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Revisiting the Parable of the Prodigal Son for Decolonization: Luke's Reconfiguration of *Oikos* in 15:11-32

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Abstract

The early Christian Gospels' most radical construction of the household (*oikos*) helps to create extensive opportunities and freedoms over and against the constraints of the Roman Empire. In particular, the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) provides a transformative awareness of living and interacting under the Empire and writes its empowering effects into the present context of grassroots people. The *paterfamilias* of the parable is crossing the boundary of colonial *oikos* which has been least traversed. While going back and forth interacting with his sons, the *paterfamilias* erases the borderline and releases *oikos* from the economic, social, and cultural constructions of colonial power. Jesus' *oikos* emerges not from a moral regarding good economic discipline and earnings, but rather from real needs and real community under the mercy and grace of a God who levels all boundaries: "every valley" and "every mountain." This essay is a postcolonial reading of the Parable of the Prodigal Son from an East Asian perspective.

Keywords

Luke, household, prodigal, parable, empire

As a student of early Christianity, born and bred in South Korea and now living in the southern US as a resident alien, I recognize that hybridity becomes more significant in the face of multi-cultural realities.[1] From this perspective, which has received limited attention thus far, I read the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In the mid-20th century, several

[1)] This essay originated as a paper presented to the Asian and Asian American Hermeneutics Section of the 2005 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

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commentators argued that the parables of Luke 15, as the *Evangelium in Evangelio,* relate to the topics of sin, repentance, grace, joy and sonship.[2] Subsequent studies have become more concerned with the stylistic and cultural considerations of the parables.[3] However, it has rarely been noted that Luke's parables embrace and transform "*oikos*" discourse over and against the colonial background. By telling the parables of Jesus, Luke reconstructs *oikos* and effects a blurring of its boundary. He shows how the outside and inside of *oikos* are interwoven and generate another space of meaning. Hence, if we accept Homi K. Bhabha's notion of hybridity, this kind of in-between space soon produces antagonism in the political process, and becomes an unpredictable force for political representation.[4] In such a context, Luke's *oikos* becomes the ground on which contemporary debates about personal identities and communities can be examined.

My reading of the parables arises from the way that colonial relations still determine peoples' lives and consciousness. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son in particular, the colonial system of oppression is

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2) W.F. Arndt, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), p. 350; G.V. Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables* (London: SPCK, 1964); J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

3) Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* (Eerdmans: Michigan, 1983). Also of relevance are Bailey's other books: *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992) and *Jacob and the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story* (InterVarsity Press, 2003). See also Stephen C. Barton, "Parables on God's Love and Forgiveness (Luke 15:1-7//Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:8-32)," in Richard N. Longenecker (ed.), *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 199-216.

4) Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), "Introduction: Narrating the Nation" in *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 4; there are, of course, diverse modalities of hybridity, such as "forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political cooperation, social conformism, cultural mimicry, and creating transcendence." See E. Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 110. Nevertheless, Bhabha has to be credited with noting that the colonial discourse is never transmitted perfectly to the natives but is always transformed by a process of translation, indigenization and contextualization. He states that the colonial presence is "always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference." See H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 107. The gap left by this "split" in colonial discourse is a site for resistance.

represented by dichotomous forms, such as 'haves' and 'have-nots,' honor and shame, men and women. In order to disclose what is really at stake in such dichotomies, and to rethink Luke's relationship to the Empire, there is a need to reconstruct the submerged voices implied in the parables. The question is whether Luke fosters liberating, dissident consciousness or whether his rhetoric of power strengthens the colonial relations of kyriarchy.[5] With that in mind, a hermeneutics of ideological suspicion will be employed in order to understand Luke's socio-historical context and the rhetorical constructions of his parable. By means of a postcolonial analysis, I will engage with the voices of the colonial subjects who struggle against oppressive imperial regulation for their very survival, even below the subsistence level. In the presence of destructive social, economic, and cultural formations and discourses, I will also highlight the voice of the real reader—in my case, that of an East Asian postcolonial reader. This sort of dialogical imagination and engagement democratizes the whole process so that it becomes a set of discursive reflections and conscientizations of the manifold and highly complex dimensions of human identity.[6]

Luke's *Oikos* Discourse

In the Roman Empire, while most indigenous people belonged to the working and lower classes, the colonial associates formed a cultured

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5) In colonial Mediterranean culture, a father has both power and responsibility for his children. His role as a father includes instruction, discipline, and punishment. This role of the father as *paterfamilias* should be understood in regard to a colonial environment. The household system is one of the building blocks for ensuring the hegemonic influence of the Empire. The mainstay of the imperial order is the kyriarchal pattern. See the discussion of E.S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1994), p. 7.

6) This model and strategy are best defined in terms of "reading-across," in contrast to "reading-of" and "reading-[in-company]-with." While the latter two approaches personify an interlocution of "speaking to" and/or "speaking for," both of which retain the hierarchical bias of scientific criticism, "reading-across" is more akin to "speaking with," which abandons such privilege by arguing for "full inclusivity and multiplicity." See also F.F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (New York: Orbis Books, 2000).

middle class, noticeably loyal to the Roman colonial authority. They became chief clients of Roman patronage and supported and oversaw the locals' education and culture. It is within this overall social matrix that Luke's polemic of *oikos* comes into view. In chapters eighteen and nineteen, Luke's Jesus relates to an *oikos* at large. In chapter eighteen, he abandons *oikos* as culturally defined; in chapter nineteen, he links it with salvation, thus valuing its ancestral link. The contrast between these two views of *oikos* may give us pause, but does Luke's narrator want to stop us in our tracks? Several markers in the text indicate that the audience should associate *oikos* with the issues of power, property, and privilege under the Roman Empire.

In 18:18-30, Jesus articulates a sharp critique of the rich ruler, who declines to inherit eternal life in favor of his wealth, and this strikingly ends up being a critique of *oikos*. Disciples, Jesus explains, are expected to leave *house* or *wife* or *brothers* or *parents* or *children* for their entrance to the kingdom. By setting possessions and *oikos* side by side, and connecting one to the other, Luke raises the question of a coalition between wealth and kinship, which has been largely veiled, so that it becomes even more pressing under colonial regulation. Luke seeks to deconstruct their configuration, which is deeply embedded in the Empire. For the rich ruler, the required boundary crossing is too grave and this shames him into silence. In 19:1-10, Luke presents the different view of *oikos* which he himself espouses. Here Jesus not only supports the concept of *oikos*, but also associates salvation with it:

> And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham." (19:9)

Like the rich ruler, Zacchaeus was a colonial associate. He was a rich *publicanus* and worked as a chief in the colonial tax collecting system. However, salvation falls on his house and he is honored as kin through Abrahamic ancestry. What is it that allows Zacchaeus to be welcomed? By sharing Jesus' concerns with the colonial downtrodden, Zacchaeus sketches for Jesus a model of *oikos* which neutralizes imperial economic appropriation.[7] Without a doubt, Zacchaeus' unorthodox engagement

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[7] Cf. Luke 19:8, "I will give to the poor…I will pay back four times as much."

with colonial assets allows him an exit from the disgrace associated with his vocation. His behavior marks him as one who crosses the colonial edges that have been least traversed and so opens a true venue in which to define a new *oikos*. Bearing these overall observations in mind, I turn to the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Reading the Parable for Decolonization

The textual history of the Lost and Found Parables is complex. It would seem that the Parable of the Lost Sheep, at least, represents a realistic pericope that can be counted as an early free-floating unit of tradition (cf. Matt. 18:10-14). For our postcolonial reading, however, it is more important to notice the socio-historical context of the parable which influences Jesus' response to the grumbling Pharisees.[8] In fact, this context functions as a type scene in Luke, that is, as a basic situation that occurs several times with variation (cf. 5:29-32, 7:34, 14:25-35).

Boundary Blurred

To begin with, Luke's narrator betrays a colonial construction of *oikos* and its representation that limits the daily life of the people. When the older son considers his relationship with his father not as parent-son but as master-servant, he is serving as the mouthpiece for a relationship with the *paterfamilias*, who wields enormous power (*patria potestas*) over the household. By analogy, the Roman emperor was referred to as the 'supreme father of the Empire' or the 'father of the fatherland' (*Pater Patriae*).[9] This eloquent title is highly suggestive of the protective but coercive authority bestowed on the master of the household. Indeed, the father as a property owner, a slave master, and a patron to clients

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8) It is notable that, when there is no sign of any meal occurring, Pharisees and scribes criticize Jesus' ministry of "welcoming and eating with" sinners (Luke 15:1-2). This criticism and Jesus' response encloses the collection of parables.

9) Since Caesar, the title of *Pater Patriae* was consistently conferred on the emperors, although Tiberius never accepted this title. See "Pater Patriae," in Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 1121.

exerts both "material and moral power over those who live in and around" the household, as Paul Veyne states.[10] Like the emperor, the father of the parable is also entitled to the power of *paterfamilias* over his household and, if need be, to show paternal severity in a public role. This kyriarchal household is revealed in the older son's paradoxical grievance:

> But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command." (v.29) [11]

For the older son, doing good works for the household consists in strictly remaining within the *oikos* by subjecting himself to harsh and even unjust work. He could not go out to celebrate with his friends, since, for him, the boundary is highly marked by the power of the *paterfamilias*.

Paternal monopoly of property and persons is also evidenced by the older son's accusation of his younger sibling:

> And you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him (vv. 29-30).

This kyriarchal relationship stands out most in the inter(con)textual comparison with the Confucian family system in an East Asian society. Although the Confucian family is gradually modifying and adapting itself to an increasingly egalitarian perspective, it is still defined by its value systems, which include age grading and the dutiful bonding between parents and children and among siblings. Family roles clearly require proper discipline and behavior. The rigorous implementation of these roles is far from universally binding. The virtue of the hierarchical structure is the help it offers in ensuring the passive acceptance of the status quo by subordinates. There might be occasional insubordination against the patriarch's leadership, but there is never defiance against the

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10) Paul Veyne, "The Roman Empire," in Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby (eds.), *A History of Private Life* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1987), p. 92.

11) Here, in the older son's speech, one may perceive the last words which the younger brother omitted from his rehearsal: "Treat me like one of your hired hands" (Luke 15:19).

system that establishes and maintains its structure.[12] Again, the boundary of *oikos* appears very clear. Though such power—cultural or otherwise—is invisible, it often justifies human suffering, rationalizes the present condition and deflates any aspiration toward, or possibility of, actual change.

Strikingly, however, the *paterfamilias* of the parable does not dictate or exercise *patria potestas*, but tries to conciliate his household with a soothing voice:

> Child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found. (vv. 31-32)

It also has been shown that the *paterfamilias* consents to the demand of an inheritance from his younger son, which would otherwise have to be occasioned later around the father's death. The father appears to have no paternal severity to him. He reserves no greater privilege for himself. Given that the author of Luke should be familiar with popular Greco-Roman genres such as comedy, mime and farce, one must not miss the contrast between the lenient, forgiving attitude of the father in Jesus' parable and the harsh, punitive behavior of fathers toward delinquent, prodigal sons in contemporaneous literature.

For instance, in Petronius' *Satyricon* 46, a father, who is firm and meticulous over his son, controls his learning and does not even tolerate his son's own entertainment:

> When he has a minute to himself, he never takes his eyes from his tablets; he's smart too, and has the right kind of stuff in him, even if he is crazy about birds. I've had to kill three of his linnets already, I told him that a weasel had gotten them, but he's found another hobby, now he paints all the time.[13]

Also in Persius' Satire 3:44-62, a son, who lives for the moment against his father's wishes, faces the fatal consequences of his wrongdoing.

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12) See the discussion on the Confucian family by Walter H. Slote, *Confucianism and the Family* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

13) *The Satyricon of Petronius Arbiter* (trans. W. C. Firebaugh; New York: Liveright, 1943), pp. 102-03.

> So our hero goes to his bath, with his stomach distended with eating and looking white, and a vapour of sulphurous properties slowly oozing from his throat; but a shivering comes on over the wine, and makes him let fall his hot tumbler from his fingers; and his teeth are exposed and chatter; the rich dainties come back again from his dropping jaws. The upshot is horn-blowing and tapers; and at last the deceased, laid out on a high bed and daubed with coarse ointment, turns up his heels stark and stiff toward the door; and citizens of twenty-four hours' standing in their caps of liberty carry him to the grave.[14]

On the other hand, in Herodas' *Mime* 3, a mother brings her truant son to school to be flogged for neglecting his studies in favor of gambling.[15] She wants her son's teacher, Lampriscos, to punish him. After being rejected, she says that she will talk with her husband and let him punish the son:

> You should not have stopped flogging, Lampriskos, till sunset……On afterthought, I will go home, Lampriskos, and tell the old man of this, and return with footstraps, so that as he skips here with his feet together the Lady Muses, whom he has hated so, may witness his disgrace.[16]

In ancient comedy and mime, particularly stories about rebellious, prodigal children embarrassing their parents, and their fathers in particular, severe treatment is the typical response. This must be a normal event in an ancient Greco-Roman society.

Greco-Roman art also provides evidence for this fatherly severity. A relief panel in the Naples Museum pictures a comic scene of an enraged father emerging from the door of his house bearing a staff for beating his drunken son.[17] In this regard, the relationship between Herod the Great and his sons is also worth of consideration. According to Josephus, although they were not prodigal, Herod killed his sons,

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14) *The Satires of A. Persius Flaccus* (trans. J. Conington; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893), pp. 68-71.

15) Although a mother appears, she is playing the traditional role of a father.

16) *Herodas: The Mimes and Fragments* (edn. by A.D. Knox; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 116.

17) M. Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1879), p. 92, figure 324. I would like to thank Lawrence Welborn for bringing this picture to my attention as well as discussing with me the popular literature.

Alexander and Aristobulus, because he was suspicious of their treachery. Antipater, the eldest son by Herod's first wife, falsely accused his stepbrothers after learning that he was not favored to take over from his father. Just before his death, however, Herod also commanded Antipater to be slain after he was arrested for laying a plot against him: "[Herod] cried out louder than his distemper would well bear, and instantly sent his guards and slew Antipater."[18] Herod was far from lenient or forgiving like the father in the parable. The death warrant of Antipater was also signed by Augustus Caesar.

Indeed, it would seem that Greco-Roman society expected fathers to punish their delinquent sons. This parable in Luke shows, however, a reversal of the paternal right. Luke's patriarch, who does not exercise power, lacks the ambition of kyriarchal management of *oikos* and fails to maintain it. He only goes back and forth interacting with his sons and erasing the borderline which is being crossed. Slowly but surely, his movement will serve those who are in the colonial margins as an affirmative statement of their possible inclusion. Luke also calls into question the boundary of the colonial *oikos* through the values of honor and shame.

Honor and Shame Dissipated

Luke's narrator breaks apart the honor/shame construct which commonly demarcates the *oikos* in terms of status, praise and recognition. According to this system, abiding by kyriocentric relations brings honor to the family, while its failure causes disastrous mortification. Without any doubt, the whole family will be put to shame when the younger son parts from his *oikos* with a premature inheritance. During the famine he is further driven downward to tend the pigs. He is finally at rock bottom when he has to eat the pods with the animals (v. 16). This bringing of shame on the family has no end. This time, the older son refuses to return to his *oikos* and accuses the father of poor household management (v. 30). Certainly, this action causes an affront to the *paterfamilias* of the household, and is viewed in the public eye as a serious familial disorder.[19] The older son does not finish without

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[18] Josephus, *Jewish War* I, p. 664.

[19] See Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, pp. 195-96.

degrading his younger sibling to the level of human waste for associating with "harlots":

> But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him. (v. 30)

The term "dissolute living (ζῶν ἀσώτως)" which was used in an earlier description of the younger brother, is now interpreted as "sexual excess" by the older brother.[20] Hence, the narrative recites the details of the younger son to the point of complete disgrace. The younger son continues to be voiceless in his humiliation.

The story then turns around another time as the parent proclaims banqueting for everyone (cf. v.24: "…και ἤρξαντο εὐφραῖνεσθαι"). He champions his voiceless younger son as the cause for celebration and values his safe return most blissfully. Thus, a would-be very shameful son/brother becomes a greater benefactor of joy and delight. As the parent releases his *oikos* from all kinds of accusations, the framework of honor and shame becomes more ambiguous and a different construction of communal values is needed.

It is noteworthy that, during the celebration, the markers of both public and private spheres are also obscured around the *oikos*. Notice, first, how the first two Lost and Found Parables were set in different locales. The (male) shepherd stands in an open, public space where he cares for his sheep, while the woman stays in a private sphere where she manages her household. The parent of the third parable, however, not only welcomes his younger son *inside* the house and hosts a party, but also comes *outside* the house to engage his older son. He limits his activity to the geographic contours of his *oikos* although he steps beyond it, and without going too far. While he moves in and out of the house, his functional locus represents a "hybridized haven" that becomes a site of resistance to the colonial construct of life and existence.

The father, the only parent of Luke's parable, is also shown to be hybridized when compared to the shepherd and housekeeper of the

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20) While such a claim might be an unbearable exaggeration, it would make perfect sense in the colonial discourse, for the younger son's misery alludes to the extreme insolence and corruption of the colonized in the colonizer's view.

other parables.[21] This comparison emerges, however, from one of the poignant paradoxes of Luke: the characters full of prestige and dignity are portrayed in dubious representations. The younger son has to eat pods with the pigs (or rather the other way). Also, the broken silence of the older son marks him as another household slave, lacking capability on his own. The portrayal of the sons as "human-animal" and "son-slave" unveil a systematic construction of power that does not legitimize full humanity or affirm human capability and agency. In their midst, however, the parent serves as the model of a person refining his own agency with regard to the creation, or restraint, of opportunities and freedoms under the Empire.

Inasmuch as the parable portrays the formation of hyphenated, and yet hidden and disguised, identities, the powerless rather recognize the "hybrid" nature of the parent as a haven releasing all the constraints of boundaries.[22] As such, the hybridized *oikos* empowers the colonial margins, which were formerly conceived as voiceless and invisible. For the others, who operate under colonial desire, however, the hybridized haven will occasion a social disaster, since it destabilizes both constructs of power and relations of domination. Last but not least, possession serves as another code window through which the established boundary of the colonial *oikos* can be transgressed.

Wealth Reciprocated

Luke's *oikos* discourse breaks apart the rich/poor construct and thereby calls the colonial household into question. Luke's narrator has already revealed economic concerns in the preceding two parables and now that same narrator cultivates a more deeply rooted social message. Although the initial context of the parable is table fellowship between Jesus, tax collectors and sinners, this narrator reveals the increasing social and economic difference between rich and poor. While one group is portrayed

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21) Johnson points out that it is typical of Luke to pair a male example with one involving a woman (cf. 1:6-7; 2:36-38; 4:25, 38; 7:11-15, 36-50; 8:1-3, 19-21, 43-56; 10:38-42; 11:27; 13:10-17). See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 236.

22) The distinguishing feature of this new identity goes beyond the categories and representations worked out by so-called Orientalists, who tend to work with core elements such as nationality, ethnicity, feminity, and so forth.

as poor, marginalized, and struggling for human survival, the others, political, religious elites, imagine themselves to be self-sufficient people.

Primarily, colonial power ought to be held responsible for the grinding poverty and the plight of the common people in Palestine.[23] There were no isolated poor and no independent, 'innocent' rich under the colonial presence. People easily lost their wealth and their access to basic resources. While falling below subsistence level because of colonial exploitation, the poor would have been hired out by the privileged and eventually sold as indentured slaves across the Empire.[24] For this reason, control of property became the most significant aspect of household management, and each *oikos* turned into a more exclusive and more self-interested unit. When the older son disparages himself as a slave and criticizes his father for his lax economic management, the parable betrays this kind of colonially constructed economy, and *oikonomia* in particular. In Luke's narrative, this kyriarchal order carries out the authorization of scarcity:

> …and you have never given me even a young goat… [yet] you killed the fatted calf for him. (vv. 29-30)

The parent of the parable shows, however, no interest in maneuvering his possessions and maximizing his profits. He is rather suggesting a social gathering and celebration even at a most critical time. He wastes riches for his younger son and puts himself in subjection to his older son's portion of the estate: "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours!" (v. 31). By featuring the father in this way, Luke breaks the framework of the exploitative *oikos*. Luke's Jesus rejects both inequality and reciprocity as embedded in the Roman imperial system. The claiming son and the soothing father represent a "typology of disclosure and interaction,"[25] unveiling the system in a more perceptible way. The

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23) Cf. Gerd Theissen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics, and the World of the New Testament* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

24) The impoverished posed an ever-present threat to the Empire. The historian Tacitus uses poverty to explain the disorder of the Roman imperial society, whether it be civil war or provincial rebellion. See *Histories* 3.47.

25) Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 163.

father's modest, yet persistent, boundary crossing releases *oikos* from any economic misappropriation of imperial power. His economic reciprocity hybridizes *oikos* and wears down its existing borders in the service of the poor and the exploited. No distinction exists between the "prodigal" and the "principled," there is only a reciprocity that liquidates the dominant power's boundary line.

The manifest breaching of rules in Luke is actually the condition for the alternative *oikos* and *oikonomia* to become more visible, encouraging the audience to perceive God's economy, which is actually at work in their midst. When colonial agents apply dominant power to every corner of the household, creating scarcity (especially in a zero-sum colonial society), Luke's *oikos* discourse tends to focus on entitlements rather than on loyalty, on rights rather than on discipline. Hence, the idea of obligation alone, which condones "like-mindedness" under the Empire, fails to explain Luke's substantial development of the human agents in the parable.[26] The text of Luke does not leave room for the exploitation of the marginalized to be achieved through a sense of indebtedness, inequality or immorality. For an East Asian postcolonial reader, the 'prodigal' remains merely a marker of Luke's (comm)union over and against drastic colonial convention and conformity.

Hermeneutics for Decolonization

In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu suggests that value distinctions cause problems, but natural opposites complement and enhance each other.

> When people see some things as beautiful, other things become ugly.
> When people see some things as good, other things become bad.
> Being and non-being create each other. Difficult and easy support each other.

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[26] In this regard, the shrewd steward (Luke 16:1-9) also serves as a model of a person satisfying the ends he has reason to value. The imperial slave *oikonomos*, as a chief household slave, enjoys a position of authority over other slaves and has responsibility for his master's possessions, yet he remains a slave. If he failed to discharge his duties prudently, he might be beaten, even killed. Even with this ambiguous position, the steward uses his own freedom to survive rather than succumb to impending afflictions and devastation.

> Long and short define each other. High and low depend on each other.
> Note and sound harmonize each other. Before and after follow each other.[27]

According to the *Tao Te Ching*, consciousness of the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the not-good, splits the world into two objects clashing with each other. However, the real homeland is nature, where harmony and unity persist beyond their differences. One of the postcolonial traits of this philosophy may be its attention to mutual support, liquidating artificial value-conflicts and rubbing out the jagged edges.

Luke's (re)presentation of *oikos* might well encompass this kind of view, while at the same time unveiling colonial, socio-cultural norms, which say "this is the way things are" or "should be." The parent and prodigal's mutual hugging and kissing invites the subjects to build another *oikos*, in which the disappeared will be found, the missing welcomed home, and there will be, finally, no need for distinctions between the 'have-nots' and 'haves,' the shameful and the honored, the women and the men. Hence, the colonial construct of outsider and insider will fade. Luke lays out an alternative (comm)unity by awakening imaginations and encouraging discussions, by creating an *oikos*, a place of life and freedom for all, which is not divided or discriminatory, going far beyond individual relations and exclusive motivation in the reality of the Empire. This *oikos* does not condone inside/outside boundaries within which our identities are contested, challenged, and often jeopardized by strife and scarcity, where death is dealt with as often as life.

The *oikos* of Luke is always driven by real needs and real (comm)-unity under the mercy and grace of God, who levels all boundaries. Notice that the parable is still open-ended:

> Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth. (Luke 3:5; cf. Isa. 40:4).

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27) Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (trans. Stephen Mitchell; New York: Harper & Row, 1988), Chapter 2.