A Dancing Prodigal:
A Reading of G. Balanchine’s Ballet,
Prodigal Son (1929) from a Biblical Perspective*

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I. Introduction

One of the most dramatic stories in the Bible is the so-called the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), which has been praised as Evangelium in Evangelio.1) It has attracted many readers of artistic temperament and abilities to enhance its flavor by reproducing it in various forms of arts such as paintings,2) music,3) film4) and performances.5)

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2) E.g., Albrecht Hans Sebald Beham (The Prodigal Son Wasting His Patrimony, 1540, National Gallery of Arts, Washington); Jan Sanders van Hemessen (The Prodigal Son, 1536, Muses Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels); Gerrit van Honthorst (The Prodigal Son, 1622, Alte Pinakothek, Munich); Drer (The Prodigal Son among the Swine, 1497-98, British Museum); Pieter P. Rubens (Return of the Prodigal Son, ca. 1618, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten); Rembrandt (The Return of the Prodigal Son, 1669, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg); Bartolome Esteban Murillo (Return of the Prodigal Son, 1667-70, National Gallery of Arts, Washington).

3) E.g. Achille-Claude Debussy, L’Enfant Prodigue (1884), a cantata honored him with the Prix de Rome. It is not difficult to find many gospel songs based on this parable, and in some modern popular musical works adopting or paralleling, if the biblical narrative is not kept in the composer’s mind, its motif such as Eagles’ Desperado (1973, later sung by Judy Collins).

4) Except for a couple of films like The Prodigal (1955, dir. Richard Thorpe) which is a representation of the Lucan narrative adding a little touch of dramatization, most movies of this parable, unlike other forms of arts, have been produced in a sort of allegorical ways adopting its themes and motifs, for instance A Father and Two Sons (1992, American Bible Society and
These artistic works are the products of inter-relational communication between the biblical text and artists, and this shows how the artistic creativity can make the extension of the hermeneutic boundary of the biblical text possible. However, many biblical scholars and exegetes throughout the history of biblical scholarship have read and interpreted the biblical narratives as written texts on the paper only, and this has limited the interpretive possibilities of biblical narratives to the papery textbook.

A movement to approach the biblical text from a perspective of arts than that of traditional biblical scholarship has recently been made amongst some biblical scholars, and it is the same in the Korean biblical scholarship. These scholarly atmosphere however, is not widespread and it cannot be denied that the biblical scholars of this kind are still struggling to introduce this interdisciplinary approach to the Korean biblical scholarship. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to give the Korean biblical scholarship an example of this approach to the biblical studies, and to show how affluent possibilities in reading and interpreting biblical narratives can be made. This article discusses G. Balanchine’s (1904-1983) ballet piece, Prodigal Son (1929), and it will help the reader feel how the parable of the prodigal son in Luke’s gospel can be interpreted in a different way, and find a fresh taste of this parable at the place where these two texts of the Lucan text and Balanchine’s audio-visual text meet each other. It will firstly

5) E.g. Benjamin Britten’s opera The Prodigal Son (Op. 81, 1968), which is one of his three pieces for church performance.
6) It is no more than a decade ago when the SBL meeting began to open the session for the bible and art.