THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON AS A EUCHARISTIC METAPHOR IN ROMANOS MELODOS' KONTAKION 49 (OXF.)

by J.H. Barkhuizen
(University of Pretoria)

ABSTRACT

A merely superficial reading of kontakion 49 (Oxf.) of Romanos on the prodigal son reveals that, far from rendering a slavish paraphrase of this parable, he has transformed it into a eucharistic metaphor. In his interpretation or exegetical presentation of this parable, Romanos has made use of a homily attributed to Pseudo-Chrysostom. In both texts the first part of the parable is either merely referred to (Romanos) or only briefly touched upon (Pseudo-Chrysostom), the main focus being on the joy experienced by the father at the return of his lost son, as well as on the description of the banquet. The final scene of the parable, involving the elder son, is in both texts also concluded in more definite and positive terms as to the elder brother's final attitude towards the conduct of his father with regard to the prodigal son. This differs conspicuously from the biblical text itself, in which we have an open-end conclusion. The aim of this paper is to analyse this transformation of the parable into a eucharistic metaphor. It will focus on both the different elements constituting this metaphor and the way in which this transformation has been effected.

Introduction

A merely superficial reading of kontakion 49 (Oxf.) of Romanos on the prodigal son reveals that, far from rendering a servile paraphrase of this parable, he has transformed it into a eucharistic metaphor. In his interpretation or exegetical presentation of this parable, Romanos has made use of a homily attributed to Pseudo-Chrysostom. In both texts the first part of the parable is either merely referred to (Romanos) or only briefly touched upon (Pseudo-Chrysostom), the main focus being on the joy experienced by the father at the return of his lost son, as well as on the description of the banquet. The final scene of the parable, involving the elder son, is in both texts also concluded in more definite and positive terms as to the elder brother's final attitude towards the conduct of his father with regard to the prodigal son. This differs conspicuously from the biblical text itself, in which we have an open-end conclusion.
The aim of this paper is to analyse this transformation of the parable into a eucharistic metaphor. It will focus on both the different elements constituting this metaphor and the way in which this transformation has been effected.

Analysis

The elements constituting this metaphor can be divided into objects and persons, the objects for the most part being connected with the banquet and the elements constituting the banquet, and the persons with the participants of the banquet. The way in which Romanos has shifted these elements from the parable to the level of eucharistic thought is already revealed in the second prooimion of the hymn to be a direct shifting from parable to metaphor.

This shifting of objects and persons as well as the way in which it has been done can be presented either within the framework of a running commentary on the hymn as a whole, or by analysing these objects and persons as separate units as they are presented by Romanos in the hymn. This second way has been judged to be the more meaningful way of presenting the intended analysis.

The Banquet with its constituting elements

The second prooimion is, typical of Romanos' art, in the form of a prayer, in which the 'I' of the hymn is defined as the prodigal son of the present context: τὸν ἀσωτὰ φθαρέντα. It is prayed that God, who is addressed as ἅβαντε, would deem this τὸν ἀσωτὰ φθαρέντα worthy of God's mystical table: Τῇ μυστικῇ σου τραπέζῃς... ἐξώσον. This is a clear indication by Romanos to his audience that he regards the banquet of the parable of the prodigal son as pointing to the communion-table in Christian worship. In fact, in strophe 18.5 the house of the father in which the banquet (called in strophe 10.1 ὦ θάσος, while the banquet hall is referred to as ἡ ἐστία in 3.1') takes place, is directly interpreted as ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ (the church)! That Romanos wishes to establish at the outset this viewpoint in their minds, is proved by his homiletic phraseology at the beginning of the first strophe, lines 1–2: Δεῖχνον κατάδωμαν ἡμεῖς εὐφρασθέν έξαπολίως τῷ... ἀσώτῳ, and the fact that he — in recalling in lines 5–6 the words of the father to his slaves — refers to it as 'all-holy': Σκεύαστε τὸ δείχνον ἡμῖν πάρναγον τὸ πανάγιον...', which could only have been linked by his audience to the Christian communion-table. This description of the banquet as all-holy recurs in strophe 10.9, where the focus is on the banquet as sacrificial altar/sanctuary: οἱ θαλαμολόγος calls for the offerings to be brought to the all-holy altar/sanctuary: προσαχάντες θύματα ἔχαντα, εὐλογημένα, πρὸς τὸ πανάγιον θυσιαστήριον. The direct shifting of the banquet to eucharistic metaphor also points to the involvement of the audience with this
all-holy banquet, and in continuation with the subjunctive in κατίδωμεν in 1.1, Romanos in 2.1ff now urges his audience to participate in this banquet: Ἐνθὲν σκοπῶμεν νῦν καὶ μετάγχωμεν τῷ δεῖπνῳ ... And this call to participation is motivated by what this table or banquet offers the participants: eternal life — a concept which is also in line with the eucharist or Christian communion-table. This banquet, Romanos states, offers one bread (ἄρτους) which provides divine happiness (μακαρισμόντα), and offers as drink (όμοι) holy blood (ξυμον αίμα), which provides eternal life (ἐφθάσαν καὶ ἀπελευνησεν ζωῆς). Again it is clear that Romanos links the bread and drink directly to Christ’s body and blood, which are the principal elements of the communion-table. In strophe 9, in which Romanos has the father command his servants to prepare the banquet, Romanos returns to the drink offered at this banquet, and again links it to Christ’s blood: δότε δὲ πρὸς τούτους τίμων όμοι, αἰμά τε καὶ θᾶνω τὸ ἐκ τῆς πλευρᾶς τῆς αυτοῦ πηγάζον τοῖς πιστεύοντα.

The most startling element in this metaphorical transformation is the calf (μόσχος) which is sacrificed. I have already pointed above to the banquet as τὸ πανάγιον θυσιαστήριον, which implies the idea of the θυσία. In the light of the bread and drink defined as the body and blood of Christ, it comes as no surprise, although it is a startling interpretation of the parable, that the calf prefigures Christ! Already in the very first strophe, lines 8–9, Romanos has the father call onto his servants to sacrifice the calf (τὸν μόσχον), to which a λεκτάνοις ὁμολαλις has given birth. The expression παρθένος δαμαλις, which is totally absent from the biblical account (Luke 15:11–32), undoubtedly points the audience to the virgin Mary. This is confirmed in strophe 8.2 (τὸν μόσχον τὸν παρθένον τὸν ὑμὸν τὸν τῆς παρθένου), and prepares the way for identifying the calf with Christ. In four consecutive strophes (8–11) Romanos dwells on this identification. In these lines the following aspects need to be highlighted:

Strophe 8:

The calf to be sacrificed (cf. θύσιατρό τῶν in 8.1), namely Jesus, is sacrificed on behalf of the sinner (παρθένος) — referring firstly to the prodigal son, but also universally to mankind, as is clear from the hymn as a whole. The calf is a virgin calf (τὸν μόσχον τὸν παρθένον), the son of the Virgin. With the expression ‘the virgin calf’ Romanos defines this as referring to the sinless nature of Christ: τὸν μὴ δαμασθέντα ζωῆς τῷ τῆς ζωῆς. Referring to his death, Romanos points to his acceptance of death, focussing, as do the fathers in general, on the concept of Jesus’ death as one which He underwent willingly. He did not die from necessity, but through his own free will: τὸν προσθέμα πρὸς τοὺς ἑλκοντας πορεύμων ὡς γὰρ σταυνάζει πρὸς τὴν θυσίαν, ἀλλὰ τὸν σωζόν κλίνει ἐκουσίως. He is called
the lifegiver, who, though He is sacrificed, is not killed. Romanos emphasizes this by means of word-play and antithetical juxtapositioning of concepts: θύσατε τὸν ζωοδότην τὸν καὶ δυσμένον καὶ μὴ νεκρούμενον, τὸν ζωοποιοῦντα πάντας τοὺς ἐν ἀθι. 

Strophe 9:

The calf is to be sacrificed and given to be eaten by those worthy of the banquet (cf. Luke 15:23: ύμέτερον ἐνθάδε τὸν ζωοδότην καὶ δυσμένον καὶ μὴ νεκρούμενον). The calf is defined subsequently as τὸν ἀστιλον μόσχον τὸν καθαρόν κατὰ πάντα — one which has been fattened from the unsown earth which God created: τὸν συντεθέντα καὶ ἀσφόρον γῆς ἂν ἑπλασε. While συντεθέντα recalls Luke 15:23 (τὸν μόσχον τὸν συντεθοῦν), the phrase ἀσφόρον γῆς ἂν ἑπλασε is absent from the biblical account and quite obviously refers to the virgin Mary who is here identified with the unsown earth since she did not conceive by means of a man's sperm. In lines 9–13 Romanos again shifts the element ‘calf’ to theological thought: the calf will be dismembered by being eaten by all, but will not be divided, not be consumed: μελιζέται, ἄλλα ὑμεῖς διαφέρεται, οὐδὲ διαπανάται, for he will feed all for ever (εἰς αἰώνας χορτάζει πάντας). The words οὐ μερίζεται, οὐδὲ διαφέρεται clearly refer to the two indivisible natures of Christ.

Strophe 10:

At the end of strophe 10 the theological transformation (from calf to Christ) gains in strength by Romanos' quotation from Paul: Τὸ πάσχα τὸ ἡμέτερον ἐνθάδε τὸν θεόσου Χριστός ... (1 Cor.5:7).

Strophe 11:

In this strophe reference to the calf occurs within the hymn to be sung at the banquet (see below). It is the will of the father that the calf without blemish is to be sacrificed for the sake of mankind: τὸ σαφηνθηκά ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀνθρώπων τὸν κάθαρον τὸν ἀκάθαρτον. In the same hymn reference is made to the s(S)on of the f(F)ather who is willingly sacrificed as the calf without blemish: ὁ υἱὸς σου ἐκὼν θυμίζεις ὡς μόσχος ἀστιλος.

An interesting element of the banquet, which is not named in the biblical account, but which can be inferred from Luke's expression in verse 25 (ὁ υἱὸς ... ὁ πρεσβύτερος ... ἁρώνυμος συμφωνάς καὶ χρώμων), is the hymn which was sung by the ψαλιμολόγος at the banquet (ὁ ψαλιμολόγος). This hymn is composed in the form of the trisagion. The ψαλιμολόγος, playing on his cithara (τοῦ χιθώρου), sings in a sweet voice, first calling the servants to bring forward the offerings and the calf:

Σπουδάζως προσαγάγετε θύματα άρα χράντα, εὐλογημένα,
πρὸς τὸ πανάγιον θυσιαστήριον.
Again the phrase μετ’ εὐχαριστίας is clearly a significant allusion to the eucharist.\textsuperscript{11}

But before quoting the trisagion in full, Romanos firstly presents Paul by means of a *time-transformation* — i.e. he is referred to as if he is present at this very banquet — and has him call out his words recorded in 1 Cor.5:7 (see above):

\begin{quote}
Καὶ μετ’ αὐτὸν ἔδωκε Παῦλος:
"Τὸ πάσα τὸ ἡμέτερον
ἐτύθη νῦν Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς ..."
\end{quote}

The *trisagion* relates in this instance to the prodigal son and his father as protagonists in the parable, but retains its trinitarian context: the (f)Father is called holy because it pleased\textsuperscript{12} Him that his s(S)on be sacrificed for mankind as the calf without blemish; the s(S)on is called holy because h(H)e is sacrificed willingly as a calf without blemish, and because He also sanctifies those *baptised* in the power of the *baptismal font*. This is the second time that Romanos refers to the baptismal font. In strophe 4.5 it is the baptismal font that weaves the first (=original) robe for all (see below). Thus Romanos has twice embedded a *baptismal image* in an overall eucharistic metaphor. Finally, the Holy Spirit is called holy as the gift given to believers.

Three remaining elements of the banquet form a close-knit unit, relating to the return of the prodigal son and his acceptance by his father, namely the first robe, the shoes and the ring.

(i) Already in the second *prooimion*, lines 3–6, Romanos anticipates the *first robe* (καταστολή) which will be given to the prodigal son on his return, at the same time transferring this symbol to the personal life of himself and his audience. He prays that God may again give him the ‘first’ robe of God’s grace (τὴν πρώτην καταστολήν τῆς χάριτος σου — see strophe 5.12–13: στολήν ... τῆς χάριτος), and which he, Romanos (as representative of mankind in general) has stained by his sinful passions. This directly anticipates his narration in strophe 4 of the father’s pity with his son’s condition, especially in view of his sullied robe:

\begin{quote}
Σωτήρ\textsuperscript{13} ὁ πάντων κατιδών ἑρμισμενήν ἐσθῆτα
tότε ἠμψισμένον τὸν ὑλὸν κατεπλαγχνίσθη.
\end{quote}

The father’s commanding his slaves to bring the ‘first robe’ for his son, recalls the words of the second *prooimion*: τὴν στολὴν τὴν πρώτην, and which is based on Luke 15:22 (ἐξενέγκατε στολὴν τὴν πρώτην). The ‘first’ robe refers, as Grosdidier de Matons has pointed out,\textsuperscript{14} to the better robe, the original robe which has become stained by sin and which is recovered by the act of baptism and the grace of God (*prooimion* 2.3) or his Holy
Spirit (ἡν κατασκευάζει χάρις ἢ τοῦ πνεύματος μου, strophe 4.6 — see also strophe 5.12–13). In fact, Romanos states this clearly and in detail in strophe 4.8–5.7: although he was clothed (with the grace of his father13), the ‘enemy’ rendered him naked (ἐγκράματος ἀπέλαυσε) and made a spectacle of him in the eyes of all the demons (καὶ ἔδηματος τοῖς δαίμονις πάσιν). The result was nakedness (τὸν γυμνωθέντα, 5.1), and defilement (ἐφρυσμομένη ἐσθήσει, 4.1). Of course, this whole description of the prodigal son’s position is transferred to the level of God and sinful man, so that Romanos in 5.2 could refer to God’s reaction as follows: οὗ φέρω βλέπειν οὕτως τὴν εἰκόνα μου τὴν θειάν!

(ii) Following the reference and description of the robe, the next item occurs in strophe 6, namely the ring. The father instructs his servants not only to clothe his son, but also to adorn his hand with a ring (τὴν χείρα δακτυλίῳ καλλωπίσατε ..., 6.2). The purpose and consequences of this act form the contents of this strophe. This act would first of all render his son a στήλη αἰθέριος for his creation.16 It is not certain what στήλη implies,17 but it appears to be an indication of being a guarantee of the inseparable Trinity: ἀφαεριζόν ... τριάδος τῆς ἀγωσίας, 6.3 — in 6.12 it is defined as τὴν σφαγιάδα μου. As such it will protect him, for by wearing it he will be recognised as the son of the King of the universe,18 and he will thus also be recognised by the enemies of the King — the demons and the haughty devil — and will prove to be to them a fearful sight, with the result that they will no longer approach him, but in fact flee from him (Ἰνα μηρέτι αὐτῷ ἐγκύκλιο Ὀρῶν ... οὐχ ἱσταται ...).

(iii) The next strophe (7) deals with the third item: the shoes. With the gift of the shoes Romanos has a negative as well as a positive purpose in mind. In view of his poor situation, the feet of the prodigal son were in the eyes of his father unguarded — πόδας ... ἀνασφαλίστος — the latter word being related, as is clear from the passage quoted below, to the situation in paradise, where God referred to the ‘bite of the serpent’ (Gen.3:15). Providing him with shoes (ὕποθεσατε ... τὸν γυμνωθέντα) will therefore protect him this time against the wiles of the serpent:

Μὴ πάλιν εὕρῃ ὁ πανοῦργος δόρις καὶ δόλιος
πτέρναν τοῦ παιδός μου γεγυμνωμένην
καὶ ἐπιβουλεύσῃ διὰ τῆς κακίας αὐτοῦ
τῷ ἐρήμῳ ὁ παμπάντιος (7.4–7).

But it will also render him powerful to trample on the serpent (Gen.3:15), which will enable him to return to paradise:

Δύναμιν δίῳμι τῷ ὑπὸ μου,
Ἰν’ ὡς ἀδύνατον πατὴ τὸν ἀδίκοντα,
Ἰνα ἐπιβατήν μετά παρθένους
The Participants in the banquet

Eight different figures or groups of persons are depicted in the transformation of this parable by Romanos, of whom the prodigal son, his father and the elder brother feature with greater frequency than the others.

Based on Luke 15:13, where the reckless life-style of the prodigal son is described as ζην ἀσώτος,¹⁸ he has been called in patristic literature ὁ ἄσωτος. By means of assonance, Romanos refers to him as the 'reckless/immoral one' who, through his repentance (μετανοοῦντα τούτων ... τῇ δὲ μετανοίᾳ, 1.4,5), has become the 'chaste one':

τῷ πρώτῃ μὲν ἄσωτῳ, σωφρονήσαντι δὲ ἄμως.

This line anticipates lines 10-11, which are modelled on Luke 15:24b/32b:²⁰

διὶ δὲ υἱὸς μου ἀπόλετο πρώην
καὶ ὑπὲρ εὐφρέθη;

while line 12 (ἐκεῖρ όν καὶ ἀνέξησεν) is merely a rhythmic repetition of Luke 15:24a and 32a.

Another example of assonance, also relating to his repentance, occurs in 17.11/13, where Romanos has the elder son refer to his father’s invitation to all his friends to attend the banquet to celebrate the return of his younger son:

καὶ προστρέψατε ...
τιμᾶς ... ἀλόκοτας
τῷ παῖσαντι, ἐπιστρέφαντι ...

In strophe 3.4 Romanos uses the image of being rendered naked = bereft of all grace: οὖσας γὰρ πρώην ἐγυμνώθη πάσης τῆς χάριτος. The next line (3.5) is again merely a rhythmical adaptation of Luke 15:14,²¹ πᾶσαι τῆν οὖσαν καταναλώσας, an aspect of his sinful life which the elder son later (in strophe 17.1-2) describes as a life-style which has consumed the father’s wealth in the company of prostitutes:

τὸν ὑδὸν τούτον τὸν καταμαχόντα
τὸν πλουτὸν σου σὸν πόρνας ...

In 3.13, 8.1 and 17.13 Romanos could therefore refer to the prodigal son as the one who has come to a fall: τὸν παῖσαντα ὑδὸν αὐτοῦ (3.13), and: ὑπὲρ παῖσαντος in 8.1, and: τῷ παῖσαντι in 17.13, the verb παίσας already having been used in the NT in the sense of ‘to sin’.²² In line with this life-style, Romanos refers in strophe 4 to the father as Σωτήρ who feels...
compassion at the sight of his son clothed in filthy clothes: ἔρυπαμένην ἐσθήτα τότε ἡμιφυσιομένην τὸν ὅλον, 4.1–2. Romanos continues to give a detailed description of how the enemy has rendered the younger son ‘naked’ and made him a spectacle in the eyes of the demons (4.8–10), and how the father could not tolerate to see him in this state, and to look upon his divine image reduced to such a position (4.8–5.2). In the eyes of his father he was ἄφρονόστων and ἄκοιλικῶπιστων (5.9), but because he repented, he was worthy of forgiveness:

τὸν ἐν μετανοίᾳ ἐμοὶ προσδραμόντα
καὶ τῆς συγγνώμης ἄξιωθέντα (5.10–11).

And in his response to his elder son’s objection to the banquet, the father refers in strong terms to his younger son’s disgraceful condition when he returned to beg for forgiveness:

Οὕτος δὲ ἐξευθεὶς κατηρσιχμένος,
γυμνός καὶ ἀμορφος …

The prodigal son should therefore be restored to act again as στήλη αἰθέτους (6.1) for his ‘creation’ — here Romanos again transfers his image from the common level of family and friends to the universal level of mankind. Adorned with the father’s ring on his hand, and his feet protected by shoes — for without these he was ἀνασφάλιστος (7.1), and bereft of his father’s care (γηγομονύσθη τῆς προσώπους (7.2), the son can now ‘turn the tables’ — so to speak — on the devil and his demons, and thus can safely return to paradise (6.2–13 — see above for this passage).

The figure of the father is almost equally important as that of the prodigal son in the parable. The transformation operative in this hymn becomes immediately apparent in the refrain (ὁ τῶν αἰώνων δεσπότης καὶ κόσμος), and in the very first strophe where Romanos refers to the father of the prodigal son, and then immediately corrects himself by calling him the ἱματοσοφος of all men, in which case God is directly identified with the figure of the father in the parable: πατήρ γὰρ ὁ τοῦτον ἔχειν πάντων ἄνθρωπων. By means of word-play (ἄνθρωπων — φιλανθρωπος) Romanos anticipates, not only the joy of God/the father towards all who repent (τῇ δὲ μετανοίᾳ γὰρ, 1.5), but also his compassion: ἐν ἑλαθεὶ ἐν τοῖς σπλάγχνοις, 1.13). This compassion of the father — Romanos again using a word-play on φιλανθρωπος κἄλ. — especially comes to the fore in strophe 18.13 and 19 in his response to the elder son’s objection to the banquet being given to one who has squandered his father’s wealth in the company of prostitutes (17.1–2). Referring again in 18.13 to the father as ὡς φιλανθρωπος, the latter explains his conduct to his elder son as follows:

Χαίρω γὰρ πάντωτε φιλανθρωπώτερος.25
πῶς οὖν ἀπάνθρωπος γενέσθαι ζήχων;
Here, of course, the phrase "On ἐπιλασα πρώην πῶς μὴ ἔλεησω καὶ οἰκτειρήσω μετανοούντα;" naturally reveals the process of transformation, for although it is said that he as father engendered his son (19.12: Τὰ σπλάγχνα μου ἔγενον τὸ τέκνον ...), ἐπιλασα in 19.10 could refer only to man being created by God.

Turning to his audience at the beginning of the second strophe, Romanos exhorts them to partake of the banquet on condition that they are deemed worthy of rejoicing with the f(ather), who in this context is obviously none other than God, the King of the ages (τὸ πατρὶ συνεργαζόμενα ... τῷ βασιλεῖ τῶν αἰώνων, 2.2-3; in 4.11 He is called τὸν βασιλέα τῆς γῆς ἀπάσχος, and in 6.7 τοῦ πάντων βασιλεύωντος). Referring at the beginning of strophe 3 to the Gospels and the parable of the prodigal son, he relates how he runs to his father, confesses his sins, and how his father meets him and kisses him. Two expressions in the description of this scene point to the transformation: Romanos first calls the father the One who sees all (Ἰὲν τὰ σπλάγχνα τῶν ἑνόν κτλ.), and then explains in line 11 the father’s loving conduct towards his repentant son as follows: Θεὸς γὰρ ἐστι μετανοούντων.

In the following line (3.12) he picks up the concept of God’s compassion, first expressed in 1.13: ἡλέπτων ὡς εὐσπλαγχνος τὸν πατέρα χέν κτλ. — compare this with 1.13: ἐν τοῖς σπλάγχνοις. In 19.12ff Romanos again takes up this concept where he has the father react to his elder son’s objections to the banquet:

"Τὰ σπλάγχνα μου ἔγενον τὸ τέκνον μου ὥς ἔλεησα ..." 26

The verb ἔλεησα, of course, plays an important part in Romanos’ description of the f(ather)’s compassion: apart from the two passages quoted above (3.12 and 19.13), Romanos has the f(ather) ask his elder son in 19.3-4: 27

Πῶς δὲ ἐδυνάμην μὴ ἔλεησαι ... τὸν ὑλὸν μου ...;

and again in 19.10:

"On ἐπιλασα πρώην πῶς μὴ ἔλεησω —

this in conjunction with οἰκτειρῶ in line 11:

καὶ (μὴ) οἰκτειρῆσω μετανοούντα; 28

The beginning of strophe 4 (line 1) describes the father as Σωτὴρ ὅ πάντων, who is in this capacity aware of his son’s defilement, and therefore immediately addresses the issue of his reinstatement. The compassion of the f(ather) is such that He cannot endure to see his son ‘naked’ (=bereft of grace and beauty); that He cannot endure to see his own divine image (τὴν εἰκόνα μου τὴν θείαν, 5.2) in such a state. His compassion is such that the
disgrace of his son (τὸ δνείδος, 5.3) is also his disgrace (ἐμὴ... αἰσχύνη), and He considers the glory of his son to be his glory as well (δὲν δὸξαν τὴν τοῦ τέκνου δόξαν ἡγησόμαι, 5.4). Such is his compassion that He considers it outrageous (ἀτομον) to see the son who is returning with a repentant heart, and who is therefore worthy of forgiveness, bereft of his care and unadorned, i.e. bereft also of all beauty (ἡ ἀπορροή... ἡ ἀκαλλάσσων). This compassion reaches a climax in strophe 20, in which the Father explains his conduct towards his younger son. By being compassionate to the younger, He is not at all diminishing that which the elder son has always possessed and still possesses. He is the Creator(!) of both — their generous father, lover of mankind and compassionate One (see note 25). As such He therefore honours the elder son for his love and service, but He is also full of compassion (κἀκεῖνῳ συμπάσχω, 20.10) towards the one who has returned full of repentance (διὰ τὸ σπουδάσω τῇ μετανοίᾳ προσκαρτήρησα, 20.10–11).

In strophes 14–15 Romanos interrupts the story-line: following his reference to the anger of the elder son on hearing of what has happened while he was away, Romanos instructs his audience about the compassion of God (or of Christ, as he states in 14.1), and he does this in strophe 14.10ff in lines that reflect the compassion of God towards both the righteous and sinners.

He first refers to Christ’s compassion (ἐυσπλαγχνίας, 14.1) and his immense sympathy (ὁμήρου συμπάθεια, 14.2). As Governor (πρύτανις) and Creator God (κτίστης Θεός), He desires to save all (ὁ θελὼν πάντας σώσει). His compassion as lover of mankind is unspeakably great to those whom He is saving (ἀφαίρετος, ἀφαίρετος τοῖς σωζομένοις ἐν ἐνθαλάκτης συμπάθεια). Having stated his compassion, Romanos continues to describe it in more detail in the form of statements relating to his conduct towards the righteous and the fallen:

• Though He constantly cares for the just, He also constantly calls the sinners to return to Him (14.10–11);
• He did not only keep the righteous brother safe, but also saved the other one (14.12–13);
• He raised his son who has fallen, just as He upheld the one who was standing (15.1–2);
• He showed pity to the one who had come to a fall and raised him, but He also prevented the one standing from coming to a fall (15.3–4).
• He enriches the one who became poor, but the one who was rich He did not allow to become poor (15.5–6).

Romanos then concludes his description of God’s compassion by stating: He saved all (ὁλὰ ἐσπασε τοὺς ἐπιστευτας, 15.7).
In line with his compassion, the father could do nothing but change the attitude of his elder son (πῶς ἵστατο δυσωτῶν αὐτῶν, 15.13), and respond with gentleness to his son’s accusations (ἐπεκρίθη σὺν πραότητι πρὸς τούτον, 16.2).

In his response to the elder son (18.3–21.4), Romanos has the father again move directly to the level of God as the Father of those within the church (σὺ τῆς ἐκκλησίας οὐκ ἐξωρίσθης) and of those who were outside, but who are returning to Him and the church with repentance and supplication. As the father also of the prodigal son, He could not but pity him and save him. He calls on his elder son to judge him — for He constantly rejoices in his love for mankind, and could not act contrary to this love — for He is not only the father, but also the Creator of his son (19.5–14 — see also above for discussion of this latter passage).

The third figure in this triangle, is the elder son. Called at the beginning of strophe 12 γὰρ ὁ πρῶτος, his selfish attitude soon becomes apparent when Romanos has him enquire in detail into what was going on in his father’s house. In comparison with Luke’s succinct report — καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος ἔνα τῶν παιδῶν ἐπινόησεν τί ἂν εἴη ταῦτα — Romanos ascribes 10 lines to his enquiry, in which several words are indicative of his attitude:

Τί ἂν εἴη τοῦτο; λέγει συντόμως:
καὶ γὰρ μυστικός μια ἡχός εἰς τὰ Ἰτα κτυπεῖ
μεγάλης πανηγύρεως:
λέγει μοι τί ἄπτε τούτο τὸ δράμα:
τίς τὰ προσέχοντα ἐμοὶ μυστήρια
καὶ πάντα τὸν πλουτὸν τῆς θείας θυσίας
ἐμοὶ ἀπόντος μερίζει ἄλλοις;
Μὴ ἄρα πάλιν δίδωσι
χαρίσματα ὁ γεννήσας με
ὁ τῶν πλαίνων δεσπότης καὶ κύριος; (12.5–14)

The first to be noticed (apart from μυστικός ... ἡχός), is the word-play involving μυστήριον. Grosdidier de Matons writes: ‘... μυστήριον, qui est à prendre à la fois au sens liturgique de “sacrement” ..., et au sense biblique de “dessein de Dieu sur les hommes”, en vue de leur salut ... : cette intention salvatrice, dans la pensée du fils ainé, doit être réservée au seul juste.’ This idea that God’s salvation should be reserved for the just, and not for the ‘outsiders’ (μερίζει ἄλλοις), which ultimately also relates to the world of just and unjust outside the parable, is continued in line 12 with πάλιν (referring to that part of the heritage already given to the younger son, who with his life-style became a symbol of the unjust, and who therefore does not merit the father’s grace), as well as with χαρίσματα, the latter alluding especially to the spiritual gifts bestowed through baptism.33
Strophe 13 is fully in line with Luke 15:28a, Romanos merely embroidering upon Luke's succinct statement concerning his anger and unwillingness to attend the banquet. Strophe 14 contains Romanos' commentary on Christ's compassion, which he says, significantly, excites the just to envy — ἀμέτρου συμπαθείας τῆς καὶ τούτων δικαίων πρὸς φθόνον ἐρεθιζωσάς. This again points to a level outside the mere scope of the parable, as also becomes apparent in 14.10–15.7. In depicting the elder son's anger and envy, Romanos expands his response reported in a mere two verses in Luke 15:29–30 to two strophes (16–17). What is, however, of importance, is the fact that Romanos has the father persuade his elder son (οὗτος ἔπιστη, 21.5) that what he did was an act of love and a cause for joy and celebration. This joy is then shared by the elder son (ἡγαλλότοι μετὰ τοῦ συγγόνου αὐτοῦ), to such an extent that he imitates the role of the φανταλόγος (10.5–6), and praises the father for his love in terms that reflect the transformation operative throughout the hymn:

"Απαντεῖς κράζει μετ' εὐφημίας,  
ὅτι μοικάριον δόντες ἀφίηται  
πάσα ἁμαρτία, καὶ ἡ ἁνομία  
ἐπεκαλυφὴ καὶ ἐξηλετρῆ,  
Σὲ εὐλογῶ, μιλάνθρωπε,  
δοκεὶ ἑσωπάς καὶ τὸν σύγγονον,  
ὅ τοις αἴώνων δεσπότης καὶ κύριος."

The servants being an integral part of the biblical story, Romanos at first refers to them in the same terms as Luke does (cf. πρὸς τοὺς δούλους, 1.6 with Luke 15:22 πρὸς τοὺς δούλους). But in the very next strophe (2.7) they have become, in line with Romanos' transformation, God's angels: καὶ ἐξοσμάντα πέρα ἄγγελοι! This is reflected also in strophe 11:1 where they are called the servants of the banquet: "Ἀγγέλοι εἴσδοξαν αὐτούς οἱ ὑπομονοῦντες τῷ θείῳ, which at the beginning of the hymn (4.3) was said of the servants as such (τοὺς δούλους τοὺς ὑπομονοῦν). In 5.5 δούλοι is complemented by the term λειτουργοὶ μου, which has an ecclesiastical connotation. This is confirmed by the use of τερεῖζε as complement to δούλοι μου πιστὸι in 9.1. In 18.7 Romanos again uses the term 'angels', where he has the father explain to the elder son that he was never bereft of the 'church', and was always with him and all his angels: σὺν πάσι τοῖς ἄγγελοι μου.

In 21.2, however, it is difficult to decide whether Romanos identifies the angels with the guests:

"Ὅθεν σὺν ἔκαστιν, ὀλά, τοῖς εἰς τὸ δείπνον κληθέσιν:  
εὐφημίαν καὶ μελάνιες μετὰ πάντων τῶν ἄγγελων."
In strophe 2.10–11, in which Romanos refers to the guests, he does not include the angels, but mentions only the patriarchs, apostles, prophets and martyrs, a list which occur frequently in patristic writings as a specific group:

εὕθος πατριάρχαι, χοροὶ ἀποστόλων
καὶ οἱ προφήται μετὰ μαρτύρων.

It would therefore seem that the term ‘angel’ is reserved for the servants in line with Matthew 13:41. However, what is certain is that both servants and guests are visualised within the framework of the eucharistic metaphor, representing τοὺς φίλους καὶ γνωστοὺς αὐτοῦ (strophe 13.7) of the parable.

Apart from the φαλαινόλογος, to whom I have already referred above, there still remain the figures of the devil and his demons. They do not, of course, feature in the biblical account, but, in the eyes of Romanos, they fit in naturally with the story of the prodigal son, being defined as his enemies who caused his downfall, and who thus also complement the transformation from parable to life itself. It was the ‘enemy’ who has rendered the younger son naked (ἐξῆλθεν ἀπέδωκε, 4.9 — see τὸν γυμνωθέντα, 5.1 etc.), and made a spectacle of him in the eyes of his demons (ἐπεισήματε τοῖς δαίμοσι πᾶσιν, 4.10). In 6.8ff the enemy is identified as the devil. The function of the ring on the younger son’s hand would be to render him a person who is recognised as the son of the King, as well as one instilling fear into the enemies:

γένηται γνώριμος τοῖς ἐναντίοις
καὶ φοβερώτατος φονῆ τοῖς δαίμοσι
καὶ τῷ διαβόλῳ τῷ ὑπερηφάνῳ...

In strophe 7.4ff the transformation reaches back as far as the original destructor of mankind — the serpent. The shoes on the feet of the younger son would enable him to protect him against the serpent and thus trample on the serpent:

μὴ πάλιν εὕρῃ ὁ πανούργος δίρις καὶ δόλιος
πτέρναν τοῦ παιδὸς μου γεγυμνωμένην
καὶ ἐπιβολεύσῃ διὰ τῆς κακίας αὐτοῦ
τῷ πρῷ ὁ παμπόνηρος.

... ἐν ὡς ἀδύνατον κατη τῶν δράκοντα
ἐνα ἐπιβαίνῃ μετὰ καρποστασίᾳ
ἐπὶ ἀσπίδα καὶ βασιλισκον...

Conclusion

The kontakion being in nature a homiletic text, Romanos time and again applies his exegetical reading or ‘narration’ of the biblical account to
himself and to his audience. This 'application' occurs more often at the beginning and end of his hymns. In both the first and second prooimion Romanos identifies himself with the prodigal son — what we could call the 'priestly ἐγώ'. Romanos, as representative of his audience, confesses that he has imitated the prodigal son with his deeds, and like the prodigal son, is seeking forgiveness of his sins:

Τὸν ἀσωτὸν ἥζησα ταῖς ἀτόποις μου πράξεσι,
καὶ ως ἔκεινος προσπίπτω σοι καὶ ζητῶ τὴν ἀφεσιν, Κύριε.

In the second prooimion he prays to be deemed worthy of the mystical banquet and begs for the first robe which he has sullied by his sins:

Τῆς μιστικῆς σου τραπέζης ...
tὸν ἀσωτία φηλαρέντα ἄξιωσον,
καὶ τὴν πρώτην καταστολὴν ...

The final strophe is, as so often, in the form of a prayer, and in lines 4-7 especially, Romanos again applies the situation of the prodigal son to himself and his audience:

ημαρτηκότας ως τὸν ἀσωτὸν περιποίηται:
πράσδεξαι καὶ σώσων δι' εὐσπλαγγίας
τούς ἐν μετανοίᾳ τρέχοντας πρὸς σέ, βασιλεῦ,
χρυσάζοντας ''Ημάρτωμεν.''

He concludes his hymn with a final reference to the communion-table in line with his transformation of this parable into an eucharistic metaphor:

μετόχους τε τοῦ δείκνυον σου
ἀνάδεξον ως τὸν ἀσωτὸν,
ὅ τὸν αἰώνων δεσπότης καὶ κύριος.

NOTES

2. In two instances kontakion 49 also contains a reference to the baptismal font. See discussion regarding the 'new robe' and the 'trisagion' below, as well as Grosdidier de Matons, op. cit., 249, n.2.
3. The hymns or kontakia of Romanos are homiletic in nature. Their exegetical/homiletical nature can inter alia be perceived in this kontakion by the fact that Romanos refers to the biblical passage having been read to the audience in the same way as the authors of the prose homily do — cf. strophe 3.1–3:...

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5. In line with the repentance shown by the prodigal son, this specific hymn falls under the sub-genre of ‘penitential hymns’, called κοντάκιον κατανοητικόν.


7. διήμερος οπωσδήποτε is already in evidence in Polybien 29,5,6; cf. also Grosdidier de Matons op. cit. 239, n.1.


9. Cf. also Grosdidier de Matons, op. cit. 247, n.2: 'L’usage des chants et de la musique instrumentale dans les banquets, hérité des Anciens, est bien connu à Byzance; au banquet impérial de Noël on sait qu’on chantait l’hymne de Romanos: Εις Παρθένους σήμερον.'

10. In strophe 10.2 it is called φιλιον ζημιον, while in 12.6 the elder son asks one of the servants to inform him as to what is going on, since a μυστικός ... ήχος is sounding in his ears. This is not without significance, seeing that μυστικός ἦμιον, as Grosdidier de Matons (249, n.2) has pointed out, is the name given to the Trisagion. See also H.F. Stander, ‘A Trisagion Hymn to Christ’, Ekklesiastikos Pharas 75/2 (N.S.4) (1993) 85-90.

11. Grosdidier de Matons, op. cit. 247, n.4, confirms this by noting: ‘Nouveau jeu de mots sur εὐχαριστίας.’

12. The verb εὐδοκήσας, used by Romanos in 11.5, is of course a significant reminder of Luke 2:14 (εὐδοκήσας) and 3:22 (εὐδοκήσας) — both said of the Father’s attitude towards the Son.

13. For the transformation ‘father’ = ‘God the Father and Saviour’, see below.


15. Romanos merely defines the prodigal son’s first situation as εὐθεία θανάτου (4.8).

16. Notice again the direct shifting from prodigal son to mankind/creature!


18. For the significance of the king bestowing on a subject or person the gift of a ring, see Grosdidier de Matons, op. cit. 243, n.1.

19. The only occurrence of the adverb in the New Testament. For the noun ἀσωτία, see Eph.5:18, Tit.1:6, and 1 Pe 4:4.


21. δυσκανόντος δὲ αὐτῶν πάντα κτλ.


24. ὁσιός does not occur in the New Testament, but recalls the other New Testament words in this group, namely ἡσυχαινόμας, ἡσυχία, ὑπάρχει and ὁσιός, none of them, however, being used in connection with the prodigal son.
25. The phrase picks up the almost identical one in strophe 1.5, noted above.
26. Notice also the combination of φιλάνθρωπος and εὐσπαλαγγός in 20.6–7, where the Father points out to his elder son:
   Ἐξ ἐμοῦ τῶν δύο κύριτες καὶ πατήρ ἄγαθός, 
   φιλάνθρωπος καὶ εὐσπαλαγγός.
27. See also strophe 8.13: νεκρὸς γὰρ ἰδ. ... καὶ Ξηραν ὁ ἐλέησα, and 17.6: καὶ ἁπάθειας καλ.
28. See also 15.1 (δ οἰκείριον) and 22.10 (οἰκείρισιν).
29. The word ἑφίλονητος is especially used of God’s providence — see G.W.H. Lampe, op. cit., 220.
30. πατὴρ ἄγαθός in 20.6 reminds us of Jesus’ reference to his Father as such in Luke 18:19.
31. See above where I have discussed this adjective in relation to the banquet.
32. See Grosdidier de Matons, op. cit. 251, n.1.
33. See also Matthew 31:41.
34. See also Lampe, op. cit. 796.
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