

The parable of the Two Mothers: An un hiding reading of the parable of the Prodigal Son

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The parable of the Prodigal Son is traditionally viewed from an androcentric perspective, focusing on the male characters, such as the father and brothers. However, this article suggests that the original listeners may have perceived female characters as present and significant. It briefly explores the roles of the Prodigal's mother and the father's mother, proposing an alternative interpretation. Evidence indicates that a 1st-century audience might have envisioned a parallel narrative, termed 'the Parable of the Two Mothers', within the story. This imagined parallel parable could reflect the high-context understanding of the original hearers. The article aims to reconstruct this proposed parallel parable not only as a potentially imagined narrative within the Prodigal Son but also as a counter-narrative tool. This tool seeks to aid faith communities in addressing gender-based violence (GBV) by offering a narrative device that brings women's voices to the forefront in congregational and social contexts.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The interdisciplinary nature of this article contributes to the debate on the roles and importance of women in the church by investigating the value that women had in the parables of Jesus. Furthermore, this article promotes an inclusive reading of biblical texts aiming to combat the pandemic of GBV in South African communities. By reading women as present in the text, emphasis is given to the voices of women in the Bible and the importance of their representation today. This research is also in line with the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: Gender equality and women empowerment.

Keywords: Prodigal Son; Two Mothers; gender-based violence; parables; counter-narrative; feminism; women; un hiding.

Introduction: Methodology and previous research

This article is based on a realistic reading of the parables. It offers a reading that considers the social contexts and realities of the 1st-century audience of the parables, using the lens of social-scientific criticism (Van Eck 2009:1–12, 2016:3–42). It aims to provide an alternative reading scenario of the parables, one informed by a feminist lens, reading against the grain of the parable, where hidden female characters are brought to the foreground and are 'un hidden' within the narrative. The focus is on highlighting the important and critical roles of women, without whom the parable narratives would not have been possible. The term 'un hiding' is purposefully used to draw attention to the act of historical 'hiding' present in androcentric, patriarchal texts (Van Wyk 2023:2).¹ The parable of the Prodigal Son is no acceptance in this regard.

It should be mentioned that all textual interpretations and exegesis consist of applying some sort of imagining. The term 'imagining' is often purposefully used, instead of 'imagination', to draw attention to the fact that, with the help of social-scientific methodology, the reader or interpreter is not asked to 'imagine' as a means of fabricating a scenario or envision it *ex nihilo*. Rather, social-scientific and historical criticism provides the building blocks for a sense of informed imagining, one where the interpreter is asked to base their understanding of the alternative parable reading within the supplied social and cultural scripts that the text itself implies or might have evoked within the high-context audience of the parables. Malina (1996:42) refers to

¹Van Wyk (2023:1–3) draws attention to the term: 'unhide' as one that draws attention to how these voices are not revealed but rather 'un hidden'. It is both the hidden voice that is un hidden as well as the process which sought to hide those voices historically. Furthermore, because the voices were 'hidden', the voice in its fullness cannot be recovered and is, to some extent, lost to history. That is why 'un hiding' is also an imagining exercise and one that seeks to draw attention to a more inclusive and accurate history where the voices of the hidden are added and considered in historical texts and narratives, although this can admittedly only be done partially at best (Lerner 1987:11).

this as being a ‘considerate reader’ and Brueggemann (2002:16–17) calls it ‘faithful imagination’. This reading, therefore, asks the interpreter to not only partake in imagining the text anew but also an imagining of what images might have been evoked in the minds of the ancient hearers of the parables. The imagining process is not new or foreign to the exegetical and hermeneutical process as scholars such as Brueggemann (2003:7) and Ricoeur (1981: 3–4) remind us that all interpretation utilises imagination to some degree (Kugel 2003:192; Nathan 2014:16; Viljoen 2016:2).²

The parables are, in their very nature, narratives and stories inviting the hearers and readers to imagine the described scenarios play out within the parable’s context. This article will, therefore, take the context of the parables seriously and consider emic social and cultural scripts present within the parable of the Prodigal Son in order to supply an alternative reading scenario, one where two female characters who appear to be absent in the narrative could, in fact, contextually be present in the imaging of the parable’s ancient audience.³

Setting the stage

This section provides a short summary and summation of Du Toit’s (2022a:1–7) work on ‘unhiding’ female characters in the parables, focusing specifically on the parable of the Prodigal Son. This summary is helpful as it raises awareness about the presence and importance of the ‘hidden’ female characters in the parable narrative. It will lay the groundwork for the alternative reading scenario this article proposes, which Du Toit refers to as an unhiding reading.

Women (wives, mothers, daughters, and slaves) played important roles in and around the ancient household; indeed, a household was not considered healthy or functional without them. Therefore, while the parable of the Prodigal Son seems to focus on male characters, it unfolds within (Lk 15:12), away from (Lk 15:13) and towards (Lk 15:20) the house, a space typically associated with, as well as managed and governed by, women. Women actively participated in daily household tasks, food preparation and even management of estates. Women were important characters within households, and it would have been highly likely that the hearers of the parables would have understood this as they shared the same context as the characters in the parable (Du Toit 2022a:1–7; Ferguson 1987:58; Instone-Brewer 2002:5–6; Knust 2011:64; Loader 2012:12, 2013:32–33; Meyers 2003:68; Osiek 1998:300, 2019; Saller 2003:190; Vearncombe 2020:50–51).

²For the importance of imagination as an hermeneutical lens also see Schökel (1988:141), Elisabeth Fox-Genovese (1979:10), Little (1983:28) and Staley (2021).

³The parable of the Prodigal Son is widely and famously known, with the male characters often receiving exegetical attention almost exclusively. However, recent research has provided alternative readings (unhiding readings) informed by the social and cultural scripts present in first-century rural Palestine and known to the high-context, dyadic society that would have heard the parables. These readings focus on unhiding female characters in parable narratives, such as mothers, daughters, slaves, labourers, entertainers, innkeepers and more (Du Toit 2022a, 2022b, 2024).

From the offset of the parable, the presence of a mother and wife is alluded to, as in the very first sentence in Luke 15:11 [ἄνθρωπός τις εἶχεν δύο υἱούς]. Here a mother and wife is implied as a man could not possibly ‘have’ two sons apart from a wife being present to give birth to the children. Additionally, the implied wife and mother, although ‘hidden’ in the narrative, holds significance when considering the Prodigal’s return, his welcoming and his safe arrival at the household. The Prodigal would most likely be at risk when returning, having shamed his father and household through his actions of leaving and demanding his inheritance. The father likely runs to meet his son, as the parable describes, to save his life and place him under his protection. However, the first transgression of the son, taking his inheritance and leaving, would have to be forgiven by the father prior to the Prodigal’s return. The father would have to have had a change of heart. This is somewhat alluded to in Luke 15:20 where the father ‘feels compassion’ upon seeing his son (Buttrick 2000:203; Snodgrass 2008:126).

The imagined ‘hidden’ mother would, therefore, have been understood to have played a role in the father’s change of heart as it was known that mothers often played crucial roles in mediation between family members in cases of inheritance. They kept the honour and structure of the household intact by reconciling conflicting parties, most commonly inheritance conflicts between fathers and sons; the very same scenario that plays out in this parable. This suggests the hidden mother’s potential influence in this pivotal point in the narrative where her son is welcomed back and her possible part in the father’s change of heart (Du Toit 2022a:1–5; Osiek 2008:333; Rohrbaugh 1997:147). It is likely then that, during the time of the son’s absence from the house, the ‘hidden’ mother enacted her motherly and wifely responsibilities by acting as mediator for her absent son, changing the heart of the father thereby allowing the Prodigal back into the household.⁴

This alternative reading invites a paradigm shift in interpreting this parable, one where the father’s or the son’s actions are not viewed in isolation. They most certainly unfolded within a family dynamic influenced by the Prodigal’s mother as well as the ‘hidden’ presence of other female characters managing the household: The feast does not merely appear at the father’s command but is the culmination of women’s ‘hidden’ labour.⁵ Even the son’s return could be reimagined as a homecoming, not just to his

⁴The BGU III 846 papyrus, a letter dated between 127 and 126 BCE about a prodigal son, details how the son pleads for reconciliation with his mother [μήτηρ, δ(ι) ἀλόγητι μοι, *author’s own emphasis*] after squandering his resources. The son acknowledges his mistakes to his mother, admitting: ‘I know that I have sinned’ [οἶδα ὅτι ἠμάρτηκα, *author’s own emphasis*] (in Kloppenborg 2008:190). In some respects, Luke 15:18 mirrors the structure of BGU III 846, with the son addressing his parent (in Lk 15:18, it is the father) and then confessing his sin [πάτερ, ἡμάρτων εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ ἐνώπιόν σου, *author’s own emphasis*]. While there may not be a direct link between the papyrus and the biblical parable, the text offers an intriguing alternative viewpoint, providing readers with a different perspective from the first century that modern readers might overlook.

⁵See Du Toit (2022a, 2022b, 2024) for a detailed account of the roles of various women and their importance within the typical social scripts present within the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Friend at Midnight and the Good Samaritan. These women included female slaves, farm labourers, entertainers, musicians, hostesses and food preparers who would all be present, but hidden, in the narrative.

father, but to the warmth and embrace of his mother,⁶ the house she has prepared for him, and the hidden women who kept the household functioning and prepared the feast on his return (Du Toit 2022a:1–7).

Such a reinterpretation does not diminish the existing narrative but enriches it by acknowledging the hidden presence and agency of the female characters in this narrative. It urges the reader to move beyond a superficial reading and embrace the cultural context that breathes life into the parable. By acknowledging the work and influence of women, we gain a deeper understanding of the parable's message of forgiveness, compassion, and the significance of the hidden and undervalued characters shaping perceptions of family and home.

The parable of the Two Mothers

It should be clear that, for the modern reader of the parable, female characters are 'hidden' in the androcentric, patriarchal textual narrative, yet could be imagined to be present for the high-context, 1st-century audience as 'background characters' and 'supporting cast'.⁷ Nevertheless, they played an important narrative function as the parable could not play out in the same way without their 'hidden' actions. There is, however, a fascinating possible relationship not yet explored: That of the 'hidden' mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in the Prodigal's narrative. To better understand this relationship, it is important to first understand the importance of a mother's relationship with her son in the ancient Mediterranean (Balch & Osiek 1997; [author's own emphasis]):

This bond between mother and son was '[o]ne of the closest and most conflicted relationships in Mediterranean culture...each will defend the interests of the other against others, especially father and daughter-in-laws. (p. 42)

This close relationship continued into marriage, with sons often having closer familial ties with their mothers than with their wives (Balch & Osiek 1997:43).⁸ As a point of interest, this would also mean that the Prodigal's father in the parable would have had a stronger relationship with his mother than with his 'hidden' wife (already mentioned and discussed in the 'Setting the stage' section), although it is

6. In Rembrandt's famous painting: *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, art commentators and historians have noted that the hands of the Prodigal's father in the painting depict both masculine and feminine elements as one hand looks to be that of a man's, and the other that of a woman's. This represents Rembrandt's interpretation of the son being welcomed by both a fathering and mothering presence (Kappe 2023).

7. These roles that women portray are to be seen in relation to Lerner's (1987:11–14) understanding of history as a play and patriarchy assigning all the leading roles and important casting and writing duties exclusively to men. This left women in supporting roles, still critically important and assisting in the narrative's very outcome and message, however, seldom mentioned or remembered.

8. After marriage, wives were kept at the periphery of their husband's family and was only considered to be fully part of the household once they have produced a child. In fact, a girl [παρθένος] was not considered to be a woman [γυνή] unless she gives birth, preferably to a son (Ebeling 2010:115; King 2016:23). This formed a very strong link between mothers and their children, one that would remain well into adulthood (Peristiany 1976:14). Children were an important point of honour of the household as they would not only continue the family name and increase the honour that the family acquired, they would also look after their parents in their old age (Strange 1996:5). This meant that the Prodigal's father would have an obligation to look after his own father and mother should they still be alive. They would most likely live in the same house, as this house would have been the father's childhood home.

conceivable that his mother might not have been alive in the narrative given the high mortality rates in the 1st century. However, if the father's mother was still alive, she would most likely be living with them in the house on the estate, and she would be another woman who is 'hidden' in this parable. In fact, should the father's mother (the Prodigal's grandmother) be alive and living in the house, that very house would most likely have been the father's childhood home where he grew up, with his wife (the Prodigal's mother) only joining the household upon marriage. Furthermore, the father's mother would have had a very real stake, not only in the property and the affairs of the household but also in the welfare and protection of her son (the Prodigal's father) as he would be the one to ensure that she would be cared for in her old age (Katzoff 2007:545–575; Huebner 2017:14).⁹

Mothers were suspicious and distrustful of daughters-in-law as they presented a threat to the important mother–son relationship. A mother-in-law was suspicious of her daughter-in-law, although initially kept at the periphery of her new family,¹⁰ as she could provide her husband with a son and could have influence and sway over her husband and the household. Similarly, a daughter-in-law was weary of her mother-in-law, as she would be aware of the strong relationship between her husband and his mother. This could jeopardise a daughter-in-law's position and security in her household, and even influence the security of her children, including her son.

The relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is so volatile that Terence (*Hec.* 198–204) uses this relationship to express his confusion at the actions of women (in Bellemore & Ryan 2018):

And so with one mind-set all mothers-in-law, all daughters-in-law hate each other ... Their keenness in obstructing their husbands is also the same, as is their obstinacy, and they all seem to me to have been trained in malice at the same school: if there is such a 'school', I'm sufficiently convinced my wife is headmistress. (p. 76)

Undoubtedly, there would also be dynamics at play between the 'hidden' mother of the Prodigal and the 'hidden' mother of the Prodigal's father. Furthermore, the same strong and important mother–son relationship would apply to both of these mothers and their respective sons. The relationship between son and mother was a very important one in the 1st-century Mediterranean, especially in the context of this

9. An example of the stake that a mother had in the property of her son, and the importance of a strong mutual relationship between mother and son, can be seen in the account of Babatha. Babatha's narrative is found in *P. Yadin* 21 and its mirror text *P. Yadin* 22, also called *P. Babatha* or the Babatha archive. Her husband had died and Babatha had claims against the estate, most notably her own dowry; however, Babatha used first-century Jewish law to invoke her right to self-help, which was a common practice.

10. A newly married wife would only be kept on the margins of her new household until she produced a child, preferably a son. Thereafter she would be accepted and welcomed into her new household. This made a mother's relationship with her son crucial as it was the relationship that granted her both family acceptance and motherly status (Loader 2012:102; Stambaugh & Balch 1986:84; Treggiari 2003:175).

parable where, after the Prodigal leaves, he might be considered lost to his mother. This would cause great anxiety to the Prodigal's mother as she might lose her most valuable relationship (Peristiany 1976):

If bearing a son is likened to the growing of roots in one's own home, this departure, especially his premature departure after a quarrel with his father, is responsible for the sentiment of intense insecurity. A mother is thus prepared to make any sacrifice in order not to lose him. (p. 14)

If both these 'hidden' women (the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law) are indeed imagined to be present as this alternative reading scenario suggests, both the Prodigal and the Prodigal's father would be understood as critically important characters to their respective 'hidden' mothers. A scenario could be imagined within the household, where the Prodigal's mother, who would most likely have attempted to reconcile her husband with her son, was perhaps opposed by her mother-in-law in this endeavour. Seeing that the father's honour was at stake and, in effect, challenged by the Prodigal's departure, the mother-in-law would have likely wanted to protect her son and his honour and in so doing protect her security and place within the household. This would mean the father needed to protect his honour and reject the Prodigal upon his return, an act that could jeopardise the Prodigal's mother's place in the household as well as the Prodigal's very life. However, we know that the narrative does not happen in this way and the father embraces and welcomes his son, perhaps hinting that he did not listen to his own mother, but rather followed the advice of his wife.

An alternative scenario could also be possible one where both mothers (the Prodigal's mother and her mother-in-law) 'teamed up' as mediators to persuade the father to reconcile with his son. This might be the more likely scenario if the book of Ruth is to be considered as a case study for the relationship between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law's relationship.¹¹ The hearers of this parable could have imagined either one of these surprising scenarios between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law; either working together to 'save' the prodigal, thereby overcoming the normative understanding of a mother that is always in competition with her daughter-in-law; or the father listens to his wife instead of his mother, choosing to reconcile with his son which might mean that he had a stronger relationship with his wife than with his mother. Both of the two possible scenarios would present an element of surprise to the audience, which creates a type of parable within the parable (Plummer 2009:8-9; Van Eck 2009:317).

11. Ruth and Naomi seem to have a very close relationship and work together to survive. Moreover, Ruth is praised for her loyalty to her mother-in-law (Rt 2:11), abandoning her own mother and father to travel with Naomi to Bethlehem. Ruth also continuously returns to Naomi in the narrative, reporting back on her day and receiving important information and advice from her mother-in-law. At the end of the narrative, both Ruth and Naomi are welcomed into Boas' home and accepted as part of his household. Interestingly, the final verses of Ruth describe the close relationship Naomi shares with one of Ruth's children, Obed, with the women of the village even exclaiming 'Naomi has a Son', even though Obed is the son of Ruth and Boas. It should be mentioned that the narrative of Ruth is an exceptional case of a daughter-in-law choosing to follow her mother-in-law after the death of her husband and does not play out in a household setting similar to that of the Prodigal Son.

To the first listeners of this parable, who were most likely also mothers and daughters-in-law, and familiar with these cultural norms, the hidden narrative within the parable may have brought to mind images of their own households or those they were familiar with. Especially, the female hearers of this parable, who might have experienced similar situations in their households as the parables do tend to reflect everyday life in 1st-century Palestine. Parables also contain a sense of surprise and unexpected twists, and in this article's proposed, 'Parable of the Two Mothers', an ending is supplied where two traditionally opposing women work together to save a lost son (or grandson) and ensure his welcome arrival into the household, which would have been very surprising indeed.

Hidden voices, hidden violence

This article presented an alternative reading scenario that imagines women as active and important agents in the parable of the Prodigal Son. This is a parable with many 'hidden' female characters within its narrative. Lives and relationships are 'hidden' by the text but also 'hidden' by androcentric, patriarchal constructs. The parable is decidedly directed and focussed on the house, the departure away from it, the return to it and the feast inside it. Within the construction of the parable of the Two Mothers, this research also aims to ask: what is going on inside the house? Who don't we see or hear? What isn't told to us? Who isn't heard? Who is hidden?

These are the exact questions that should be asked when addressing gender-based violence (GBV). What is going on inside houses? Who do we not hear or see? The answer most often is, unfortunately, women. With South Africa's shocking GBV statistics,¹² it seems clear that strategies from all sectors of society should be considered to end this pandemic.¹³ Biblical scholarship is no exception; however, how can interpretations of the parables in the Bible help combat GBV and Intimate Partner Violence?

The Bible, and how it is interpreted, is frequently cited as a key reason for GBV within religious communities in South Africa. Many faith communities and churches favour a patriarchal understanding of the Bible, viewing it as

12. Although this article will primarily focus on the South African context, it should be noted that GBV is not only a South African crisis. Many incidents occur and are frequent around the world. These incidents of GBV follow the same trend that will be discussed in this article of using biblical interpretation to justify acts of abuse. Globally, there are 'many families in the church in which husbands, who frequently use the Bible to justify their actions, abuse their wives. The women in these varied scenarios often believe that they deserve such treatment and that the Bible supports it' (Hack 2017:23).

13. A popular biblical interpretation that perpetuates GBV and patriarchy is the theological understanding, informed by religiously ascribed gender and social norms, that to divorce is a sin and partners should suffer the abuse of their spouses rather than separate from them (Buqa 2022:2). Deeply ingrained cultural and religious expectations within certain communities require that wives obey their husbands and uphold traditional views on marriage. This can significantly delay, or prevent, survivors from leaving abusive partners, even when they are aware of their religious and civil right to divorce. The complex interplay of cultural and religious norms creates significant barriers for victims seeking to escape abusive relationships. In some cases, deeply held religious beliefs not only discourage divorce but also prevent survivors from acknowledging the abuse itself (Pertek et al. 2023:7). Moreover, verses such as 1 Timothy 2:11-14 are used to deprive women from leadership roles within faith communities and churches as well as establish a wife's subservience to her husband (Schoeffel, Boodoosingh & Percival 2018:22).

unquestionable and the literal word of God (Buqa 2022:2–6; Dlamini 2023:4). This reinforces a male-dominated hierarchy seen as divinely ordained by certain scriptures (Pillay 2013:64). South African churches are often male-controlled, perpetuating the idea that patriarchy is divinely sanctioned by the Bible. This interpretation is used to justify and maintain patriarchal structures, including stereotypical gender roles and ideologies passed down across generations. Biblical interpretation is often used to shape family values within faith communities, and it is frequently argued that androcentric, patriarchal values are restrictive and promote harmful gender expectations. This, in turn, is believed to contribute to GBV (Dlamini 2023:4).

It should be noted that ‘the whole Bible can be accused of causing havoc in Africa when it comes to GBV...the Bible still holds tremendous influence in Christian practice in southern Africa. It is, therefore, important for scholars to rethink Bible interpretation for social transformation including such issues as GBV’ (Togarasei 2021:127). This is especially important because many South African women believe the Bible condones violence against them, and churches are not doing enough to fight GBV or create safe spaces (Hendriks 2012:39). The interpretation of biblical texts holds significant power and potential, especially considering these widespread beliefs.

A more accurate and inclusive reading of the Bible, including the parables – as proposed in this article – can positively impact how faith communities understand the text and the role of women within it and assist in developing a new hermeneutical lens. Such a reading asks the reader, and the faith communities participating in this reading, to imagine women as present and important in narratives. This is an important step in asking questions about hidden women within faith communities and churches in South Africa while cultivating a culture of ‘unhiding’ the experiences and presence of women, hearing their voices and understanding their roles as valuable. In turn creating counter-narratives to dominant, patriarchal structures that continue to hide the voices of women even today. Furthermore, this reading also provides a way for women to read themselves as active and important characters inside parable narratives, ‘unhidden’ and valuable.

By ‘unhiding’ the voices of women that have been historically silenced within biblical narratives, both women within parables and women within faith communities might be ‘unhidden’. This approach to interpreting the parables, focussing on previously ‘hidden’ voices, encourages the understanding of women’s presence and voices as crucial and valuable to both the parable narratives and contemporary faith communities and aims to contribute to ‘unhiding’ the voices that are hidden even today.

Conclusion

This article proposes a novel interpretation of the parable of the Prodigal Son, focussing on the ‘hidden’ female characters

and their influence within the narrative. By employing a realistic reading and social-scientific approach, this article argues that the parable likely included various female characters whose presence and contributions would have been understood and imagined by the first hearers of the parable. This approach further highlights the significance of the mother of the Prodigal Son and her mother-in-law in the parable as possible ‘hidden’ female characters within the household. It explores the complex dynamics between these two women and the potential impact they had on the narrative’s events.

Furthermore, this article delves into the parable’s broader societal context, drawing parallels between the parable’s hidden female characters and the contemporary issue of GBV in South Africa. It emphasises the importance of critically examining biblical interpretations that could contribute to harmful gender norms and exegetical practices. It also advocates for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of the text, empowering women and enabling them to relate to parable narratives and challenge GBV.

The parable of the Two Mothers encourages a more inclusive reading of the parables, enriching its message and fostering a more thorough understanding of the important roles women played within the parable narratives and also their importance within South African faith communities today.

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Data availability

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