IOTA 2027 Conference Proposal
Biblical Studies Group

CONFERENCE PROPOSAL TITLE

Being and Refusal: The Elder Brother's Eschatological Crisis in Luke 15:11–32
An Orthodox Reading Through Zizioulas, Heidegger, and Levinas

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a systematic re-reading of the Parable of the Prodigal Son that places classical patristic exegesis in dialogue with contemporary Orthodox ontology and continental phenomenology. While recent scholarship (Bailey, Keller, Nouwen) has recovered the elder brother's centrality as addressee, existing readings continue to interpret his crisis primarily as moral failure or psychological dysfunction. I argue, instead, that Luke 15:25–32 dramatizes a profound ontological choice between modes of being—a distinction articulated through John Zizioulas's eschatological ontology of communion.

The parable presents two competing modes of existence: being-as-reputation (the elder son's closed, merit-based, past-determined identity) and being-as-communion (the father's open, gift-based, eschatologically-oriented reality). The elder son stands outside the feast—which Zizioulas would recognize as standing outside truth itself, since "communion is the only way for truth to exist as life." This ontological reading transforms our understanding of the parable's unresolved conclusion.

To develop this thesis, the paper brings three hermeneutical resources into conversation. First, Martin Heidegger's existential analytic clarifies how the elder son embodies inauthentic existence through identification with das Man (social conformity) and existence defined by the finished past. Second, Emmanuel Levinas's phenomenology of the face illuminates why the parable devotes extended attention to the younger son's suffering—not merely as narrative exposition but as ethical pedagogy revealing the vulnerable Other to whom we are answerable. Third, Zizioulas's theology of personhood and communion provides the specifically Orthodox framework for understanding the crisis as a choice between participation in communion or self-exclusion from it.

The paper also addresses a methodological question relevant to contemporary Orthodox hermeneutics: the distinction between dogmatic and exegetical authority. While patristic readings of Scripture possess enduring spiritual and pastoral significance, they also reflect particular historical contexts and interpretive priorities. Chrysostom's celebrated homily, though pastorally brilliant for fourth-century catechumens, emphasizes the younger son's repentance and divine mercy while giving less attention to the parable's confrontational address to the self-righteous. To extend the patristic reading while addressing dimensions less emphasized in earlier interpretation is not to reject tradition but to continue its

interpretive and eschatological dynamism.

The parable's open ending—the reader never learns whether the elder son entered the feast—functions as a liturgical and existential summons. Following Zizioulas's understanding of liturgical time as the site where eschatology becomes a mode of existence, I argue that the parable remains unfinished because the reader's response remains pending. Each liturgical assembly re-enacts this drama whenever sinners approach the table. The question persists: will the righteous welcome them, or remain outside?

This reading demonstrates that close attention to narrative structure, phenomenological analysis, and systematic engagement with Orthodox eschatological ontology can yield fresh exegetical insight while remaining deeply rooted in tradition. It contributes to contemporary Orthodox biblical hermeneutics by modeling how dogmatic fidelity and exegetical development can coexist.

KEYWORDS

Luke 15 (Parable of the Prodigal Son)
Eschatological Ontology
John Zizioulas
Elder Brother / Being-as-Communion
Orthodox Biblical Hermeneutics
Heidegger / Levinas / Phenomenology
Patristic Exegesis and Contemporary Theology

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Archpriest Giorgi Tserodze is an independent theological researcher and editor of the theological journal Zghvari in Tbilisi, Georgia. His research centers on relational and eschatological ontology in Orthodox theology, with particular focus on John Zizioulas's theology of personhood and its implications for biblical hermeneutics, ecclesiology, and contemporary theology. He has translated major works by Zizioulas into Georgian and Russian and has published on Orthodox approaches to Scripture, continental philosophy, and the relationship between theology, culture, and political modernity.