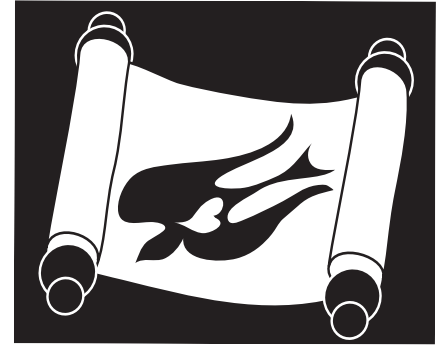


# Archaeology of the Word



Traditional Jewish methods of Bible study for Christians  
*The Jewish biblical tradition is a rich source of insight and learning for Christians. This conviction was stated at Vatican II and has been reaffirmed in church statements down to our own day. Jewish approaches to the bible, such as those below, put us in touch with a tradition that was dear to the heart of Jesus, himself a Jew. Such methods, which have been honed over thousands of years via oral and written traditions, offer interpretative tools which are new to most Christians.*

## Archaeology of the Word

Excavation of a biblical text is like the work of an archaeologist digging into the ground. Clues on the 'surface' of the text direct the reader to a spot to 'dig'. As we dig we undertake a work of discovery, finding layers of meaning beneath the plain or literal meaning of the text. What are some of these clues? The examples below are taken from the *Akedah*, the Torah portion that tells the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22:1-19.

**Repetition.** The phrase 'they went on together' in v.6 is repeated in v.8. To what is the author trying to draw our attention by this repetition?

**Use of numbers in the text.** 'On the third day...' is mentioned in v.4. What might be the significance of this day being mentioned by number?

**Questions** in the text are almost always meant to be answered by the reader. '...but where is the lamb for the offering-up?' In what way do I find myself asking a question like Isaac's in my own life? I identify with the questioner in the text.

**Names** can hold meanings which affect the interpretation of the text. The name 'Akedah' is the word for 'binding' in Hebrew. When we know that the binding of the sacrificial lamb was essential for the sacrifice to be carried out cleanly and successfully,

how does this knowledge affect our understanding of the text as a whole?

**Structure.** The *Akedah* finishes in v.19, just before the death of Sarah which is mentioned 7 verses later. What significance might we find in the proximity of the two stories?

**Puzzling words, phrases, passages.** 'Avraham...saddled his donkey,... he split wood for the offering-up...' (v.3) These phrases puzzled the sages. Abraham was a man of wealth, with servants. Why would he be doing the manual work himself?

**Times.** 'Avraham started-early in the morning' (v.3). Why the early start? Why might the time of day be noteworthy?

**Rhythm.** With the help of Hebrew-sensitive translations, we can find that the poetic rhythm of the text contributes to interpretation. In the *Akedah*, note the steady, almost robotic rhythm of Avraham's actions as he goes about a terrifying activity. What can we make of this?

**Absence.** Absence can also act as a clue. E.g., Abraham is a fearless negotiator in so many other Genesis texts, yet here he is silent and unquestioning. Why?

**Echoes of other passages, cross-references.** Compare the triplet in 22:1 with a similar triplet in Gen 12:1.

'Jewish biblical scholarship in all its richness, from its origins in antiquity down to the present day, is an asset of the highest value for the exegesis of both Testaments, provided that it be used with discretion.'

- Pontifical Biblical Commission,  
*Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1995, IC.



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# The Prodigal 1

Here we model some steps in the excavation of the Word, starting with one of the textual 'clues' from Jewish biblical interpretative methods. Our passage of focus is the Parable of the Prodigal Son (or the Two Brothers), Luke 15:11-32. This is a key text for Christians in teaching the reconciling power of Christ's death on the cross. Yet, as we shall see, we need Jewish perspectives to appreciate the text. Begin by reading the text aloud, in pairs (in havrutah), noting your existing thoughts/reactions. Now: let's find a spot to dig...

## Clue: Absence

**Do we notice anything interesting about what is NOT said in the text? Any unusual omissions? Any key characters who appear to be absent?**

E.g., Where is the wife and mother in this familial drama? Do you notice that all the characters are male?

Why is the father so silent in the face of the younger son's rebellious behavior? Such an affront to paternal dignity and authority would warrant a serious reprimand. The whole village would be aware of this and would support such a reprimand. Why is the father unprotesting before his son's demands?

## Why?

In the tradition of Jewish sages we can ponder and imaginatively discuss such questions. Surely the absence is for a reason. What hidden meaning can we uncover? In *havrutah*, imaginatively probe and question the text.

E.g., Is the father grieving the death of his wife? Does this deep personal loss make another relational loss seem unbearable? Is that why he is going to extraordinary lengths to prevent complete alienation from his son? Has the experience of suffering opened up new depths of compassion within himself?

## What the rabbis discussed

When the wound is large, and we don't have the resources to acquire the proper medical attention, we are dependent on the freely-given compassion of the doctor (God) to heal without self-interest.

Has the father experienced great mercy (from God, others) in his own woundedness? Is this the experience he is moved to share with his sons? Has his ordeal

desensitized him from the usual constraints of social expectation, custom, prestige? He knows what truly matters, and cares not if he appears foolish in the eyes of the village.

## What new light is shed on the text by interpretations like these?

Does the all-male cast of this parable present a particular challenge to a male audience? Here father-son love takes priority over money, status, power, law, custom.

## What new questions are raised about the characters?

When we start to speculate as to the possible relational complexities 'behind the scenes' of this family saga, how does this affect our view of the characters and therefore our grasp of the parable's teaching?

## Patristic links

What did the Church Fathers have to say about this parable?

## Interactive

Write your own *midrash* that expresses the father's aloneness, perhaps his circumstances as a widower.

Ponder Rembrandt's painting: The Return of the Prodigal Son. In particular consider the two hands of the father, one masculine, one feminine. (See [www.biblical-art.com](http://www.biblical-art.com))

## Survey the scene

Having emerged from your excavation, take stock of your findings. In what way has my appreciation of the text deepened? How has my understanding of discipleship been enlarged?

## Continue looking for clues

What other clues of absence can you find in this text? Explore them.



## From the Old Testament

Have mercy on me, O God,  
in your goodness; in the greatness of  
your compassion wipe out my offense.

(Psalm 51:1-3)

## From rabbinic teachings

With whom may David [in his prayer of repentance, Ps.51] be compared? With a man who had a wound on his hand. The physician said, 'You cannot be treated. The wound is large, but the money you have is little.' The man said, 'I beg of you, take all the money that I have here, and as for the rest, let it come from you. Have mercy upon me, have compassion upon me.'

\*\*\*\*

Try to prevent alienation of inheritance, even from a bad son to a good son, because one never knows what issue will come from the bad son...

(See Bialik and Ravnitzky,  
*The Book of Legends*, #206, p.557  
and #261, p.637 respectively.)

## From a Church Father's commentary on the Prodigal

"He fell on his neck and kissed him." This is how the father judges and corrects his wayward son and gives him not beatings but kisses. The power of love overlooked the transgressions. The father redeemed the sins of his son by his kiss, and covered them by his embrace, in order not to expose the crimes or humiliate the son. The father so healed the son's wounds as not to leave a scar or blemish upon him. "Blessed are they," says Scripture "whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered."

(Peter Chrysologus, SERMON 3.35)

# The Prodigal 2

Archaeology of the Word

Here we model some steps in the excavation of the Word, starting with one of the textual 'clues' from Jewish biblical interpretative methods. Our passage of focus is the Parable of the Prodigal Son (or the Two Brothers), Luke 15:11-32. This is a key text for Christians in teaching the reconciling power of Christ's death on the cross. Yet, as we shall see we need Jewish perspectives to appreciate the text. Begin by reading the text aloud, in pairs (in havrutah), noting your existing thoughts/reactions. Now: let's find a spot to dig...



## Clue: Repetition

### Where in the text do we find repetition?

The son rehearses his 'repentance' speech in vv.18-19 before repeating most of it in v.21.

The father's display of outgoing, proactive, unconditional forgiveness towards the younger prodigal son is repeated the same day towards the bitter older son.

The older son's behavior is very different to the younger... or is it? In the older son's confrontation with his father (vv.29-30) do we detect a repeat of the attitudes displayed in the younger's original confrontation (v.12)?

### Why these repetitions?

The Jewish sages pondered and discussed recurring images, words, phrases. Surely the text repeats itself for a reason! E.g., Why do we need two displays of the father's forgiveness? Isn't the first example clear enough? What hidden meaning can we uncover? In *havrutah* (pairs), ask questions of the text.

### Rabbinic-like discussion:

The prodigal's return is prompted by regret but not true repentance. He thinks he has broken a law; he fails to see that he has broken his father's heart. It isn't until he sees the father's extraordinary example of outreaching love that begins to understand. His father's concern is not for the money lost but the relationship lost. He accepts the father's reconciling love and is restored to sonship.

The older brother's concern is also for law. He cannot rejoice with his father. He sees his father humiliating himself by this display of apparent weakness; he resents the father's festive spending

of what will one day be his inheritance; he demands reward for his productive output. He wants reward and punishment as dictated by social custom, not sonship.

### What new light does this interpretation shed on the text?

Both sons commit a sin against a relationship, expressed in different ways. The father forgives twice, for there are two acts of rebellion. The superabundance of our heavenly Father's love is underscored.

### What new questions does it raise about the characters?

In Hebrew biblical literature the younger son is traditionally the favored one. Is this true or not of this parable?

How will the older brother respond to the Father's gesture of reconciliation?

The complex, dysfunctional relationships of this little family are exposed.

### Interactive

Dramatic role play: with your *havrutah* partner, complete the undisclosed final scene of the parable.

If you were writing a song inspired by this parable, what would be the sung refrain?

### Patristic links

How did patristic commentators deal with this text?

### Survey the scene

Having emerged from your excavation, take stock of your findings. How has my appreciation of the text deepened?

### Continue looking for clues

What other clues of repetition can you find in this text? Go back and explore them.

## A Midrash sample

In a *midrash* on the Song of Songs we read: "Open to me, my sister". R. Issi said: God says to the Israelites, open to me, my children, the gate of repentance as minutely as the eye of a needle, and I will open for you gates wide enough for carriages and wagons to enter through them" (Cant. Rabbah).

(See Bialik and Ravnitzky, *The Book of Legends*, #206, p.557)

## Old Testament links

I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners shall return to you.

(Psalm 51:15)

## A sample from early Christian hymnography

Offering his right hand the Compassionate raised the fallen son, Likewise he supported the other who was standing.

The one who was laid low he raised up in his compassion,

While he would in no way allow the one who stood to fall.

The one in poverty he enriches,

The one in wealth he would not allow to become poor, but saved them all.

(St Romanos, 6th century C.E., *Kontakion on the Profligate Son*, stanza 15)

# The Prodigal 3

Archaeology of the Word

Here we model some steps in the excavation of the Word, starting with one of the textual 'clues' from Jewish biblical interpretative methods. Our passage of focus is the Parable of the Prodigal Son (or the Two Brothers), Luke 15:11-32. This is a key text for Christians in teaching the reconciling power of Christ's death on the cross. Yet, as we shall see we need Jewish perspectives to appreciate the text. Begin by reading the text aloud, in pairs (in havrutah), noting your existing thoughts/reactions. Now: let's find a spot to dig...



## Clue: Puzzling/surprising elements

### Do we notice anything odd, unusual, surprising in the story?

E.g., In v.20 the Father *runs*, actually *races*, to greet his son. The Greek word used here, *dramon*, is the technical term for footraces in the stadium. What is odd here? A man of his age and position would never run; rather he always *walks* in a slow and dignified fashion.

### Why?

Why does the storyteller have the father running? Wouldn't the reconciliation be just as complete if he had waited for the son to reach the father? Of what value to the parable teaching is the word *dramon*?

### Rabbinic-like discussion:

The running suggests an urgency in the father's response. His love is such that he can't wait to reach his son.

Some commentators speculate that by running to greet the son while still at a distance, the father saves the son from undergoing the humiliating walk through the village, including the taunts of children which typically followed a wayward beggar.

### What new light is shed on the text by interpretations like these?

E.g., the salvation held out by the father is more readily apparent. Imagine the running father... robes flapping, lower legs exposed, children giggling, the lack of dignity... he becomes the object of ridicule in place of his son.

### What new questions are raised about the characters?

The father's unprecedented display of emotion at the end of the story seems at odds with his silent surrender to the son's demands at the start. What's going on here?

## Patristic links

How did the early Church Fathers interpret the father's running? E.g., see (at right) Ambrose's address to catechumens, those preparing for baptism.

### Interactive (Refer to S8)

Engage in an exercise of 'handmade midrash' (Milgrom).

Write your own *midrash* that expresses the father's thoughts as he spots his son in the distance and runs towards him.

How would you script this scene for theatre? (See Kenneth Bailey's one act play in *The Cross and The Prodigal* - refer to bilbligraphy. An excerpt is available in S8.)

### Survey the scene

Having emerged from your excavation, take stock of your findings. In what way has my appreciation of the text deepened? How is my perspective different? What new questions are raised for me about the life of faith and the path of discipleship? E.g., Do I really believe that there is an urgency about God's love for me? Is my image of God a condescending judge or a racing father?

### Continue looking for clues

What other clues relating to unusual images or phrases can you find in this text? Go back and explore them, following a similar method to that practiced here.

## From the Jewish sources

"A king had a son who had gone astray from his father a journey of 100 days. His friends said to him, 'Return to your father'; he said: 'I cannot.' Then his father sent word to say, 'Return as far as you can, and I will come to you the rest of the way.' So God says, 'Return to me, and I will return to you' (Mal.3:7)"

(Pesikta Raba)

Ben Azzai said, Run to [the fulfilment of even] a slight precept as [thou wouldst to fulfil] a grave one, and flee from transgression, for one good deed draws another good deed [in its wake], and one transgression draws another transgression [in its train]...

(Mishnah Abot, 4,2)

"Let the wicked one leave his way and the sinful man his thoughts; let him return to HaShem and He will show him mercy; [return] to our God for He is abundantly forgiving."

(Isaiah 55:7)

## A Christian patristic source

Christ chooses those who stand. Rise and run to the church. Here is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He who hears you pondering in the secret places of the mind runs to you. When you are still far away, he sees you and runs to you. He sees in your heart. He runs, perhaps someone may hinder, and he embraces you. His foreknowledge is in the running, his mercy in the embrace and the disposition of fatherly love. He falls on your neck to raise one prostrate and burdened with sins and bring back one turned aside to the earthly toward heaven.

(Ambrose: *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*

7.229-30.33)