

# Introduction

Then Jesus said: “A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father: ‘Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me’. So, he divided to them his livelihood. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living ...”

(LUKE 15:11-13)



The present book investigates the relevance, function, and variety of interpretations of the parable of the prodigal son throughout the medieval period and up to the religious conflicts of the sixteenth century. During the given period, this biblical story was increasingly intertwined with major theological and pastoral themes. This parable became a fundamental instrument employed in pastoral activities to shape and negotiate the self-perception of the contemporary faithful, who in turn were called to look at the prodigal son’s story as a mirror reflecting their own lives. The itinerary of the prodigal son – or rather, its many retellings – provided the audience not only with the main features of Christian life, but also with models of basic human conduct such as rebellion, repentance, and reconciliation. In particular, the present study underscores the progressive construction, the wide circulation, and the numerous transformations of a paradigmatic reading of this parable both in late medieval period and during the religious crises of the sixteenth century, when the biblical story was at the heart of the controversies between Catholic and early Protestant spokesmen.

From this perspective, I examine the multiple functions and the variety of meanings of this biblical parable in the context of the religious and social developments of the time. The interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son serves as a catalyst for analysing dominant late medieval discourses of religious instruction, particularly within a homiletic context.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, this book

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1 On the historiographical debate on and the definition of late medieval literature of religious instruction, see Bert Roest, *Franciscan Literature of Religious Instruction before the Council of Trent* (Leiden, 2004), pp. IX-XIX. My research developed in the context of the research project “Religious Orders and Religious Identity Formation in Late Medieval and Early Modern

aims to make a significant contribution to a better and more nuanced understanding of the texts produced for and employed within pastoral activities, thereby accenting the historical and cultural relevance of a vast set of sources that are still in need of greater scrutiny. Studies on medieval sermons and comparable religious texts have flourished in recent decades.<sup>2</sup> However, still too often these sources – particularly those written in Latin by clerics – are subject to a monolithic, undifferentiated treatment. This study argues that this group of sources, which may at first glance appear repetitive, in reality presents a surprisingly varied panorama that exhibits an intriguing interplay of continuity and change, and merits careful evaluation.

Moreover, by analysing the pastoral use of a specific evangelical text – namely the parable of the prodigal son – this study also aims to contribute to our understanding of the manner in which key biblical texts circulated in society, that is, how they were appropriated, adapted, transformed, and disseminated.<sup>3</sup> Attentive consideration will be given to both the active players – men and women, lay and cleric – and the various media involved in these processes. The interaction between biblical commentaries, model sermons, actual preaching, religious plays, devotional texts, religious songs, and a wide range of images was a decisive factor in the making and increasing popularity of the prodigal son.<sup>4</sup> By way of an in-depth examination apropos a strategic Gospel pericope, this book also has the ambition to contribute to the study of “the practice of the

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Europe (ca. 1420-1620)”, which was led by Dr Bert Roest, and which was funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research/Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO). On the scope of the project, see Bert Roest and Johanneke Uphoff, eds., *Religious Orders and Religious Identity Formation, ca. 1420-1620: Discourses and Strategies of Observance and Pastoral Engagement* (Leiden, 2016).

- 2 A panorama of the most recent studies is provided in Ronald J. Stansbury, ed., *A Companion to Pastoral Care in the Middle Ages (1200-1500)* (Leiden, 2010) and Sabrina Corbellini, Margriet Hoogvliet and Bart Ramakers, eds., *Discovering the Riches of the Word. Religious Reading in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, 2014). As introduction to the dynamic field of medieval sermon studies, see Beverly Mayne Kienzle, ed., *The Sermon* (Turnhout, 2000); Carolyn Muessig, ed., *Preacher, Sermon and Audience in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2002); and Volker Mertens, Hans-Jochen Schiewer and Wolfram Schneider-Lastin, eds., *Predigt im Kontext* (Berlin, 2013).
- 3 An interesting methodological perspective is provided by Hartmut Böhme et al., eds., *Transformation. Ein Konzept zur Erforschung kulturellen Wandels* (Paderborn, 2011). See in particular the collective article with the same title of the book (pp. 39-56), which discusses, among others, the concepts of appropriation (*Appropriation*), assimilation (*Assimilation*), encapsulation (*Einkapselung*), hybridization (*Hybridisierung*), and interpretation (*Umdeutung*).
- 4 I echo here Katherine L. Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 2000).

Bible”.<sup>5</sup> Not in abstract terms but in a concrete way, the present study undertakes an investigation of the Bible’s pervasive presence, its multiple functions, and the great flexibility of applications that it underwent within the changing socio-religious situations of the centuries under discussion. In fact, the parable of the prodigal son was repeatedly interpreted and presented in sophisticated and manifold ways, and its message was differentiated to suit the capacities of highly diverse audiences. As we shall see, this biblical story was “a flexible matrix”<sup>6</sup> used to shape a normative discourse of religious instruction and to strengthen a religious identity in both its personal and collective expression. This biblical narrative thus served to both transmit a vision of the world and – as part of a ritual form of communication – reassert “the representation of shared beliefs” that maintained a given symbolic order of society.<sup>7</sup>

By means of a slow and multifaceted process, in the later centuries of the Middle Ages the parable became an important master narrative that allowed people active in pastoral work to present their audiences with an emotionally engaging discourse on the model identity of the faithful and on the characteristics of God. In the skilful hands of those who shaped and controlled religious communication, the parable became an ideal space to touch upon the main features of Christian anthropology and soteriology. The study of the pastoral uses of this parable will lead us into the heart of a rich debate on freedom and grace, sin and conversion, justice and mercy, confession and salvation. More fundamentally, the story of the prodigal son emerges as a powerful instrument in the cultural construction and negotiation of the self-understanding of the faithful. This biblical text was indeed used to present the audience with “a normative centring”, which is to say, an authoritative, regulating, and legitimizing focal point, a clear-cut centre to interpret and orient life.<sup>8</sup> In the present case, however, the normative discourse was developed in a narrative form.

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5 On performative aspects of the biblical text see Susan Boynton and Diane J. Reilly, eds., *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages: Production, Reception, and Performance in Western Christianity* (New York, 2011).

6 This expression is used for the images of the Mass of St. Gregory in Jeffrey F. Hamburger, “Introduction,” in *The Mind’s Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, eds. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton, 2006), pp. 3-10: 6.

7 On the transmission view and the ritual view of communication, see the classical pages of James W. Carey, “A Cultural Approach to Communication [1975],” in James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York, 1992), pp. 13-36. On the vast field of medieval communication, see Marco Mostert, *A Bibliography of Works on Medieval Communication* (Turnhout, 2012).

8 On the interpretative category of ‘Normative Zentrierung’ see Berndt Hamm, *The Reformation of Faith in the Context of Late Medieval Theology and Piety*, ed. Robert J. Bast (Leiden, 2004), pp. 1-48.

Within the parameters sketched above, this book aims to show how clever religious educators used the parable as an ideal basis for a thorough discussion of the essential points of Christian faith and conduct. It is worthwhile to note that the Latin verb *parabolare* was derived from the substantive *parabola* (a calque of the Greek παραβολή) during the early Middle Ages. *Parabolare* was a highly productive term in Romance languages, generating *parler, parole, parlement* in French, as well as the Italian *parlare, parola*. Although the exact conditions that produced this evolution have not been completely elucidated by philologists, the decisive role played by Christian culture is clear. The words of Jesus in the Gospel became the model for any discourse.<sup>9</sup> A *parabola* was therefore the paradigmatic instrument to develop a well-structured discourse and to unfold a clear-cut interpretation of reality. Such a phenomenon proved particularly true for the parable of the prodigal son, which in the medieval period came to be considered as *the* model sermon of Jesus himself and a map to guide the listeners in their own lives.

In this study, the parable of the prodigal son functions like Ariadne's thread to enter the intricate and intriguing forest of texts of religious instruction produced for and performed in (late) medieval and sixteenth-century pastoral care. My encounter with a series of primary sources was a determining factor in the decision to focus on this parable. When I first visited the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague in 2009, I came across a peculiar incunabulum entitled *Quadragesimale novum de filio prodigo*. At the time, I was looking for fifteenth-century sermons on another parable – that of Lazarus and the rich man.<sup>10</sup> And yet, it was this fascinating book, with its unusual combination of words and images, that captured my attention. Its author, the Franciscan Johann Meder (d. 1518), considered the parable of the prodigal son as the ideal platform with which to offer his audience a lively, yet in-depth catechesis. As we shall see, this sermon collection had quite peculiar features. Nonetheless, as subsequent research has shown, the *Quadragesimale novum* was not the isolated product of an ingenious preacher who used this parable to expose his audience to the main points of a *Frömmigkeitstheologie* (theology of piety), which proposed an “internalization and intensification” of the emotional life of

9 “Dans l’Occident chrétien, la parole, en son sens générique, est pensée sur le modèle de celle du Christ”; Anita Guerreau-Jalabert, “Parole/parabole. La parole dans les langues romanes: Analyse d’un champ lexical et sémantique,” in Rosa Maria Dessì and Michel Lauwers, eds., *La parole du prédicateur, ve-xve siècle* (Nice, 1997), pp. 311–39: 331.

10 See Pietro Delcorno, *Lazzaro e il ricco epulone: Metamorfosi di una parabola fra Quattro e Cinquecento* (Bologna, 2014). This work has been relevant in developing the methodology that I employ in this study.

the soul.<sup>11</sup> Instead, Meder's sermon collection proved to be a relatively late exponent of a longstanding, yet still growing interest in the parable of the prodigal son within pastoral activities.

During the 1424 Lenten period, for instance, while preaching in the Florentine church of Santa Croce, Bernardino da Siena, the most famous preacher of his time, began a sermon by saying that on the same day he had decided to preach on the parable of the prodigal son, and for that reason he deviated from the biblical readings proposed by the liturgy. As a means to underpin his choice, Bernardino carefully explained this change in the calendar of readings to his audience: "The parable of the prodigal son is so full of meaning that, if there had been no other argument to bring the sinners to penitence, it would have been enough".<sup>12</sup> In his experience, the prodigal son perfectly summarized the core message of Lent: namely the conversion of the sinner and the mercy of God. Even leaving all other biblical passages aside, this parable alone could reach the goal of moving its listeners to penitence. Bernardino praised and privileged this parable for its pragmatic function, i.e. for its potential in achieving a transformation of the listeners.<sup>13</sup>

Bernardino shared his evaluation of the exceptional importance of this biblical narrative with several eminent predecessors. A century before, in 1306, the Dominican Giordano da Pisa had been even more radical in singling out the value of the parable of the prodigal son. Preaching in the Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella, he not only stressed that this parable was "the most useful and necessary part of the Gospel for sinners", but he went much further by stating that it possessed a quality that he deemed superior to other parts of the Gospel.

11 Berndt Hamm, "Was ist Frömmigkeitstheologie? Überlegungen zum 14. bis 16. Jahrhundert [1999]," in Berndt Hamm, *Religiosität im späten Mittelalter: Spannungspole, Neuaufbrüche, Normierungen*, eds. Reinhold Friedrich and Wolfgang Simon (Tübingen, 2011), pp. 116-53.

12 "El vangelo di domani [i.e. the parable of the prodigal son] è tanto pieno di sentenze, che se niuna altra cosa non ci fusse che questo a fare tornare un peccatore o più a penitenza, basterebbe"; Bernardino da Siena, *Le prediche volgari*, ed. Ciro Cannarozzi, 2 vols (Pistoia, 1934), 1, pp. 254-55 (hereafter cited as *Firenze 1424*).

13 See Carolyn Muessig, "Bernardino da Siena and Observant Preaching as a Vehicle for Religious Transformation," in *A Companion to Observant Reform in the Later Middle Ages and Beyond*, eds. James D. Mixson and Bert Roest (Leiden, 2015), pp. 185-203. See also Eleonora Lombardo, "La pragmatica politica nei sermoni minoritici tra Due e Trecento. Due casi di studio," in *Francescani e politica nelle autonomie cittadine dell'Italia basso-medioevale*, ed. Roberto Lambertini (Rome, forthcoming).

This Gospel passage is so full of wisdom that there is no word in it from which one cannot acquire much wisdom. This indeed is not the case with all the other Gospel passages. Yet, it is true for this one. Each of its words has a considerably deep meaning. In fact, this Gospel has a hundred words, and among them today we discuss only one, leaving out all the rest.<sup>14</sup>

Consistent with his remark, the Dominican preacher focused completely on a single detail of the story (the prodigal son's plea for his share of the property). He then stated that "preaching for an entire Lent on this parable alone would be good and necessary".<sup>15</sup>

The suggestion that Giordano da Pisa made (probably in hyperbolic manner) eventually came to be realized in 1494, when Johann Meder preached an entire Lenten cycle of fifty sermons on the prodigal son in Basel. The choice to preach a whole Lenten period on a single parable was without precedent. Other parables likewise had a prominent role in late medieval religious communication, such as the parable of Lazarus or that of the good Samaritan.<sup>16</sup> Only the parable of the prodigal son, however, was put forth in a project of such proportions. Meder elevated this biblical story to the level of the major texts of

14 "Il quale vangelo è sì pieno di sapienzia, che non ci ha nulla parola che non se ne potesse trarre molta sapienzia. Non è così di tutti gli altri, che d'ogni parola si possa trarre tanta sapienzia, ma di questo sì, però che non ci ha nulla parola che non abbia grande abisso: che -cci n'ha de le parole entro presso a cento, ma di tutte queste non diceremo se non solamente dell'una, e tutte l'altre lagando"; Giordano da Pisa, *Quaresimale fiorentino 1305-1306*, ed. Carlo Delcorno (Florence, 1974), p. 173.

15 "Questo vangelo non tratta altro se non de la penitenzia e de la misericordia, e è questo vangelo il più utile e 'l più necessario ai peccatori, che -ssia intra tutti gli altri. Il quale vangelo è tutto pieno di profonda sapienza, onde, disse il lettore [Giordano], non sarebbe sconvenevole a predicare tutta la Quaresima pur di questo, anzi sarebbe buono e necessario"; Giordano da Pisa, *Quaresimale*, p. 173.

16 On Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31) in medieval preaching, see Jussi Hanska, *And the Rich Man also Died; and He Was Buried in Hell: The Social Ethos in Mendicant Sermons* (Helsinki, 1997). Yet, in the Middle Ages this story was generally considered as a historical narrative; Delcorno, *Lazzaro*, pp. 28-29 and 68-70. An interesting pastoral use of the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is the *Curam illius habe* or *Medicina dell'anima*, written by the Dominican Antonino Pierozzi (d. 1459). This handbook for priests is structured on the fundamental catechistic patterns (the Decalogue, the seven deadly sins, the seven sacraments, and so forth), with a focus on confession. Antonino framed each chapter of his work with a brief reference to a different moment in the story of the good Samaritan. I consulted Antonino Pierozzi, *Curam illius habe: Medicina dell'anima* (Bologna: Balthasar Azoguidi, 1472).

Christian faith, just as the Creed, the Decalogue, and the Pater Noster, which had been used since the late thirteenth century to frame systematic catechesis in Lenten preaching.<sup>17</sup> The remarkable sermon collection crafted by Meder was – at least indirectly – imitated subsequently by another Franciscan preacher. In the much-changed historical context of the harsh religious disputations between Protestants and Catholics, Johann Wild again focused on the prodigal son for an entire Lent. In 1547, while preaching in the Cathedral of Mainz, a city at the forefront of the confrontation with Lutheran ideas, he delivered twelve sermons on the prodigal son and transformed the evangelical parable into the perfect framework for a thorough discussion of free will, sin, grace, and justification. His attempt to address the most burning theological issues of his time systematically from the pulpit, came just a few months after the Council of Trent had issued its decrees on justification. Wild's sermons on the prodigal son can thus be seen as an early initiative to disseminate the decisions of the Council, which had started to fix the guidelines of 'orthodox' Catholic theology.<sup>18</sup> However, this was also the result of a century-long process that transformed this parable into a master narrative habitually used to discuss a set of key concepts and to shape the religious self.

Spanning a period of more than two centuries, these four prominent preachers clearly expressed their predilection for the prodigal son as a key narrative to effectively convey an all-encompassing religious message to their listeners. Their sermons were just the tip of the proverbial iceberg of the growing attention given to this parable in pastoral activities. The specific space given to this biblical text in preaching becomes even more striking when one considers that the liturgy, as we will see, did not propose this parable in the readings for any of its main celebrations. The history of the pastoral use of this parable is therefore the history of a biblical text that was in a rather marginal position within the liturgy of the Latin Church and, nevertheless, increasingly gained a central role in religious communication. Time and again, we shall see that preachers not only reasserted the relevance of this Gospel passage and praised it as a perfect text for preaching on penitential themes. Rather, they also developed efficacious communicative strategies to give it a more appropriate space than that provided by the liturgical calendar.

The growing relevance of the prodigal son narrative in preaching is paralleled by equally dynamic forms of appropriation and re-elaboration of this

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17 See Jussi Hanska, "Sermones quadragesimales: Birth and Development of a Genre," *Il Santo* 52 (2012), 107-27.

18 See John M. Frymire, *The Primacy of the Postils: Catholics, Protestants and the Dissemination of Ideas in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden, 2010), p. 357.

biblical text by means of other media of religious instruction, which included religious plays as well as a wide array of visual artefacts (such as illuminations, stained windows, ivory caskets, tapestries, and woodcuts). The contemporary presence and interaction of this parable through different media offered people multiple access points to this story, and to its associated religious message. This multi-media representation of the prodigal son was explicitly acknowledged and praised by a prominent sixteenth-century Catholic preacher, Georg Witzel. He stated that this parable enabled believers to visualize human history and its vicissitudes of sin and redemption better than any other lively description. Then, he added:

For this reason, it is nice that this extraordinary parable is staged so often as a play and is so perfectly represented by painters and embroiderers. In this way, it is clearly represented to everybody, old and young, how the mercy of God is overwhelming, which he has manifested to the entire world in Jesus Christ, his only Son.<sup>19</sup>

Sermons, religious plays, paintings, and tapestries were all elements of a complex “culture of persuasion”.<sup>20</sup> Such a culture surely shaped and moulded the sixteenth century, and yet its basic workings were hardly different in previous centuries, which also saw a close interplay between assorted media within the sphere of religious communication.

This cultural process involved the agency not only of the clergy but also of the laity. During the fifteenth century, both “members of the *respublica clericorum* [...] and of the *respublica laicorum*” actively participated – with different levels of engagement – in the process of appropriation and cultural elaboration, which promoted a “dynamic approach to religion and religious knowledge”.<sup>21</sup> This is clearly visible when we consider three different religious plays on the prodigal son, which were written for and repeatedly staged by some of

19 “Ist derhalben fein, das ist dise allerlieblichste Parabel Comoedien weise gespilet, und von malern und stickern auff künstlichst controfact wirt, damit allen menschen alt und jung deutlich eingebildet were, wie übergros Gottes erbarmung sey, welche er in Christo Jesu seinem eingebornen der ganzen welt erzeugt hat”; Georg Witzel, *Quadragesimale Catholicum* (Mainz: Franz Behem / Cologne: Peter Quentel, 1545), fol. S2v.

20 See Andrew Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (Cambridge, 2005). This concept has been recently adopted – with a specific attention to preaching – in Torrance Kirby and P.G. Stanwood, eds., *Paul’s Cross and the Culture of Persuasion in England, 1520-1640* (Leiden, 2014).

21 See Sabrina Corbellini, “Beyond Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy: A New Approach to Late Medieval Religious Reading,” in *Cultures of Religious Reading in the Late Middle Ages*:



the Florentine youth brotherhoods during the second part of the fifteenth century. The repeated attention given to this parable has – again – no parallel among the other narratives used on the Florentine confraternal stages, thus confirming the prominent standing that the prodigal son’s story had in the religious culture of the time. These three plays, which we shall analyse in detail, resulted from a strict cooperation between clerics and lay people, who together promoted a sophisticated form of religious (and civic) acculturation specifically targeted at the young members of the confraternity. The biographies of the three playwrights perfectly embody the different agencies involved in this activity of religious instruction. They included a layman, a laywoman, and a secular priest: Piero Muzi, Antonia Pulci, and Castellano Castellani. Their plays can be described as exegesis in a theatrical format. The text written by Antonia Pulci has the additional value of allowing for an investigation of the active participation of women in this process of appropriation and interpretation of the biblical text. From this perspective, the other prominent case that we shall consider is the twelfth-century “dramatic narrative exegesis” of Hildegard of Bingen, who dedicated special attention to the prodigal son.<sup>22</sup>

Three strategic considerations support my choice to focus on the pastoral uses of the prodigal son narrative. They form the very basis of the present study of the function, relevance, and flexibility of this biblical parable in late medieval and early modern religious culture as well as of the mechanisms of religious acculturation that were at play in this period.

Firstly, in the realm of late medieval pastoral mission, the parable of the prodigal son was often employed as a means to present a well-structured religious model that went beyond a set of doctrinal or moral ideas. Through sermons and religious dramas, the people in the audience were commonly asked to identify with the main character of the story. Religious spokespeople considered the parable in question as an invaluable framework with which to project and shape the religious self. In other words, the parable gradually became a powerful device able to produce and suggest a “narrative identity”.<sup>23</sup> The fictional story of the prodigal son was put forth as the real biography of the listeners: the narrative mediated (and manipulated) self-knowledge. The story – or

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*Instructing the Soul, Feeding the Spirit, and Awakening the Passion*, ed. Sabrina Corbellini (Turnhout, 2013), pp. 33-53: 36.

22 See Beverly Mayne Kienzle, *Hildegard of Bingen and Her Gospel Homilies: Speaking New Mysteries* (Turnhout, 2009), pp. 109-54.

23 See Paul Ricoeur, “Narrative Identity,” in *On Paul Ricoeur. Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London, 1991), pp. 188-99, which underlines how this interpretative scheme is particularly true for “conversion narratives” (p. 199) – such as the story of the prodigal son.

rather, its continuous re-elaboration – was utilized to expound upon the basic facets of Christian life for each and every believer; it thus formed a sort of narrative catechism, particularly in the penitential interpretation that dominated medieval (and post-medieval) exegesis of the parable and, what is more, its presentation to the laity. For instance, in 1547 Johann Wild exhorted his listeners to acknowledge that this story was indeed their own story: “We have to ask the light of grace, so that we learn to recognize ourselves in the prodigal son”.<sup>24</sup> We shall see that in the sermons of Wild, as well as in those of many other preachers, the passage from the prodigal son to “we also” was continuous, and served to enhance the identification of the listeners with the protagonist of the story. Wild repeatedly insisted on this point by depicting the parable as a mirror:

The parable of the prodigal son is nothing else but a mirror, in which it is possible to see at once both the sinner’s misery and the mercy of God, and to see how one passes from one to the other, i.e. from God’s favour and grace to the misery of a sinner, and back from the misery of sins to God’s grace. In fact, the prodigal son went through both experiences. [...] These two *mutationes* or transformations are very different. One is good, and the other is bad.<sup>25</sup>

Such a mirror did not serve a static contemplation of a fixed identity but made possible a transformation.<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, the parable – and its

24 “Da will uns nun zum ersten not sein, das wir umb das liecht der genaden bitten, damit wir uns in dem verlorren Son lernen erkennen”; Johann Wild, *Die Parabel oder Gleichnuß von dem verlorren Son* (Mainz: Franz Behem, 1550), fol. 5r (sermon 1).

25 “die gleichnuß von dem verlorren Son nichts anderst ist dann ein spiegel, darinnen man bei einander sicht des sünders onseligkeit und Gottes barmhertzikeit, und wie mann von einem zu dem andern kömpt, das ist von Gottes gunst und genaden in das elend eins sünders; und herwider, aus dem ellend der sünden zu Gottes genaden. Der verlorren Son hat die beide erfarn. Er war in huld unnd genad, in ehr unnd gut bei seinem vatter, kame aber in die höchste armut unnd ellend, dargegen aber kam er aus sollichen onseligen wesen wider in sein vorige ehr unnd wolstandt. Das seind nun zwo mutationes oder enderung einander sehr ongleich. Die eine ist gut, die ander böß”; Wild, *Parabel*, fols. 11v-12r (sermon 2). On the *specula* genre, see Alain Dubreucq, “La littérature des *Specula*: Délimitation du genre, contenu, destinataires et réception,” in *Guerriers et moines. Conversion et sainteté aristocratiques dans l’Occident médiéval (IXe-XIIe siècle)*, ed. Michel Lauwers (Antibes, 2002), pp. 17-39. On the ideas connected with mirrors in late medieval culture, see Herbert Leon Kessler, “Speculum,” *Speculum* 86 (2011), 1-41 (with bibliography).

26 On the necessity of a dynamic concept of identity, see Adriano Prosperi, *Identità: L’altra faccia della storia*, (Rome-Bari, 2016).

interpretation – was presented to the listeners as a spiritual map on which to locate and orient themselves in their own lives.<sup>27</sup> Early on, this appears in Bernard of Clairvaux's *Parable of the Son of the King*. On the basis of a rather free retelling of the story of the prodigal son, the text provided its intended audience of novices and monks with a "spiritual topography" concerning the conflict between virtues and vices.<sup>28</sup> The idea of the parable as a useful map became explicit a century later in the influential sermons of the Dominican Iacopo da Varazze (Jacobus de Voragine). Having laid out the journey of the prodigal son, for the preacher, the four corners of the world symbolized four distinct qualities of God, by means of which he provided the listeners with a topography to orient their own lives. The point of arrival for each and every person was the encounter with God – that is portrayed here as the inescapable horizon – but the ultimate result of this encounter depended on the direction that one had chosen.

East and west are God's mercy and his justice, while south and north are his grace and his power. One who distances oneself from God's prevenient mercy gets closer to his avenging justice, and one who distances oneself from his subsequent grace gets closer to his punishing power.<sup>29</sup>

Such a mechanism was not limited to written texts. The early thirteenth-century stained glass windows that depict the parable of the prodigal son in French cathedrals have been interpreted as "powerful ideological maps" or "cognitive maps of the medieval world". They served to urge the viewers to give an ideologically orientated response to processes at work in the medieval social and religious landscape.<sup>30</sup>

27 As introduction to the studies on the medieval production of space, see Megan Cassidy-Welch, "Space and Place in Medieval Contexts," *Parergon* 27/2 (2010), 1-12.

28 See Mette Birkedal Bruun, *Parables: Bernard of Clairvaux's Mapping of Spiritual Topography* (Leiden, 2007), pp. 135-64.

29 "Quanto autem peccator magis se elongat a deo, tanto magis appropinquat ad deum [...]. Ideo quasi oriens et occidens sunt eius misericordia et iusticia, auster et aquilo sunt eius gratia et potentia; qui igitur elongat se ab eius misericordia preueniente, appropinquat ad eius iusticiam ulciscentem et qui elongat se ab eius gratia subsequente, appropinquat ad eius potentiam punientem"; Iacopo da Varazze, *Sermones Quadragesimales*, ed. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni (Florence, 2005), pp. 178-79.

30 See Gerald B. Guest, "The Prodigal's Journey: Ideologies of Self and City in the Gothic Cathedral," *Speculum* 81 (2006), 35-75 and Gerald B. Guest, "Narrative Cartographies: Mapping the Sacred in Gothic Stained Glass," *Res. Anthropology and Esthetics* 53/54 (2008), 121-42.

Nearly contemporaneous to Wild's sermons mentioned above, on the other side of the doctrinal divide, a Lutheran leader such as Philipp Melanchthon likewise acknowledged the relevance of the parable by saying:

A very sweet image is proposed to us in the detailed description of the return of the prodigal son. It exhorts us to penitence, attests that we will be received [by God], and eruditely summarizes both the causes and the effects. Therefore, this image has to be often considered attentively, so that we arouse ourselves to penitence and piety.<sup>31</sup>

Drawing on a longstanding medieval tradition, Melanchthon presented the prodigal son as the icon of the penitential itinerary and as a text that allowed him to expose the "*summa evangelii*, namely that, through Christ, the forgiveness of sins certainly will be given *gratis* to those who do penitence".<sup>32</sup> However, while there was a consensus on the strategic value of this biblical narrative for the instruction of believers, the ways in which the prodigal son was portrayed were by no means always the same. Rather, they shifted, depending on the priorities of those who adopted the story to convey their own message, as the sixteenth-century religious conflict perfectly illustrates.

This leads us to the second major consideration that underpins my study, that is, the dynamics of continuity and change in the interpretation and usage of the prodigal son parable. The interpretation of this biblical narrative, as with many passages of the Gospel, was shaped by a long reception history. The history of the interpretation of this parable has not yet been mapped out in a satisfactory manner, especially from the perspective of its colourful pastoral treatment within the life of the Church. Studies on the prodigal son concentrate almost entirely on the patristic age or on modern and contemporary times. The long period between Augustine and Luther has not attracted comparable attention, aside from a few articles on individual commentators. An overarching analysis of the interpretation and pastoral uses of this parable for the millennium between the bishop of Hippo and the reformer of Wittenberg does not yet exist. What often seems to be perceived as something unaltered

31 "Hactenus in hac longa descriptione reditus filii prodigi, dulcissima imago proposita est, quae nos ad poenitentiam hortatur, et testatur nos recipi, et causas et effectus erudite complectitur. Quare saepe et diligenter cogitanda est, ut nos ad poenitentiam et pietatem excitemus"; Philipp Melanchthon, *In evangelia quae usitato more diebus dominicis et festis proponuntur annotationes* (Leipzig: Valentinus Papa, 1557), p. 293.

32 "Haec tota concio [...] teneamus summam Evangelii, quod omnibus agentibus poenitentiam certo detur remissio peccatorum gratis, propter Christum"; Melanchthon, *In evangelia*, p. 284.

through the centuries was indeed a lively laboratory of experimentation. Moreover, in order to properly evaluate the late medieval depictions of this parable, the comparison with the previous exegetical and pastoral tradition is – in a methodological sense – considered essential. The analysis of patristic texts, high medieval homilies, and scholastic commentaries provides a solid foundation for a study of the innovation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as well as persistence of a dynamic cultural heritage. One example that draws on a preacher mentioned above, is how in 1547 Johann Wild depicted the process of the prodigal son's conversion as a consequence of the action of grace. Such an interpretation was probably influenced by the recent Tridentine decrees on justification. However, one also has to consider that presenting a detailed theology of grace within a commentary on the prodigal son was a common practice, which dated back to well-known thirteenth-century biblical commentaries such as those of Hugh of Saint-Cher and Bonaventure. The reception of the Tridentine decrees and the legacy of thirteenth-century exegesis were not mutually exclusive. What at a first glance might seem a reference to contemporary events could be – at the same time – the continuation of a century-old medieval line of exegesis.

The third strategic consideration behind my choice to focus on the story of the prodigal son pertains to the lively debate on this parable during the sixteenth century. The late medieval period already presented significantly diverse interpretations of this parable, several of which are closely scrutinized in this study. Nevertheless, such interpretations largely favoured a penitential reading. In both sermons and religious plays on the prodigal son, the preachers and playwrights put a different stress on either the sinful life of the protagonist or the father's merciful welcome; on either the human efforts or the grace of God; on either the inner relationship with God or the necessity of clerical mediation. Still, the main focus was not on theological discussions, but rather on the exhortation to do penitence in accordance with the codified sequence of contrition, confession, and satisfaction. I suggest calling this a "late medieval consensus" on the interpretation of this parable. On the one hand, the current study investigates the gradual formation of this paradigmatic interpretation. In doing so, it examines the dissemination of this paradigm via different media, the nuances and tensions within this shared framework of interpretation, and the appropriation and reformulation of this message by various actors at play in the process of religious communication. On the other hand, moving into the sixteenth century, the present book explores the crisis of this consensus and its transformation at the dawn of the confessional age. In fact, it was exactly this previously shared penitential message that became highly controversial during the sixteenth century, as the commentary on this parable by the Lutheran

Johannes Brenz summarized: “This is the main religious controversy of our time: how one has to make penitence”.<sup>33</sup> From this perspective, the study of the pastoral use of this parable also helps to shed light on the history of penance. It has a deep symbolic meaning that, in 1519, in his famous dispute with Luther, the Catholic theologian Johannes Eck initiated the discussion about the penitential process by using the traditional reading of the conversion of the prodigal son as a process shaped by both fear and love of God. As is evident in Eck’s repeated references to both prior and contemporaneous preachers, by refuting Luther’s ideas, he was defending not only a theological position, but also a pastoral tradition accustomed to mix – in varied and sophisticated forms – the fear of damnation with the description of the merciful love of God. In their dispute over the prodigal son, Luther and Eck were discussing the profile of the perfect believer. The novelty of the discussion was in their profound disagreement. The only point on which they agreed was that “the prodigal son represents the model of the penitent” and “Christ proposed him to us”, as Eck stated.<sup>34</sup> From this moment onwards, each side tried to enrol the prodigal son in its own religious discourse, thus breaking the earlier consensus on the parable’s penitential interpretation. While previous differences and tensions were composed into a common framework, from this moment onwards the entire scheme came under discussion. The prodigal son remained a key narrative in shaping religious identity, yet the context had become much more complex. Thus, the changing religious climate and the harsh debates of the period required a corresponding change in presenting the exemplary story of the prodigal son. An examination of the sermons and texts of religious instruction based on the prodigal son, therefore, both offers the possibility to touch upon a concrete pathway through which the religious debate of the time reached a wider audience, and enhances our understanding of the ways in which previous religious paradigms were adapted to and reinvented for the new historical context.

This book is structured in six chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the reception history of the parable of the prodigal son from the first centuries of the Christian era up to the early fourteenth century. Different typologies of biblical commentaries play a central role in this chapter, starting from the Gospel itself, passing through the rich legacy of patristic exegetes and the novelties of the medieval monastic and scholastic interpretations. The chapter ends

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33 “Haec est praecipua controversia nostri temporis de religione [...] quomodo agenda fit poenitentia”; Johannes Brenz, *Pericopae Evangeliorum* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Braubach, 1556), pp. 348-49.

34 “Filius prodigus gerit tyrum penitentis [...] eum ita proponit nobis Christus”; Martin Luther, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, 1883-2009), 2, p. 359.

with an initial consideration of the diverse forms (sermons, images, religious plays) by which thirteenth-century illiterate people were able to encounter and appropriate the story of the prodigal son. The chapter follows an ideal movement from the libraries and the classrooms, where the patristic and scholastic commentaries could be studied by clerical literates, to urban spaces such as the church and the town square, where people of different social backgrounds gathered, and where the voice of a preacher or a glittering stained glass window could mediate an interpretation of the story of the prodigal son relevant to the time. This urban scenario also dominates the following chapters.

Drawing on the studies of David d'Avray on late medieval preaching as a precocious form of mass communication,<sup>35</sup> Chapter 2 analyses the model sermons on the prodigal son that were disseminated via the most widespread Latin sermon collections written from the second part of the thirteenth to the late fifteenth century, i.e. from Iacopo da Varazze to Oliver Maillard. These types of sources had a key role in the dissemination of ideas in late medieval and early modern Europe. The most successful collections enjoyed a large circulation and were often used for decades or even for centuries by generations of preachers. Such preachers drew on these collections to craft the right sermons for their own congregations, mediating and adapting the written texts according to the circumstances. In a slow, centuries-long process, model sermons on the prodigal son deeply influenced the construction of a shared interpretation of this story, which reached large strata of society through the voices of preachers.

Chapter 3 narrows our focus to the sermons written and preached in fifteenth-century Italy in the period that spans from the time of Bernardino da Siena to that of Girolamo Savonarola. This chapter and its scope provide the opportunity to study in greater depth both model sermons and *reportationes*, that is, the notes written down by a listener during or immediately subsequent to witnessing a sermon. The fifteenth-century Italian sources are exceptionally rich in this rare type of document. This allows for a fruitful analysis of the relationship between the surviving model sermons and actual preaching. Moreover, *reportationes* bear witness to the active contribution of laypeople directly involved in writing down, copying, re-elaborating, and transmitting the ideas conveyed from the pulpit by some of the most famous preachers of the time.

The analysis of the sermons on the prodigal son preached in fifteenth-century Italy opens the way for studying other forms of appropriation of the parable that took place in the same cultural context. Chapter 4 focuses on three

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35 See David d'Avray, "Method in the Study of Medieval Sermons," in *Modern Questions about Medieval Sermons*, eds. Nicole Bériou and David d'Avray (Spoleto, 1994), pp. 3-29.

religious plays on the prodigal son that were written during the second part of the fifteenth-century in Florence, where a peculiar genre of theatre had a prominent role as a pioneering catechetical activity. These plays were primarily geared toward the boys of the confraternities and the audience of their performances. However, a closer look reveals that each play had been infused with its own perspective, relied on different sources, accented various aspects of the parable, and selected its own register. Each play was indeed a proper theological and catechetical interpretation of the parable, given that its playwright engaged with the biblical text with her or his own sensibility. They depended on a rich tradition of interpretation concerning the parable. Nonetheless, they were also innovative in their elaboration, which aimed at integrating their plays within the Florentine socio-political and cultural milieu. Hence, these plays summarize a familiarity with this key biblical text that crossed the borders between clerics and laypeople, men and women alike.

After two chapters entirely focused on the geographic region of Italy, we then move to Basel. Chapter 5 focuses on the sermon cycle on the prodigal son preached by Johann Meder in this culturally dynamic city in 1494. This cycle represents a spectacular case of appropriation and transformation of the story of the prodigal son. Meder adopted this parable to present an all-encompassing religious message to his audience in a semi-dramatic form, inviting his listeners to identify with the parable's main character. In these sermons, the itinerary of the prodigal son did not end with the father's merciful reception, but instead developed into an intense meditation on the Passion of Christ. Within this ingenious sermon cycle, the prodigal son gradually assumes the distinguishing features of the *sponsa Christi*, and finally declares his passionate love for Christ. These sermons were immediately printed in the form of a lavishly illustrated book. Therefore, the analysis of this peculiar editorial format, which has no parallel among fifteenth-century sermon collections, allows for a close consideration of the interplay between visual and verbal communication within the context of the pastoral use of this parable.

Finally, Chapter 6 depicts the different strategies used to appropriate the parable of the prodigal son within the diverging confessional factions of the first half of the sixteenth century, focusing on the German area, which was at the centre of the religious debate. The chapter first considers the role of the prodigal son in the disputation on penitence between Eck and Luther in 1519. Next, it turns to early Lutheran texts as a resource to investigate the manner in which evangelical ideas were disseminated via sermons, dramas, and commentaries on the parable in question. Subsequently, it considers the sermons of leading Catholic preachers, who vigorously faced the challenges posed by the Reformation. Particular attention is given to Johann Wild. His sermons



exemplify the way in which the prodigal son was considered a strategic tool to propose a well-structured religious identity, and to deal with contemporary theological debates. Moreover, their timing alongside the Tridentine decree on justification assumes an additional symbolic value as a sign of the transition to the new confessional era and its divisions. In this renewed religious and cultural context, the prodigal son continued to be depicted as the perfect mirror in which to contemplate one's own life. The image reflected in the mirror was, however, no longer the same for everyone.