves, then they see themselves in the parable, and that's an allegory. In light of that, it is interesting to think about the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin. In what I'm about to say, do not think I'm creating an either/or here, for it was Jesus himself who taught us "**on earth as it is in heaven.**" The earthly and heavenly spheres intersect and are not mutually exclusive.

It seems rather obvious that **the shepherd** who searches for the sheep is Jesus. He tells us explicitly who the sheep are. We don't have to guess. The sheep are those who hear his voice and **repent**. Likewise, he tells us who the ninety-

nine are. They are those “righteous persons¹⁴ who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7). But while this clearly would have the Pharisees, sinners, and tax-collectors in the immediate context, it can’t be limited only to them. Nor could it be limited only to Israel as a nation. Curiously, the story itself is not even limited to earth. For Jesus tells us that *heaven* itself rejoices when one sinner repents. Thus, this parable of the lost sheep involves both earth and heaven.

The parable of the lost coin seems to be saying exactly the same thing, and so Jesus does not actually explain any of it, except by adding that “there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (10). So now, he has explicitly introduced angels into the heavenly realm. Why? There are a couple of possibilities. One is that a person living at the time could have easily interpreted “angels” as “sons of God,” for this is what the word often translated in the LXX. In Job 38:7 in the LXX, the “stars” (*astra*) sang and the “angels” (*aggeloi*) praised with a loud voice. In Deut 32:8 in some versions, God divides mankind up according to the number of the “angels.” And so on. Thus, the family is rejoicing. That

¹⁴ “Righteous persons” is simply “righteous” (*dikaiois*) in the Greek. “Persons” is supplied by the ESV.

obviously makes better sense when read with the Prodigal Son.

The other possibility is that the group of angels rejoicing extend beyond the sons of God to other sentient creatures in heavenly places. For while all sons of God are angels in this sense, not all angels are sons of God. As Alberino puts it, “other sentient creatures inhabiting the cosmos who, though citizens of the kingdom, are not the sons of God [perhaps Cherubim, Seraphim, Four Living Creatures, and the rest of the ‘host of heaven’] ... The variety of species among these beings may be as diverse as the animal life on Earth.”¹⁵

Hang with me here. If we put this into the context of the last parable, suddenly, we have an explanation for the “servants” that almost no one bothers to bring up—precisely because they do not have an answer to it. The oldest interpretation of the Prodigal Son is that “the older son [represents] angels who were jealous of the redemption of the human race, represented by the ultimate fate of the younger son.”¹⁶ Cyril, who disagreed, nevertheless confessed, “It is

¹⁵ Alberino, ch. 1.

¹⁶ Bovon, 430. He notes (using the work of German, Spanish, and French scholars) that this is mostly a Gnostic interpretation that used the parable to make the young man correspond to the

the opinion of some that the two sons signify the holy angels and us earth dwellers. The elder one, who lived soberly, represents the company of the holy angels, while the younger and prodigal son is the human race” (Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Luke*, Homily 107).

One way of thinking about this interpretation is that **the younger son represents Adam**, who was originally created in the family of God and placed in the home of God with the sons of God-angels on Mt. Eden. But Adam fell into sin, just like the younger son who squandered his inheritance. Beginning with Adam and continuing to the last person who repents of his race, anyone who returns to his Father’s home is welcomed with open arms by the heavenly Father, for that is why Christ came as one of us to die for our sin and make this restoration of our race to the family of God possible for any whom God chooses.

While that might seem like it is stretching the immediate context, this interpretation makes good sense of why heaven and the angels are rejoicing in the first two parables, why the younger brother tells his father he has sinned against heaven even in the third parable, and it fits into so many others of

fall of humanity or of the soul in the world of matter. But it is not exclusively their interpretation, either in the ancient church or today, for this element of their interpretation is not essential to the view. Rather, it is a Gnostic addition that results from allegorizing the material world.

Jesus' parables that deal with the supernatural, including the devil and the angels. Somehow, we must make sense of the heavenly side of this in our interpretation, and this is rarely done by other interpretations.

This idea leaves open some possibilities for the older brother and the servants, and this is precisely the point, I believe, of Jesus leaving the parable itself open, for Jesus does not in fact tell us how the older brother responds to the father's gesture of mercy and grace towards the younger brother. Different people will respond different ways. Some Pharisees who heard it would have been hardened, but others would have repented. Some heavenly beings who heard it would remain fallen, but others, though perhaps bewildered at what Jesus was doing (for even angels long to look into these things), would have understood and rejoiced. Some Pharisees are children of the devil. Some become children of God by grace. So it all matches together.

Without in any way diminishing the earthly interpretation, some have recently suggested that the older brother is Satan, while the younger is Adam.¹⁷ On this view, the older

¹⁷ Cf., Kirsten Nielsen, *Satan—the Prodigal Son? A Family Problem in the Bible*, Biblical Seminar 50 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). I couldn't get ahold of this book, but one review said, "In the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, Jesus is the younger brother, and his journey to the far country is his incarnation; the elder brother is Satan, or perhaps the Pharisees, or even James, the actual elder brother of Jesus. The elder brother wishes justice, not mercy, just as the

brother does not repent, but stays bitter, getting even angrier at the younger son as every day passes. Another view is that [the old brother is the faithful angels](#).¹⁸ In this one, the older brother understands now what the father is doing and they rejoice, just like they did in the first two parables of the set. A final view is that [the older brother is the sons of God](#). Among them, some are loyal and some are not. Thus, each one could go a different way. Other heavenly beings are others of the host of heaven who help out the Lord in his house, but are not sons.¹⁹

The point is, in any of these views, and remember, this is the oldest view that we know of on the parable, the point that heaven and earth's sons are intersecting is possible to see. And this is something I find very intriguing. For what we see this, suddenly, the Prodigal's Son helps us understand [something about what Jesus is doing with humanity](#).

satan accuses Joshua the high priest in Zechariah 3, the passage by which to interpret Luke 15 intertextually." Robert Karl Gnuse, "[Reviewed Work: Satan—the Prodigal Son? A Family Problem in the Bible \(Biblical Seminar 50\) by Kirsten Nielsen](#)," *CBQ* 61.3 (July 1999): 549-51. The Satan part of this makes sense to me, especially the judicial aspect of the older brother's attitude. Jesus as the younger brother is tougher, given that the son squanders everything in sin. But having not read the book, perhaps the idea is that this is how the Pharisees and others *viewed* Jesus, not how he actually was. Or, perhaps it is that Jesus represents us sinners, identifying with us, but without sin. Another source that agreed with Nielsen is Robin Jarrell, [Fallen Angels and Fallen Women: The Mother of the Son of Man](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 162.

¹⁸ Jonathan Tobias, "[Who is the Older Brother? – or, When was the Prodigal Son Story First Told?](#)" *Second Terrace* (Feb 15, 2014).

¹⁹ This is Alberino's view.

Augustine put this family in terms of **the church** saying that the divine plan was hidden in God from the ages, but “in such a way nonetheless that the manifold wisdom of God would be made known to the principalities and the powers in the heavenly places through the church, because that is where the original church is, into which this church too is to be gathered after the resurrection so that we may be equal to the angels of God” (Augustine, *Gn. Litt.* V.38). “The primary benefit of equality with angels is in fact communion with the good angels, the rejoining of the church into one body, beholding the manifold wisdom of God.”²⁰ So he viewed the church as also including angels, just like we’ve said they are sons. Jesus, in telling this parable, is not only letting the Pharisees and sinners know what he is doing, but the angels and sons of God as well. The parable is truly universal in scope and redemption.

Where he talks about it as “church,” we are talking about it as **family.** It is no accident that we Christians get the privilege of being called **“sons of God”** by faith. In this

²⁰ Elizabeth Kline, *Augustine’s Theology of Angels* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 93. Augustine comes very close to the view where the servants are the angels, but without saying it. For the point he says of the parable is that the older and younger “along with all the holy angels whose equals we shall be in the kingdom of God” (John, ev. Tr. 107.2). As Kline puts it, “The church is wholly complete when all parts of the church reunite, and it is then when we are equal to the angels.”

act, God is adopting us into his heavenly family. It was a position we held by our birthright, but we abdicated our special status when we fell into sin, squandering our inheritance. But God was not satisfied just seeing us be left to ourselves, watching us squander away the great gifts that he gave us. He created us to be his sons. And he ordained the Fall so that in Christ, through the only begotten Son of God, a way might be made for us degenerate wicked rebellious sons to be brought back home, where we belong.

God is uniting his entire creation and family through the faith of his earthly church being united with the loyal angels. In Christ, God is reconciling “to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col 1:20). In Christ, God’s predestined plan of redemption comes in “the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10). The creation itself groans as it awaits the revealing of the sons of God (Rom 8:19).

As just said, the Prodigal Son comes home anyone time a person recognizes and confesses that Jesus alone has made this possible for them. This is about the Glory of the Son of God for what he has done for us. He is the Firstborn Son, the son of preeminence. Faith apprehends this and desires

greatly to praise Jesus for his kindness that would die for us who deserve his wrath for squandering his gifts and welcome us with open arms, putting the royal robe on our backs when we return to the family of God.

Justice demanded that the Father turn his back on the younger son. That's why the older son was so angry. He was acting like the *satan*, the accuser of the heavenly council (see **Job 1:6: 2:1**). Look at what he's done! He demanded justice.

But grace goes beyond justice, when justice is carried out through the punishment of the innocent Son of God. The parable of the Prodigal Son proclaims this message of reconciliation to all who would have it. Be reconciled to God through Christ, and know the joys of adoption as sons, princes, rulers of the kingdom of God, a kingdom that will outlast all the fallen kingdoms of men. A kingdom where all things are being made new in Christ. That kingdom comes to anyone only through faith. Do you believe?

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