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DOING JUSTICE TO THE UNJUST STEWARD:
AN EXEGETICAL EXAMINATION OF
LUKE 16:1-13 AND ITS CONTEXT

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Joel Allen Troxler, Jr.
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DOING JUSTICE TO THE UNJUST STEWARD: AN EXEGETICAL EXAMINATION OF LUKE 16:1-13 AND ITS CONTEXT

Joel Allen Troxler, Jr.

Read and Approved by:

Mark A. Seifrid
Mark A. Seifrid (Chairperson)

John B. Polhill
John B. Polhill

Robert H. Stein
Robert H. Stein

Date Nov 17, 2003

THESES Ph.D. .T759d
0199701817538

To Liza, my wife,
for her love,
and to
Joel and Suzy, my parents,
for their invaluable encouragement,
and to
Aubrey, Odell, and Ava, my grandparents,
for their constant support

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACE	xi
 Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of Purpose	1
Thesis	7
Method and Organization	13
2. HISTORY OF RESEARCH.....	18
Interpretations before Ireland	21
Ireland and His Reviewers	42
Interpretations since Ireland	56
Summary	81
3. TEXT AND LANGUAGE OF THE PARABLE	83
Establishing the Original Text	83
Lexical, Grammatical, and Syntactical Features of the Passage	88
Translation of Luke 16:1-13	137
Summary	138
4. SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PARABLE	140
The Rich-Poor Chasm	141
The Honor-Shame, Limited Good, Patron-Client Culture	147

Chapter		Page
	Lending Practices in First-Century Israel	153
	Love of Money and the Pharisees	159
5.	LITERARY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE PARABLE	168
	The “Parable” and Its Interpretation	169
	The Parable in Its Literary Context	190
	Possible Literary Conventions	229
	Summary	242
6.	EXEGETICAL SYNTHESIS.....	245
	Was the Manager Accused Fairly or Slandered?.....	245
	Whose Commodities Was He Forgiving—His Own or Those of His Master?	249
	Whom Was the Manager Attempting to Benefit?.....	253
	Were the Debtors Impoverished Farmers or Wealthy Businessmen?	257
	Where Does the Parable End?	260
	Who Praised the Manager?	266
	Why is the Steward Praised?	270
	How Does the Parable Proper Relate to Its Applications?	274
	How Does This Parable Cohere with the Theology of the Third Gospel? ..	278
	Conclusion	285
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	290

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
<i>ABR</i>	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
<i>ASTI</i>	<i>Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute</i>
<i>ATR</i>	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
<i>BangTF</i>	<i>Bangalore Theological Forum</i>
<i>BCPE</i>	<i>Bulletin du Centre Protestant d'Études</i>
BDAG	Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilber Gingrich, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i>
BDF	F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament</i>
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BibS(F)	Biblische Studien (Freiburg, 1895-)
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CJT</i>	<i>Canadian Journal of Theology</i>
<i>CSR</i>	<i>Christian Scholars Review</i>
<i>CTM</i>	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
<i>CTR</i>	<i>Criswell Theological Review</i>

<i>EBC</i>	<i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>
<i>EDNT</i>	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>EstBib</i>	<i>Estudios Bíblicos</i>
<i>ETL</i>	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i>
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>EvT</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>FoiVie</i>	<i>Foi et Vie</i>
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
<i>HeyJ</i>	<i>Heythrop Journal</i>
<i>ICC</i>	International Critical Commentary
<i>Imm</i>	<i>Immanuel</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>ISBE</i>	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>LCL</i>	Loeb Classical Library
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSNTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>LSJ</i>	H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9 th ed.
<i>NAC</i>	New American Commentary
<i>NBf</i>	<i>New Blackfriars</i>

<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
<i>NIB</i>	<i>New Interpreter's Bible</i>
<i>NIBC</i>	New International Biblical Commentary
<i>NICNT</i>	The New International Commentary on the New Testament
<i>NIGTC</i>	New International Greek Testament Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NovTSup</i>	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
<i>NRT</i>	<i>Nouvelle Revue Théologique</i>
<i>NSBT</i>	New Studies in Biblical Theology
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review & Expositor</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>RSR</i>	<i>Recherches de Science Religieuse</i>
<i>RTP</i>	<i>Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie</i>
<i>SBLDS</i>	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SP</i>	<i>Sacra Pagina</i>
<i>SWJT</i>	<i>Southwestern Journal of Theology</i>
<i>TBT</i>	<i>The Bible Today</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
<i>ThViat</i>	<i>Theologia Viatorum</i>
<i>TJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TLZ</i>	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
<i>TNTC</i>	Tyndale New Testament Commentary

TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentary
TS	<i>Theological Studies</i>
TTE	<i>Theological Educator</i>
TZ	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
VCaro	<i>Verbum Caro</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VD	<i>Verbum Domini</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WJT	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. The Concatenation of Parables in Luke 15 and 16	192

PREFACE

Although I am the one ultimately responsible for the content of this dissertation, its quality would have been significantly impaired had it not been for the diligent leadership and assistance that Mark Seifrid, my supervising professor, offered me. In the years that I have spent under his tutelage, Dr. Seifrid has taught me to question every secondary source, re-examine my conclusions, and always dig a bit deeper for the truth. For this, I am deeply grateful; he has started me on the right path towards biblical scholarship. Likewise, Professors John Polhill and Robert Stein have never ceased to offer valuable insight and support. I have been in the enviable position of having three recognized scholars on my dissertation committee, and my goal is to make sure their legacy continues in my own future work. In the several years that I have studied and learned under the guidance of these men, I have realized that they are not merely scholars. They are *Christian* scholars—in every sense of the term. They have given me affirmation and encouragement in a measure far exceeding what I deserve, and I cannot thank them sufficiently for the model that they have established for me to follow. In addition, I thank the administration of Southern Seminary, which has been my second home for nearly nine years, for providing an atmosphere in which scholarship thrives in conjunction with a fervent commitment to Christ.

There is perhaps no person in the world who knows me better than my wife, Liza. Despite my shortcomings, she accepts me unconditionally and provides the

emotional support that allows me to pursue my career most effectively. She has sacrificed a great deal to be with me and to help me complete my studies. For her, thanks are not enough. I have only my love to offer. In the same way, my family—my brothers, my grandparents, my mother, and especially my father—deserve my sincere gratitude. From my childhood to now, they have continually supported me in all that I have done. I appreciate all of you more than you know.

Finally, to God be all the thanks and all the credit. In fewer than thirty years that I have been on his earth, I have already received more blessings and undeserved advantages than most people receive in a lifetime. I acknowledge without equivocation that God stands behind it all, offering grace and joy. I pray that this dissertation will be one small way in which I may provide a service to His community of Bible scholars. We are all merely vessels for his work, and we strive to be honest stewards of His Word.

Soli Deo Gloria

J. Allen Troxler, Jr.

Louisville, Kentucky

December 2003

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Purpose

One of the only indisputable matters about the parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8a) is that it is a difficult passage to interpret. Indeed, through centuries of investigation on this matter, there has been a virtually unanimous consensus about the parable's abstruse point(s). In the ancient world, Julian the Apostate used the parable as evidence of Jesus' despicability—because a dishonest steward is praised as a model of behavior—and the inferiority of the Christian faith.¹ In the sixteenth century, Cajetan admitted that he found this parable to be impossible to understand.² At the close of the nineteenth century, Jülicher called this parable the *crux interpretum* of the parables.³

¹Ronald G. Lunt, "Towards an Interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke xvi. 1-18)," *ExpTim* 66 (1954-55): 335; idem, "Expounding the Parables: III. The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-15)," *ExpTim* 77 (1965-66): 134; Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 86. (Lunt does not cite his source in either article; Bailey cites a secondary source currently unavailable to the present writer.) The early church was so "embarrassed" by this parable that even the radically skeptical R. Funk, head of the Jesus Seminar, admits that there is no way that the church would have invented such an inexplicable parable, so it must be genuine (Robert W. Funk, Bernard Brandon Scott, and James R. Butts, *The Parables of Jesus, Red Letter Edition: A Report of the Jesus Seminar* [Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1988], 32). So confusing is the parable that the Jesus Seminar assigns one of its few red votes to it.

²I. J. Du Plessis, "Philanthropy or Sarcasm?—Another Look at the Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13)," *Neot* 24 (1990): 1. Bultmann would make exactly the same claim four centuries later. (Du Plessis bases this claim on a comment by Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 86, which refers to Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 29, which refers to Richard Chenevix Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* [New York: Harper/Revell, n.d.], 324, which cites a 1530 commentary by Cajetan unavailable to the present author.)

³Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. in 1 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), 2:495. The same phrase is also used by Beavis, Gächter, Krämer, and Fonck, none of whom makes any mention of Jülicher as a source for this phrase.

During the twentieth century, despite the unyielding flood of books and articles attempting to provide clarity, still no clear consensus formed. Instead, interpretations of the parable were characterized by increasing fragmentation and polarization as the century progressed. The result is accurately reflected by the words of John S. Kloppenborg, who calls the parable a “constant source of puzzlement for exegetes and homilists [sic] alike . . . [and] an intractable problem . . . [such that] there is hardly a consensus on any single aspect of this parable.”⁴ In similar fashion, I. Howard Marshall claims, “Few passages in the Gospel can have given rise to so many different interpretations as the parable of the prudent steward.”⁵ Robert H. Stein states the predicament even more succinctly, “Few passages of Scripture have caused as much confusion.”⁶ Bernard B. Scott is in good company in his observation that the parable “has created confusion, controversy and [even] embarrassment” for its interpreters.⁷ In his massive two-volume set on Luke, Darrell Bock adds his voice to this choir on this point: “The parable of the ‘unjust steward’ is one of the most difficult of Jesus’ parables to understand.”⁸ Baffled interpreters in the twentieth-century English-speaking academy have left a legacy of dismayed characterizations of the parable for this generation’s exegetes: it is a “notorious puzzle,”⁹ “one of the most puzzling of all within the Synoptic

⁴John S. Kloppenborg, “The Dishonored Master (Luke 16, 1-8a),” *Bib* 70 (1989): 474.

⁵I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 614. Moreover, Marshall comments on the whole of Luke 16, “It is not surprising, therefore, that the section shows links with many Lukan themes, and that it is hard to find one simple thread of thought uniting its various parts” (*ibid.*).

⁶Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, NAC, vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 411.

⁷Bernard Brandon Scott, “A Master’s Praise: Luke 16, 1-8a,” *Bib* 64 (1983): 173.

⁸Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1323.

⁹Lunt, “Towards an Interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 335.

Gospels,”¹⁰ “exceedingly strange,”¹¹ “one of the most difficult passages in Sacred Scripture,”¹² “an exegetical hornets’ nest,”¹³ and “undoubtedly the most difficult of the synoptic parables.”¹⁴ In sum, few would disagree with Blomberg’s assessment that “this parable probably contains more exegetical and theological perplexities than any other.”¹⁵

During the twentieth century, this unanimity about the parable’s enigmatic meaning was not limited to English-speaking interpreters; at the same time, there was a similar bewilderment among Continental researchers, as demonstrated in Thomas Hoeren’s statement,

Das zum lukanischen Sondergut zählende Gleichnis vom ungerechten Verwalter gehört zu den *schwierigsten* Passagen des Neuen Testaments. Seit der frühen Kirche haben sich Interpreten *vergeblich* um eine sinnvolle Deutung dieses Gleichnisses bemüht.¹⁶

Similarly, Bigo refers to this parable as “un des lieux les plus obscurs de l’Evangile.”¹⁷

P.-H. Menoud is even more blunt, “Cette péricope est l’une des plus embarrassantes des

¹⁰Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 147.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Charles H. Pickar, “The Unjust Steward (Lk. 16:1-9),” *CBQ* 1 (1939): 250.

¹³Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*, NSBT 7 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 121.

¹⁴Greg W. Forbes, *The God of Old: The Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke’s Gospel*, JSNTSup 198 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 152; Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 86, uses the exactly same words to describe the parable.

¹⁵Craig L. Blomberg, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: An Historical, Exegetical, and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1-13*, by Dennis J. Ireland, *Them* 19 (1994): 26-27.

¹⁶Thomas Hoeren, “Das Gleichnis vom ungerechten Verwalter (Lukas 16,1-8a)—zugleich ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Restschuldbefreiung,” *NTS* 41 (1995): 620. (Italics added.)

¹⁷P. Bigo, “La richesse comme intendance, dans l’Evangile: à propos de Luc 16, 1-9,” *NRT* 87 (1965): 267.

évangiles.”¹⁸ Camps and Ubach call the parable “muy controvertido,”¹⁹ and Krämer refers to it as “omnium parabolarum Jesu obscurissimam.”²⁰ This litany of descriptions from different centuries and languages is just a small sample of like-minded scholars who admit the unusual difficulty in understanding this passage that Capon calls “the hardest parable.”²¹ It, therefore, comes as no surprise that “almost every article or book section devoted to the so-called parable of the unjust steward begins by noting that it is the most difficult of the parables.”²² This dissertation is no exception.

With all parties agreed that this parable is perplexing, one might wonder whether the hundreds of attempts to interpret the parable have yielded any definitive results. While it is true that many, with varying degrees of success, have attempted to unravel this Gordian knot, no single interpretation currently commands a strong majority. This multiplicity of competing interpretations is reflected in L. John Topel’s statement, “The literature dealing with the parable of the unjust steward is staggering, and after all the effort expended, its meaning still eludes us.”²³ That no definite consensus has emerged from the hundreds of studies is confirmed by Kyoung-Jin Kim, who claims that

¹⁸Philippe-H. Menoud, “Richesses injustes et biens véritables,” *RTP*, n.s., 31 (1943): 6.

¹⁹G. M. Camps and B. M. Ubach, “Un sentido bíblico de ἀδικος, αδικία y la interpretación de Lc 16, 1-13,” *EstBib* 25 (1966): 76.

²⁰Michael Krämer, “Aenigma parabolae de villico iniquo Lc 16,1-13,” *VD* 46 (1968): 370.

²¹Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, combined ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 302.

²²David Landry and Ben May, “Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke 16:1-8a),” *JBL* 119 (2000): 287.

²³L. John Topel, “On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward: Lk 16:1-13,” *CBQ* 37 (1975): 216. Topel’s comment is by no means the only one demonstrating a degree of perplexed resignation; his statement is representative of the similar observations of many other scholars.

“all the interpretations introduced up to now are inadequate.”²⁴ In the past several decades, articles solely addressing this passage have been myriad, and the output of commentaries on Luke (which, of course, cover this passage among others) has been incessant.²⁵ In addition to these brief and often narrowly focused articles or commentary segments, there have been a couple of recent monographs dedicated primarily to this parable.²⁶ Given this relative dearth of extended treatments of the parable (and growing number of brief new studies addressing the parable), it appears justified to enter the discussion with just such an attempt. Such is the goal of this dissertation.

Given this history of confounded scholars and competing interpretations, is it justified to add one more study to the discussion? Some biblical scholars might deem this study as superfluous. Luke Timothy Johnson believes that the parable “has generated

²⁴Kyoung-Jin Kim, *Stewardship and Almsgiving in Luke's Theology*, JSNTSup 155 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 146.

²⁵See the bibliography at the end of this dissertation for a list of dozens of articles and commentaries from just the past few decades.

²⁶Since the mid-twentieth century, only two scholarly monographs dealing primarily with this parable have been published. The more recent is C.-S. Abraham Cheong, *A Dialogic Reading of The Steward Parable (Luke 16:1-9)*, Studies in Biblical Literature 28 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001). This study was originally Cheong’s doctoral dissertation; its completion date is unknown, but it appears to have been completed in the late 1990s, since the foreword of the published version was written by David J. A. Clines in January 2000. In this work, the author employs a very narrow methodology: he applies the dialogic literary theory of Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin to the parable. Although unique, the study’s focus is so narrow that it is unlikely to produce much of an impact on the field as a whole. Moreover, as explained later in this dissertation, Cheong’s conclusion is wanting. The other work, published more than eleven years ago, is Dennis J. Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: An Historical, Exegetical, and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1-13*, NovTSup 70 (Leiden: Brill, 1992). This work is cited by almost all subsequent scholars as the definitive history of interpretation for the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century. Ireland’s work is also a published doctoral dissertation, which Ireland completed at Westminster Theological Seminary in 1989; although it is a fine example of scholarship, its research is now nearly fifteen years old, and most of the resources that the author cites are more than half-a-century old. As a result, Ireland lacks interaction with dozens of articles and books that have been subsequently released; moreover, he only gives cursory attention to a few significant late-twentieth-century works that were available at the time of his writing (e.g., the work of B. B. Scott from the 1980s).

a disproportionate amount of scholarly discussion,”²⁷ so a full-length study like this would presumably exacerbate the disproportion. Lunt is also unlikely to admit that there is just cause for adding another study on the topic, for he bemoans that the “list of the hundreds of interpretations which during all these centuries have gathered round and entangled in obscurity this parable of the Unjust Steward is a pathetic record of wasted ingenuity.”²⁸ Lest this dissertation be perceived as an exercise in “wasted ingenuity,” one counterpoint should be considered: as long as no scholar has produced any kind of consensus about the parable’s interpretation, there is warrant for providing a new assessment of the evidence. In fact, a pericope from which hundreds of studies have yielded no clear consensus is perhaps one most worthy of scholarly attention—more worthy than one upon which everyone is in one accord. Moreover, given that the most recent general extended treatment of the parable (by Ireland²⁹) is becoming superannuated, it is at least a helpful contribution to the scholarly community to present all subsequent short or focused studies in one place, locate them on an interpretive continuum, and evaluate them based on their merits and weaknesses. In sum, the message of the parable of the Unjust Steward is still opaque to many interpreters, and the scholarly community is not in harmony about the proper interpretation of it. Therefore, the need exists for a renewed and extensive examination of it.

²⁷Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, SP, vol. 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 246.

²⁸Lunt, “Towards an Interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 335, quoting C. G. Lang (source unknown).

²⁹Despite the three-year interval between Ireland’s dissertation (1989) and its publication by Brill (1992), Ireland admits in his preface that he makes “no attempt . . . to include and interact with relevant literature that may have appeared” during the interim (Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, xi).

Thesis

The objective of this dissertation will be to address the most pressing unresolved questions regarding interpretation of the parable of the Unjust Steward. The dissertation will investigate the parable proper (vv. 1-8a) and its applications (vv. 8b-13) with respect to its grammatical, historical, and literary context. The work is intended to benefit the New Testament scholar, who, knowing that context is one's primary hermeneutical tool, needs a proper understanding of this text in order to make judgments about other pericopae in the Third Gospel that are close in proximity and theme. A scholar who wrongly exegetes this parable is more likely to misunderstand the material that the Evangelist chose to place before and after it; therefore, an exegetically sound understanding of this parable will help eradicate misunderstanding about other Lukan passages.

Gagnon correctly observes that “one will rarely hear this parable preached from contemporary pulpits” because of its potentially scandalous content and difficult interpretation.³⁰ If he does not clearly understand the meaning of the parable of Jesus, the preacher will either bypass it or run the risk of conveying the wrong message about it to his audience. This work, therefore, is also intended to be of benefit for the well-read expository preacher, who needs to understand the parable properly in its context in order to explain to his congregation Luke’s message to them and application for their lives. A misinformed and misdirected sermon on this parable is one that will obscure Luke’s main point for the audience and could leave the wrong impression of the Third Gospel’s

³⁰Robert A. J. Gagnon, “A Second Look at Two Lukan Parables: Reflections on the Unjust Steward and the Good Samaritan,” *HBT* 20 (1998): 2. Borsch, on the other hand, believes it is never preached because it resists easy allegorizing; for that reason it is also placed “on the banned list of Sunday-

message as a whole. It is my hope that both of these groups, the scholars and the preachers, will use this work to explain Luke's message better to their respective audiences and that the next generation of scholars will use this work as a foundation upon which to build even more cogent analyses of this parable.

To claim that this study will perfectly elucidate Luke's use of this parable where scores of investigations by more competent scholars in decades past have not would be both naïve and quixotic. Given space allowed here, however, this dissertation will at least provide a better opportunity to probe each pressing matter more thoroughly than recent investigations that have been limited to a brief article or a short section in a commentary. This dissertation intends to advance the New Testament field beyond Ireland's work in two respects: by briefly reevaluating the works released in the generation preceding Ireland and by carefully critiquing the dozens of relevant articles and books that have been published since his work.³¹ The dissertation will then integrate the best points of both groups, as well as offering new possibilities heretofore unexplored, into an exegetical synthesis that answers all of the major questions about the parable.

school texts" (Frederick Houk Borsch, *Many Things in Parables: Extravagant Stories of New Community* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988], 17).

³¹Of particular concern for this dissertation are the works after Ireland that depart from the "traditional" interpretation. Almost all of the recent studies offering alternatives to the "traditional" interpretation offer some valid points. It seems, however, that the advocates of these alternate positions have taken these few valid points and have used them to prop up invalid conclusions such that the sum is often not equal to the parts. It is hoped that these valid points that have been wedded to faulty conclusions can be extracted and re-appropriated to fortify the "traditional" view. The result will be a more nuanced, strengthened traditional view that advances most of Ireland's proposals into the twenty-first century, while precluding future interpreters from making the same mistakes as their predecessors.

In order for this study to be successful, the question that drives the entire study will have to be answered satisfactorily: why would a master (or Jesus, if κύριος in v. 8a shifts to him) praise a manager for his wrongdoing? Despite recent interpretations of the parable that have attempted to exculpate the steward of malfeasance, by claiming that the charges brought against him by his master were untrue or by claiming that the reduction of debt was in some way noble,³² the “traditional” view (i.e., that the steward was unjust in his actions from start to finish) is to be preferred. Although newer readings that offer an apology for the steward’s actions help to answer the question about why the master would praise him, these readings produce a whole new set of problems about why the steward would still be called “unjust” at the end of the parable (v. 8a) and why he appears to live up to his reputation at several points in the story. So, although the newer interpretations that seek to justify the unjust steward are possible and cannot be decisively eliminated *a priori*, they are not probable given the historical and literary

³²For example, Topel (“The Injustice of the Unjust Steward”) claims that the steward’s actions are “unjust” only to those with a Pharisaic perspective, in the same way that the older brother considered it unjust for the father to welcome back the prodigal son (Luke 15:28-30). The steward’s ample generosity is unjust by the world’s standards (because the undeserving debtors receive a boon) but honorable by Christian standards (exactly because they are undeserving). In another study that vindicates the steward, Landry and May (“Honor Restored”) argue that the reason the master praised the steward is that the steward forfeited his own profit and risked his already precarious financial well being in order to increase the master’s honor among the debtors by this act of charity. Lygre, “Of What Charges?” 27, believes that the manager might have been guilty—at worst—of incompetence at the beginning of the parable, but Lygre uses many of the same arguments as Landry and May to claim that the translation of ἀδικίας as “unjust” or “dishonest” is too harsh. Another justification for the steward is presented by Cheong, *Dialogic Reading of the Steward Parable*, 176-77, who contends that the steward was generously correcting a “maldistribution” of limited wealth so as to fulfill the debtor’s prayer for debt-reduction. Similarly, John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 67-68, argues that the steward was selflessly “obeying the messianic appeal” to practice the Jubilee by canceling debt. These examples are only a small cross-section of the growing body of recent literature defending the steward against wrongdoing and even contending that his actions were noble. The objective of this dissertation will be to demonstrate that these recent scholarly efforts, while well meaning, are misguided and do not do as much justice to the parable’s context. While it is an understandable tendency among scholars to “sanctify” the manager and his actions, to make him an idealized hero (or, better yet, a hero like Zacchaeus, who begins with a flaw but has an epiphany that transforms him into a benefactor), these “new” interpretations stretch the text beyond recognition, ignore important contextual features, and generate even more unresolved questions than the more traditional theories.

context in which the Evangelist presents the parable. Consequently, this dissertation will attempt to justify the claims that the “unjust steward” was deserving of his title.

The specific flow of the dissertation’s positive argument will be like this. It is more probable that Luke’s first-century audience would have recognized the master’s accusation to be true.³³ The steward reduced debt that may have been due to him but was more likely due his master (v. 5). Regardless of the person to whom the eliminated portion of the debt was due, the steward’s actions were not intended by Luke to be understood as acts of true generosity, beneficence, or Jubilee requirements. The large quantities of commodities due to the master imply that the debtors were probably not impoverished peasants in dire need of financial relief, but wealthy merchants or business associates of the master, who, though indebted to the master, would still have the financial wherewithal to offer the conniving, though seemingly generous, manager a job to replace the one he was losing. The steward did not cancel their debts completely; he merely reduced them fifty percent (v. 6) and twenty percent (v. 7) respectively, thus leaving a sizeable debt burden still on the debtors. It was, however, a substantial enough reduction in the debt to engender not only an appreciation toward the steward but even a social indebtedness by the debtors. In other words, these debtors would have traded part of their actual debt for a debt of hospitality toward the manager—a debt that the manager could receive benefit from even after his termination from the master’s household and after its concomitant perquisites had become history (cf. Luke 7:41-42). Even if the

³³That Luke uses the same word Greek for the steward’s “squandering” (*διασκορπίζω*) as he used for the prodigal son’s squandering is one of the many arguments supporting the legitimacy of the master’s indictment (more about this in Chapter 5). The prodigal son was wantonly wasteful; therefore, unless there is a clear reason to believe this steward, by contrast, to be above reproach, the immediate Lukian context argues in favor of his guilt. He was—at the very least—wantonly wasteful like the prodigal son.

debtors' social obligation to the steward was not perpetual, it would have been immediately due to the steward, who needed immediate assistance after leaving his master's estate. If the manager had been relieving the burden from the impoverished tenant farmers, they, in turn, could not have provided him anything besides empty-handed appreciation. That unsatisfying scenario would have been a waste of time given the objective explicitly stated in the manager's own internal monologue (v. 5). The manager, who had been thrown into imminent crisis with no viable options for escape (v. 3), was only concerned about immediately securing his own future welfare (v. 4). Any additional benefit to the debtors or to his master or even to the law was merely coincidental or, at best, a subordinate concern (see 16:8-9).

Since even begging and digging were out of the question (v. 3) as alternate career options, the steward had nothing to lose by reducing debt—even if by dishonest means. The worst that could happen from his dishonest scheme is that his deception would be discovered by the master and garner his fury. Having fired him already, however, the master could not hurt him further financially and, at most, might have him imprisoned for embezzlement (granted, a first-century prison is not an enviable option). Therefore, the worst-case scenario for the steward would have been that he would end up jobless as a beggar or doing hard labor (perhaps digging) in a prison; it seems, however, that this would be the situation he would find himself in anyway—begging or digging (v. 3)—if he took no action in the face of this imminent crisis.

Verse 8a is the end of the parable proper and depicts the master praising the steward not because he had done anything moral or honorable but simply because he had been shrewd, even at the expense of honesty. Even the master who had been duped could

recognize the value of having such a clever “rascal” on his staff. The recognition of the cleverness of the trickster by the one duped is a literary device with parallels in both ancient and contemporary stories,³⁴ so it is possible for a similar story to appear in the Third Gospel. Moreover, if the master were to rescind the debt reductions and allow the manager to be terminated anyway, he would acquire a reputation for being dishonorably fickle, firing a “generous” staff member, and treating business associates poorly. Having been forced into a corner by his own subordinate, the swindled master had no choice but to declare “touché” and admit the cleverness of the ruse. The actual cleverness of the scheme is what the master praises—not the moral behavior of the schemer.

The parable is not intended as a vindication of the steward’s character or an exhortation to follow any of his actions *per se*. On the contrary, Luke was merely using this example of worldly shrewdness to say that believers must also be shrewd (read: wise) in light of the coming kingdom. The most salient proof that one is preparing appropriately for the kingdom is the proper use of material resources. For worldly resources are entrusted to human stewards to use appropriately in establishing worldly relationships, and worldly relationships are the building blocks for the eternal kingdom (vv. 9-12). The parable demonstrates that if dishonest, worldly people (like the manager) know how to use money as a tool to further their agendas, then how much more should believers wise use everything at their disposal to prepare for the kingdom of God,

³⁴Mary Ann Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8),” *JBL* 111 (1992): 37-54, documents a number of ancient stories (viz. Aesop’s fables) featuring a tricky slave who is nevertheless admired by his master. As Beavis notes (in agreement with others who have recently quoted her work), one encounters the same literary form in the literature of almost every major culture in every era from ancient times to the present. While this literary form continues to entertain the masses even in contemporary entertainment, it is nothing new and has been well established in world literature for centuries.

especially (but not exclusively) in financial matters. Thus, insofar as the kingdom is considered eschatological, so too the message of the parable is eschatological, and insofar as the kingdom is considered ethical, so too the message of the parable is ethical. One application does not necessarily obviate the other; therefore, those scholarly works that emphasize one to the exclusion of the other are unnecessarily shortsighted.

Following the parable of the Unjust Steward is a series of concatenated sayings (vv. 8a-13 and 14-18) that reiterate the message of the parable from slightly different angles, apply its message, and tie it to the next parable. Since the Pharisees scoff at Jesus' message (v. 14), the next parable is targeted specifically at them (vv. 19-31) and explains the eternal consequences for one who is mastered by money rather than mastering the money to advance the kingdom of God. This kingdom of God, announced in advance by John and realized in Jesus, is the fulfillment of the law of Moses and the prophets—the law that originally stipulated the generosity toward one's neighbor—about which Jesus preached (vv. 16-17, 29).

Method and Organization

This dissertation's method is simply to examine the scholarly contributions from the past half-century regarding the parable of the Unjust Steward and create a exegetical synthesis based on the parable's grammatical, historical, and literary context that culls the best of the preceding studies and exposes the weaknesses in the same. All significant books, book chapters, journal articles, *Festschriften* articles, and dissertations dealing with the parable of the Unjust Steward are into consideration. In addition, all directly relevant works addressing Lukan parables in general, wealth and poverty in the

Third Gospel, the social and historical background in first-century Israel, and other germane matters are also considered.

Chapter 2 presents the recent history of research of the parable of the Unjust Steward. A clear understanding of what contemporary scholars have said about this parable will help to delineate the current trajectory of thought and advance the field beyond its current position. Several works to date have described in detail the history of interpretation of the parable of the Unjust Steward. One work covers interpretation before the nineteenth century in detail,³⁵ and Ireland's work covers the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century.³⁶ In order to avoid a duplication of their efforts, and in order to limit the scope of this dissertation to a manageable amount, this dissertation considers mainly works from the past half-century in the history of interpretation. These boundaries ensure that the dissertation does not overlap too much with the conclusions of previous scholars and incorporates the most current investigations about the parable. The boundaries also help keep the study at the frontline of contemporary research, thereby helping to foster new theories about the meaning of the text, reinforce venerable theories that have value, and critique more recent theories that are deficient. Interpretations before Ireland are divided into those that evaluate the manager as dishonest and those that evaluate the manager as honest. Then, the chapter offers a summary of Daniel Ireland's work, the most recent major interpretation defending the traditional position, and his

³⁵M. J. C. Schreiter, *Historico-critica explicationum Parabolae de improboecono
descriptio, qua varias variorus interpretum super Lucae 16,1-13 expositiones digestas, examinatas,
suamque ex Apocryphis Veteris Testamenti potissimum haustam exhibuit* (Leipzig: Maerkerum, 1803). His work is cited by Rücker, Krämer, Ireland, Hoeren, and many others, who point to it as the definitive history of interpretation for works before the nineteenth century.

³⁶Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God*, 5-47.

reviewers. Finally, the chapter's focus is a discussion of the many interpretations since Ireland (including several before that Ireland that he overlooked).

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 present the exegesis proper by examining the parable's text and context from several angles. Chapter 3 considers the Greek text itself by discussing the text critical matters, exploring significant vocabulary, grammar, and syntax matters, and offering a translation based on these insights. Then, Chapter 4 considers the historical context of the parable by discussing the historical, economic, and social concerns in Jewish and early Christian cultures that are relevant to this parable. Included in this discussion is a critique of several matters of historical background that have been incorrectly identified by recent interpreters as fundamental for understanding the parable. Then, Chapter 5 considers the parable's literary context by discussing Luke's understanding of "parable," possibilities for interpreting parables, a brief history of parable interpretation (especially as it concerns the parable of the Unjust Steward), the relation of this parable to its Lukan context, and an evaluation of several literary conventions that interpreters have offered as interpretive keys for understanding the Unjust Steward.

Having gathered all of the relevant textual, grammatical, historical, and literary data about the parable, the dissertation in Chapter 6 attempts to marshal the information to answer the nine most important questions that the parable forces the interpreter to ask. Finally, the chapter briefly summarizes the results of the entire study.

Any interpreter who purports to answer all of the grammatical, literary, historical, and theological questions associated with this paper is deceiving both himself and his readers. This dissertation does not answer all possible questions related to the

parable, but it does attempt to offer a thorough evaluation of the parable within specified parameters. Most studies that are more than a few decades old have been addressed (often repeatedly) by previous scholars, so this dissertation does not intend to spend much time on older works (except for a few of those that have been most seminal in the field). Similarly, not all recent studies can be evaluated here in depth; besides, many merely reiterate established positions and do not warrant much attention anyway. Also, this dissertation does not directly investigate the first or second *Sitz im Leben*, related matters of form criticism, or more detailed theories about the alleged tradition behind this parable. Not only are most of these studies speculative, but they are not important for this dissertation, which seeks to focus mainly on the finished product. Thus, only the third *Sitz im Leben* (i.e., the situation of the Evangelist, whose distinct theology presumably may be seen in how he redacted his sources) is in view here, and, where the dissertation claims that “Jesus said” something, it is shorthand for “Jesus, as Luke describes him, said” something. So too, matters of source criticism are not be examined in depth; here the Two- (or Four-) Source Hypothesis is assumed as axiomatic. In addition, this dissertation directly discusses neither the authenticity of the parable nor the historical reliability of any other portion of the Gospel; the parable’s enigmatic meaning virtually ensures its authenticity. Furthermore, not all historical or literary questions (e.g., how promissory notes were written, primitive Christianity’s perspective on wealth, the exact identity of Theophilus, where the endpoints of Luke’s Central Section are, etc.) can be addressed without deviating too much from the dissertation’s focus and running the risk of exceeding the page limitations. Therefore, only those matters of immediate importance for the parable’s interpretation are considered.

In sum, this dissertation cannot cover every question that might arise, and the present author will leave it to future studies to fill in the lacunae that this dissertation inevitably leaves. The dissertation should be judged based on what it explicitly claims to do within its articulated parameters, which have been stated in this introductory chapter and will be articulated in more depth at the introduction of subsequent chapters. Every scholarly work is open to the criticism that begins something like “The author could have dealt more substantially with [whatever topic fills in the blank] . . .” or “The author does not mention this related work . . .” Indeed, this study could deal more substantially with many topics and could mention many other related works, but it will not for the sake of brevity. It is hoped that the reader will find the material herein contained to be more than adequate and sufficiently thorough for what it expressly aims to do.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY OF RESEARCH

The schematization of the history of this parable's interpretation, when authors even attempt to provide it, varies substantially from one study to the next. The number of interpretive categories and the types of categories are widely different for each researcher. For example, one of the most recent interpreters, Dormandy, divides the literature into four groups: those dependent on a socio-historical reconstruction (Derrett, Fitzmyer, Kloppenborg, Oakman), those who read the parable in christological terms (Bailey, Brown, Loader, Topel), those who understand the parable according to its Lukan literary context (Ball, Parrott, Porter, Scott), and those who emphasize the parable's focus on redistribution of wealth (Byrne, Williams, Kim).¹ H. Hendrickx also divides the literature into four categories, but his categories are based on Luke's supposed purpose: ironical, allegorical, eschatological, and moral.² Landry and May have similar categories based on solutions for solving the interpretive problem: economic, literary, eschatological, and sociological.³ The most detailed recent systematization is that of Ireland, who divides the literature into two large categories, each with its own

¹Richard Dormandy, "Unjust Steward or Converted Master?" *RB* 109 (2002): 512-13.

²Herman Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed., Studies in the Synoptic Gospels (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 173.

³David Landry and Ben May, "Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke 16:1-8a)," *JBL* 119 (2000): 289-93.

subcategories and sub-subcategories.⁴ First, he divides the literature into those that argue that the steward's actions were dishonest and those that vindicate the steward; then, within each of those categories there are subcategories that segregate the studies based on whether the interpretation is monetary or non-monetary, eschatological or non-eschatological, ironical or non-ironical, the result of textual uncertainty, emphasizing charity, etc. In addition to these few history-of-research studies, there have been numerous other classification schemes, and one could think of a number of other ways to classify the material as well. One might just as easily classify the material based on whether the scholar considers the master's charges legitimate or slanderous or where the scholar considers the parable to end—verse 7, 8a, 8b, or 9—or how closely the scholar links the parable with the preceding or subsequent material or whether the debt reduction is considered a cancellation of usury or commission. The classification possibilities are limitless.

The classification difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that the more detailed the systematization of the literature becomes, the greater the danger of compartmentalizing works to fit the outline at the expense of the interpretations that reach into several categories simultaneously. It is admitted from the start that distilling the arguments of each scholar into a short summary that fits into an outline will necessarily do injustice to the complexity of many of the arguments. Nevertheless, it is legitimate to point out the general similarities among the studies and to categorize them

⁴Dennis J. Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: An Historical, Exegetical, and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1-13*, NovTSup 70 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 5-47. His two broad categories, the dishonesty of the manager and honesty of the manager, are also the two broad categories used by I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 614-15.

accordingly. Moreover, some studies are so narrowly focused or brief that they often fail to answer important questions that could be used as criteria to sort the literature (e.g., whether the steward was dishonest in his debt reduction), and some are so equivocal in their conclusions that it would be impossible to place them on the interpretive “map” with certainty. Consequently, with the scores of studies published of this parable in the twentieth century alone, it is inevitable that many will defy easy categorization no matter how few categories are employed. If for only pragmatic purposes, though, it is still necessary for this study to establish some interpretive categories and make sufficient explanation when certain studies overlap two or more of the categories.

The history of the parable’s interpretation has been surveyed in full several times in the past few centuries: Schreiter⁵ covers the material prior to the nineteenth century; Rücker⁶ covers the material after Schreiter up to the early twentieth century; and Ireland⁷ covers all of the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries. Since Dennis Ireland’s monograph on the parable is the most exhaustive, recent, and carefully categorized to date, his work will be the benchmark from which this chapter will proceed. In order to avoid duplication with Ireland’s effort, rather than offering a comprehensive survey of all pertinent literature prior to Ireland, this chapter will instead examine closely

⁵M. Joannes Christoph Schreiter, *Historico-critica explicationum Parabolae de improbo oecono mo descriptio, qua varias variorum interpretum super Lucae 16, 1-13 expositiones digestas, examinatas, suamque ex Apocryphis Veteris Testamenti potissimum haustam* (Lipsiae: Maerkerum, 1803).

⁶A. Rücker, “Über das Gleichen vom ungerechten Verwalter, Lc 16:1-13,” BibS(F) 17 (1912): 1-64. In addition, M. Krämer, *Das Rätsel der Parabel vom ungerechten Verwalter (Lk. 16.1-13): Auslegungsgeschichte—Umfang—Sinn: Eine Diskussion der Probleme und Lösungsvorschläge der Verwalterparabel von den Vätern bis heute* (Zürich: PAS, 1972) does the same up to 1972.

⁷Dennis J. Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom*; idem, “A History of Recent Interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13),” *WTJ* 51 (1989): 293-318. The 1989 journal article is a summary of the history-of-research chapter from Ireland’s 1989 dissertation, which Ireland slightly revised to form the 1992 monograph’s history-of-research.

only six of the most significant contributions up to Ireland's survey (three considering the steward to be honest, three considering the steward to be dishonest), each representing an alternate explanation of the pericope.⁸ Next, this chapter will survey both Ireland's own work and critical reviews responding to his monograph. Finally, the bulk of this chapter will offer a comprehensive survey of all the major literature on the Unjust Steward since Ireland (including several significant works published before 1989 that Ireland overlooked).

Interpretations before Ireland

Before the twentieth century, few doubted the steward's guile, especially as it concerned his debt reductions.⁹ After the nineteenth century, scholars became increasingly dissatisfied with this interpretation's main weakness (i.e., that the master ends up praising a conniving steward in the end), causing some to search for a better solution. Consequently, around the turn of the century, a second line of interpretation began to develop: the manager rectifies his initial wrongdoing (or perception of wrongdoing) by doing something legal, honest, and perhaps even directly helpful for his master.¹⁰ Thus, the master's praise does not cause quite as much cognitive dissonance for

⁸Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 8, claims to have surveyed “140 or so interpreters” of this parable. In addition, listed in this dissertation’s bibliography are no fewer than one hundred monographs, articles, book reviews, dissertations, and other materials relevant to this parable that were either omitted by Ireland or have been released since Ireland’s watershed work. Combined with the relevant book reviews, the total number of works dealing with the Unjust Steward from the nineteenth century to the present approaches two hundred and fifty. Given this unwieldy mass of literature, it appears justified—indeed, necessary—to restrict the present survey primarily to material after Ireland. Since much of the interpretive force often depends on whether the steward’s actions are dishonest or honest, this section will follow Marshall, Ireland, and Landry and May in making this the major dividing line between pre-Ireland interpretations.

⁹Ibid., 73, explains that the “vast majority” of interpretations before the twentieth century assumed the steward’s actions to be dishonest.

¹⁰Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 614.

the reader. Despite the few studies from the early twentieth century vindicating the steward, the latter position enjoyed little recognition before the 1960s; the most common interpretation even up to 1960 was that the steward was dishonest and that the main point of the parable is an exhortation to be wise in the use of material possessions.¹¹ Several influential articles by J. D. M. Derrett in the 1960s and 1970s, though, opened the floodgate for all kinds of studies vindicating the steward.

“Honest Steward” Proponents

Most trace the genealogy of the “honest steward” position back to Margaret D. Gibson, a scholar of Semitic languages from Cambridge University, who was the first in the twentieth century to suggest that the steward was guilty of no wrongdoing in his reduction of the debts. In her brief, yet frequently cited, article, she observes that a steward would commonly demand more from the debtors than he would have paid to the master; therefore, by reducing the debts, the steward was “simply renouncing his own exorbitant profits, without in any way defrauding his master.”¹² Gibson’s article did not receive wide acceptance at first primarily because she did not base her hypothesis on any evidence from first-century Palestine but on general customs of the East common in her own time. Although Gibson’s work was noted by a few scholars of later decades,¹³ it was

¹¹Ireland, “Recent Interpretation of the Unjust Steward,” 295-96. Of the 140 interpretations from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that Ireland surveys, the plurality of these, “at least 50,” argue for the understanding that the steward is dishonest and that the point of the parable is primarily “monetary” (see also *idem*, *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 8). Judging by the few dozen works cited in Ireland’s footnotes, these interpretations are mostly from the 1920s to 1960s.

¹²Margaret D. Gibson, “On the Parable of the Unjust Steward,” *ExpTim* 14 (1902-03): 334.

¹³Most notably, Paul Gächter, “The Parable of the Dishonest Steward after Oriental Conception,” *CBQ* 12 (1950): 124, whose explicit goal is to “bring to light again” the “one true answer” by Gibson that had been ignored by “nearly all expositors.” Gächter also generated little momentum because,

not until the two major scholars endorsing the steward's behavior, Derrett and Fitzmyer, that her concise work gained recognition. The main difference between the two scholars is that Derrett argues that the steward was reducing illicit usury owed to the master, while Fitzmyer argues that the steward was reducing his own commission. Despite their differences, though, they share many similar assumptions and will be discussed together here. In addition to these two positions, the other main "honest steward" argument, represented best by L. John Topel, will be considered. Topel's contention is that the steward's debt reduction represents a positive example of charity and/or forgiveness.

J. Duncan M. Derrett. Where Gibson and Gächter were lacking evidence from ancient Judaism, Derrett provided some. Few articles asserting the honesty of the steward have been quoted and relied upon more than Derrett's pair of 1960-61 articles in *NTS* and 1972 addendum article in *JTS*.¹⁴ What made Derrett's articles so significant was that he was the first to base vindication of the steward on numerous ancient Jewish documents regarding three key issues: the steward's right to act on the master's behalf, the nature of ancient Jewish usury practices, and the typical rates of interest in antiquity. Derrett's thesis is predicated on the three axioms of the Jewish law of agency, which he has derived from several rabbinic sources: "a man's agent is like himself," "there is no agency for wrongdoing," "it is presumed that an agent executes his commission."¹⁵ As

similar to Gibson, he based his argument on an amorphous "Oriental" ethos unsubstantiated by evidence from first-century Israel.

¹⁴J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Fresh Light on Lk XVI: I. The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *NTS* 7 (1960-61): 201; idem, "Fresh Light on Lk XVI: II. Dives and Lazarus and the Preceding Sayings," *NTS* 7 (1960-61): 364-80; idem, "'Take Thy Bond . . . and Write Fifty' (Luke XVI. 6): The Nature of the Bond," *JTS*, n.s., 23 (1972): 438-40.

¹⁵Derrett, "Fresh Light on Lk XVI," 201.

such, a steward was treated like a member of the master's household and would have "the most comprehensive authority."¹⁶ A steward was presumed to be carrying out his master's commission; otherwise, people would not deal with him. Therefore, it was in the master's interest for the steward to have such a wide authority, so that he did not have to deal directly with all the time-consuming administrative tasks that a steward normally would handle.¹⁷ Because of the steward's wide authority, lending with usury was "more or less expected," even if the master did not explicitly authorize it.¹⁸ Moreover, even if the steward acted without the master's permission, the master could subsequently ratify the action, making it appear that he had initiated the deed executed by the steward.¹⁹ That is exactly what the master of this parable does, Derrett claims, in praising the steward.²⁰

Next, Derrett addresses the practice of usury among Jews. Although rabbinic literature is clear that the usurer was tantamount to a "robber," Jews would still enter into transactions where credit would be granted on the promise of some kind of increase by using "tricks and devices to avoid the applicability of the biblical injunctions."²¹ Only loans where the interest was explicitly mentioned could be litigated; as a result, the interest was often tacitly added to a bill instead.²² Where the law of usury had been

¹⁶Ibid., 203-04.

¹⁷Ibid., 203.

¹⁸Ibid., 204.

¹⁹Ibid., 210.

²⁰Ibid., 216.

²¹Ibid., 205-06.

²²Ibid., 206.

broken in letter, the civil courts could rectify, but where the law had been broken in spirit only (i.e., where there was “hidden interest” or a question as to whether some increase had taken place, pejoratively known in the rabbinic literature as “the dust of usury”), the courts had no jurisdiction to act.²³ It is in this latter category where the parable’s steward, who “hid” the loans in the contracts, fell—morally culpable but legally exculpated.²⁴ By releasing the debtors from the interest, the steward was repairing the breach of the Jewish usury law, forfeiting his own dishonest gain, and reflecting well on the master for whom he was acting as agent.²⁵ The master, therefore, would have praised the steward because his own “reputation for piety” had been bolstered.²⁶

Derrett lastly addresses interest rates. Derrett claims that the “very large amounts” of the debts make them suspicious and provide evidence of their usurious nature.²⁷ Although the typical rate of interest on wheat was twenty-five percent, Indian usury laws demonstrate that easily adulterated commodities like oil were subject to very high interest rates (even up to seven hundred per cent).²⁸ Derrett concludes, therefore, that Luke’s readers would have assumed that an additional amount had been added to the

²³Ibid., 206-07.

²⁴Ibid., 209-12.

²⁵Ibid., 209-10.

²⁶Ibid., 217. Here early seeds of the later “honor”-based theories (discussed later) are planted.

²⁷Ibid., 213. He does not, however, explain why the high amounts imply usury. If the debtors were large landholders or merchants, debts could have been quite large even before any interest accrued. Unfortunately, Derrett simply claims that it is “impossible” for them to have been merchants and highly unlikely for them to have been tenants but does not provide a convincing reason for his resistance to these possibilities (*ibid.*).

²⁸Ibid., 204-05. In a supplement to his 1960-61 article, Derrett (“Take Thy Bond,” 439) later supported his contention with documents closer to Israel, namely Greek and Egyptian loan documents, which often assumed interest (often around 50 percent).

bills.²⁹ Since the parable portrays a steward praised for falling in line with Jewish law, Derrett concludes that the parable point is “the validity of God’s standards” in every aspect of life.³⁰ In other words, when the steward and master became reconciled with the law, they reaped the benefits of increased piety.

Joseph A. Fitzmyer. Perhaps he was thinking of Derrett’s growing influence on the field when J. A. Fitzmyer claimed in 1963 that there was a “growing consensus of [exegetical] opinion about the parable.”³¹ With more than forty years of hindsight, and with increasing arguments that militate against Derrett’s claims, however, the contemporary exegete cannot make this claim with the same confidence. Indeed, the fragmentation is no less profound now than it was mid-century. The Catholic exegete Fitzmyer identifies “liturgical isolation” as part of the interpretive and homiletical problem: the Roman Mass ends the reading at verse 9, although one must consider the applications in verses 10-13 as well to understand the parable’s point.³² Moreover, the parable is flanked on both sides by parables dealing with improper use of riches, a theme necessary to take into account for properly understanding the literary flow that propels parable.³³

²⁹Derrett, “Take Thy Bond,” 440.

³⁰Derrett, “Fresh Light on Lk XVI,” 219.

³¹Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Story of the Dishonest Manager (Lk 16:1-13),” *TS* 25 (1964): 23, 42. Fitzmyer reasserted most of the same points years later in his magisterial commentary on Luke (*idem, The Gospel According to Luke*, AB [Garden City: Doubleday, 1981-85], 2:1094-1102). In order to demonstrate Derrett’s immediate influence on Fitzmyer’s initial article, only Fitzmyer’s 1963 article is considered in this chapter, while his commentary statements, which are often aimed more at the Greek text, are reserved for the discussion of the Greek text in the next chapter.)

³²Fitzmyer, “The Story of the Dishonest Manager,” 23-24.

³³Ibid., 24-25.

Departing from the liturgical ending at verse 9, Fitzmyer surveys the options for where the parable ends and determines verse 8a to be the best choice, while the following material (vv. 10-13) represents several additions of diverse origin joined to each other by the catchword πιστός and joined to the preceding parable by the catchword μαρωνᾶς.³⁴ Verse 13's change in vocabulary, the isolated parallel in the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* 47, and the parallel in Matthew 6:24, which has a different context, all indicate that this verse, which is from Q, circulated independently in a different context that was lost or ignored by both Matthew and Luke.³⁵ Although Fitzmyer admits the presence of some allegory in this parable, he sees the additions in verses 8b-13 rather as the product of a conflation of sources from alien contexts.³⁶ He agrees with Dodd's frequently-quoted observation that these verses contain three different lessons drawn from the parable, although all three constitute a "unity" of thought: children of the light should be as prudent in their dealings with one another; one should be a responsible manager of possessions; and mammon becomes a god if one becomes a slavish minion to it.³⁷

Having addressed the Lukan redaction, Fitzmyer then addresses the reason the steward is called "dishonest" at the end of the parable. Although Fitzmyer concedes the probable guilt of the steward at the beginning of the parable, he contends that the steward is praised because his debt reduction was an honest act. When the steward is accused, the details of his wrongdoing are vague, but the fact of his culpability are implied by his lack

³⁴Ibid., 27, 29, 30.

³⁵Ibid., 29.

³⁶Ibid., 38.

³⁷Ibid., 38-39.

of protestation or denial.³⁸ This initial wrongdoing is why he is called “dishonest” (v. 8), as there is no evidence that the steward’s subsequent debt reductions were illegal; therefore, the “dishonesty” is only a reference back to the squandering of the master’s estate in verse 2.³⁹ In fact, since the master praises him, the steward must have done something right in order to garner such praise. Fitzmyer appeals to Gibson’s proposal that the steward was acting justly and Derrett’s complementary proof from Jewish laws of debt, agency, and usury to vindicate the steward’s actions.⁴⁰ In having the debtors rewrite the bills to represent the “real amounts owed to the master,” the steward thereby relinquishes his own commission.⁴¹ It is here that Fitzmyer primarily diverges from Derrett; the reduced amounts represent the steward’s own commission (his “profit,” which was “unauthorized” by the master), rather than an interest due to the master himself.⁴² Fitzmyer claims that the exorbitant rate in verse 6 is “not to be pressed too literally, for high figures are characteristic of Jesus’ parables, . . . [so] no one is expected to take the figures seriously.”⁴³ Thus, the point of the parable is to use money in wisely preparing for the future, in the same way that the steward displayed wisdom in

³⁸Ibid., 31.

³⁹Ibid., 32, 41. Fitzmyer does not explain why Luke chose to wait until the end of the parable to call the steward “dishonest,” although he does contend that there is a parallel development in Luke 18:2-8, where the judge is not called “dishonest” until the end (*ibid.*, 33).

⁴⁰Ibid., 34.

⁴¹Ibid., 36. Fitzmyer was not the first (or last) to set forth the “commission” theory. Before him, J. Volckaert, “The Parable of the Clever Steward,” *Clergy Monthly* 17 (1953): 332-41, made a similar claim, and, after Fitzmyer, E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 199, among others, also have followed the “commission” theory.

⁴²Fitzmyer, “The Story of the Dishonest Manager,” 35. Fitzmyer does not explain why the steward did not simply keep the commission, but one may presume that a fired agent would lose his claim to any unauthorized, illegal profit—especially a debt that was still outstanding at the time of his firing.

⁴³Ibid., 40-41.

eliminating his commission to prepare for his future. For the Christian, this future is understood eschatologically. The urgency in the parable represents the Christian's eschatological crisis, so verse 9 "seems to be inculcating a prudent use of wealth in view of one's future—eschatological—status."⁴⁴

L. John Topel. The third, and chronologically last, of the three "honest steward" paradigms examined here is the one offered by Topel.⁴⁵ His study is one of the best examples of an argument defending the steward while claiming charity as the parable's main point (as Luke presents it). His stated objective is to bring F. Maass's 1961 article (in which Maass, following Jerome, argues that the debts remitted are representative of sins forgiven)⁴⁶ from an "obscure" journal to light and fortify that argument.⁴⁷ Topel explains that the parables in chapter 15 portray a "super-human concern for the lost," which anticipates a similar theme in the material after them.⁴⁸ In the same way that the steward was an absolute agent of his master (so Derrett), humans likewise are earthly stewards delegated by God to be stewards of material resources.⁴⁹ So, when the steward releases the debtors from their obligations, it is parallel to the

⁴⁴Ibid., 41.

⁴⁵L. John Topel, "On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward: Lk 16:1-13," *CBQ* 37 (1975): 216-227.

⁴⁶F. Maass, "Das Gleichnis vom ungerechten Haushalter: Lc 16, 1-8," *ThViat* 8 (1961): 173-84.

⁴⁷Topel, "On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward," 216.

⁴⁸Ibid., 223.

⁴⁹Ibid., 224. Note the similarity to E. Kamlah, "Die Parabel vom ungerechten Verwalter (Luk. 16,1ff.) im Rahmen der Knechtsgleichnisse," in *Abraham unser Vater: Juden und Christen im Gespräch über die Bibel: Festschrift für Otto Michel zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. O. Betz (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 276-94, who argues that the οἰκονόμος represents the Pharisees, who have poorly managed "God's estate," which has been entrusted to their care. The praise at the end of the parable for the manager's shrewdness is

Christian's forgiveness on several counts: it is unjust (i.e., unmerited) by worldly standards; man has authority to forgive debts owed to God; the one who forgives others has assurance of forgiveness from God; and the purpose of forgiveness is reward from God, not humans.⁵⁰

Like Fitzmyer, Topel argues that Luke's redaction superimposed a new meaning onto the parable. The original form of the parable conveyed the message that one should use prudence in acting decisively to prepare for the kingdom.⁵¹ Luke then altered the received material to add his own distinctive theology of almsgiving, while not omitting the original eschatological message.⁵² Luke further added his own theology of forgiveness by arranging the material such that this parable fell immediately on the heels of the like-themed parables in Luke 15.⁵³ As a result of such redaction, debt and debtors are literary representatives of sin and sinners; likewise, remission of debts represents Christ's remission of sins.

“Dishonest Steward” Proponents

The traditional understanding of the parable is that the manager in the story “robbed his master deliberately and disgracefully,”⁵⁴ and most from the traditional camp

difficult to explain given this interpretation unless one also assumes the parable to be an example story in which the steward protagonist is accomplishing what the Pharisees are not.

⁵⁰Topel, “On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward,” 225.

⁵¹Ibid., 226.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., 227.

⁵⁴Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 415.

further contend that the point of this story is the “prudent use of possessions.”⁵⁵ The strongest argument from the text that proponents of the steward’s dishonesty employ is that if the steward is referred to as “unfaithful” (16:8) at the end of the parable, then that description is likely in reference to his unfaithfulness in the reduction of the debts. Some go so far as to argue that the manager is consistently unfaithful, from his initial “squandering” to the time of his commendation. Most from the “honest steward” camp, however, view this understanding as the traditional position’s greatest weakness. Why, they ask, would the manager praise a steward under his authority who had demonstrated consistent dishonesty, perhaps even a dishonesty that worked to the master’s own detriment? All three interpreters discussed below attempt to answer this perceived weakness in interpretation. All accept at least the traditional view’s first premise, that the steward was “dishonest” in his debt reduction, but vary in their views regarding the second premise, that use of possessions is the (or a) point of the parable. Bailey claims that the parable’s original meaning was eschatological, but a monetary meaning was appended later in the tradition. Porter believes the steward should be seen as an ironic negative example. Williams argues that an ironic reading is not necessary because the

⁵⁵Richard H. Hiers, “Friends by Unrighteous Mammon: The Eschatological Proletariat (Luke 16:9),” *JAAR* 38 (1970): 32. Use of the term “traditional” varies slightly among scholars. Some use this label for all interpretations regarding the steward as dishonest, while others restrict the term to those who not only view the steward as dishonest but also regard the point of the parable to be concerned with use of possessions. Representing the former, Gächter, “The Parable of the Dishonest Steward,” 122-23, lists nineteen “traditional” interpreters from the first half of the twentieth century (1899-1946): A. Jülicher, A. A. Bruce, F. Tillmann, Th. Zahn, Th. Innitzer, L. Fonck, M.-J. Lagrange, C. G. Montefiore, E. Klostermann, J. Sickenberger, D. Buzy, P. Dausch, J.-M. Voste, F. Hauck, K. Rengstorf, L. Fendt, F. Prat, J. Schmid, and L. Marchal. Some of these (namely Jülicher), however, posited no necessary monetary meaning. Ireland, “Recent Interpretation of the Unjust Steward,” 295-96, on the other hand, restricts “traditional” to those who argue that the steward is dishonest and that the use of money is main point: Arndt, Bigo, Easton, Friedel, Geldenhuis, Godet, Grundmann, Hooley and Manson, Krämer, Lagrange, Manson, Menoud, Pickar, Pirod, Plummer, Ragg, Rengstorf, Schlatter, Seccombe, Talbert, Wellhausen, Williams, and Zahn. This dissertation will restrict the term “traditional” to the latter, thus more narrow, description.

parable, read in a straightforward manner, clearly teaches about almsgiving via the steward's example.

Kenneth Bailey.⁵⁶ Before Bailey, the solely eschatological (i.e., non-monetary) reading of the parable, considered apart from the appended material, had already been articulated by many of the most notable NT scholars of the twentieth century, like J. Jeremias, C. H. Dodd, and Dan O. Via.⁵⁷ It is difficult to see how one could read verses 1-13 as a single unit without concluding that the use of possessions is at least one theme. There are those, however, who do dismiss the use of possessions as a salient theme of the parable itself by divorcing the parable proper from the “applications” attached to it, contending that in its original setting the parable did not refer to money but was (mis)interpreted as such by the early church or by Luke himself. Kenneth Bailey is one of the most notable examples of a scholar who argues for this kind of “sharp division” between verses 8 and 9.⁵⁸ Bailey was not novel in declaring the parable’s point

⁵⁶Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 110. In both of his book reviews on Ireland’s work, Blomberg questions Ireland’s placing of Bailey in the “dishonest” steward camp and explains that “surely Bailey belongs as one of the major representative of the view which finds the steward eliminating his cut” (Craig A. Blomberg, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God*, by Dennis Ireland, *WTJ* 55 [1993]: 352; cf. also idem, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God*, by Dennis Ireland, *Them* 19 [1994]: 26). Bailey, however, explicitly disavows the “cut” theory because the steward’s portion would have been off the books (88-91, 94). Moreover, Bailey calls the steward “dishonest” (86), explains that the steward’s plan could land him in “jail” (86), assumes the steward’s silence affirms his guilt (96-97), explains that the steward had no legal authority to reduce the bills (99), and implies that this reduction is a “crime” (99). In fact, Bailey explains, the fact that the steward dishonestly cheated the master would have delighted Middle Eastern peasants, who would have enjoyed seeing a “Goliath” rich man get his comeuppance by a lower-class “David” (105). There is ample evidence, therefore, justifying Ireland’s categorization of the steward as dishonest. Although he does appeal to Fitzmyer in a few places, Bailey by no means asserts the same “honest steward” position.

⁵⁷Others who make a sharp contrast between the parable proper and the ensuing sayings will be examined in the discussion about the parable’s literary context in Chapter 5.

⁵⁸Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 110.

to be an “eschatological warning to sinners.”⁵⁹ Where he differs from his predecessors is his more thorough consideration of the parable’s literary structure, cultural background, and early Semitic translations. He considers verses 1-8 to be a chiastically structured “parabolic ballad,” where the seven stanzas represent characters—problem—problem—idea—solution—solution—characters.⁶⁰

Bailey criticizes Gibson’s thesis as the product of both an anachronistic understanding of Middle Eastern culture and an imperialistic, culturally superior arrogance that misunderstood “Oriental” customs; such criticism cuts too at those who follow her line of thinking, like Derrett, Fitzmyer, and Gächter.⁶¹ Bailey, however, is only slightly less anachronistic in appealing to the Mishna, Indian consultants, modern Turkish landowners, “the conservative village today,” and later translations of the parable to elucidate the economic culture behind the parable.⁶²

Noting the similarity to the Prodigal Son, Bailey argues that the master is a noble and merciful landowner (like the father), the steward is a salaried estate-manager who received payments “under the table” that were not reflected in the written bills, and the debtors are renters who paid in kind a fixed amount of their annual crop for rent.⁶³ The steward’s firing is effective immediately, although the publicizing to the tenants of his firing is not; therefore, all subsequent actions by the steward as ostensible agent of the master are illegitimate, especially in light of the fact that he explicitly identifies the debts

⁵⁹Ibid., 86.

⁶⁰Ibid., 95.

⁶¹Ibid., 88.

⁶²Ibid., 89-90, 96.

⁶³Ibid., 87, 92-94, 110.

to be owed “to my master.”⁶⁴ The steward is taking advantage of the “unusually merciful” master by “risk[ing] everything” on this same mercy.⁶⁵ After the debt reductions, the master could not risk evoking the ire of the debtors by rescinding the reduction, so, caught on the horns of a dilemma and motivated by the same merciful spirit that prevent him from sending the steward to jail in the beginning, the master accepts the monetary loss and acknowledges the acumen of the steward’s risky gambit.⁶⁶ The steward is praised for his φρονίμως, which denotes a cleverness about one’s own self-preservation and in this context has eschatological overtones.⁶⁷ Thus, the parable is offering an example of “the splendor of the grace of God in which alone the believer must trust.”⁶⁸

Following the parable proper, which ends with verse 8b, is a three-stanza poem, each with its own chiastic features, on the single theme of mammon and God.⁶⁹ Since it constitutes a separate literary unit with its own “strong” and “artistically satisfying” internal unity, Bailey argues, “it should be read and interpreted apart from the parable that precedes it.”⁷⁰ Luke added this unrelated poem, first, so that a Greek reader like Theophilus would not misunderstand the parable to be advising dishonesty and, second, because of the close word association—a common arrangement device in the

⁶⁴Ibid., 97, 100.

⁶⁵Ibid., 98, 102

⁶⁶Ibid., 102

⁶⁷Ibid., 106. Bailey further claims that ἐπαύτως also carries a eschatological overtone.

⁶⁸Ibid., 118.

⁶⁹Ibid., 108, 110, 114. More specifically, it follows a Mammon and God—Mammon and Truth—Mammon and God pattern (112).

⁷⁰Ibid., 110, 115.

Synoptics—between the poem and the preceding parable.⁷¹ The structural and theological coherence of this unit and its Semitic features (e.g., Aramaic wording and Hebrew genitive) militate against the theory that this block represents a “gradual collection” of sayings compiled by the early church attempting (perhaps unsuccessfully) to interpret the parable.⁷² Instead, the unit reveals the work of “a skilled Palestinian poet . . . Jesus of Nazareth.”⁷³

Stanley Porter.⁷⁴ As Porter’s title suggests, he believes irony is the key that unlocks the meaning of the Unjust Steward. He acknowledges that the irony angle was first exploited in full by Fletcher in 1963, although his thesis “has not been accepted by recent major commentaries [namely, Marshall, Fitzmyer, and Rengstorf].”⁷⁵ Where he

⁷¹Ibid., 116-18. He follows Hiers in noting especially the parallel wordings of vv. 4 and 9.

⁷²Ibid., 118. John P. Comiskey, “The Unjust Steward,” *TBT* 52 (1971): 231, also argues that the church appended “entirely different” applications dealing with money. He likewise claims that the parable’s purpose was to exhort listeners to act wisely in light of the coming judgment (as much of his ministry also advocates) and that the monetary idea was a later ethical accretion (“The Unjust Steward,” 235).

⁷³Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 118.

⁷⁴Ireland mentions Porter’s article (Stanley Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward [Luke 16.1-13]: Irony is the Key,” in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*, ed. David J. A. Clines, S. E. Fowl, and S. E. Porter [Sheffield: JSOT, 1990], 127-53) in a single brief footnote. Ireland apparently added the note just before the dissertation’s publication without adding further discussion of the article. Since, however, Ireland did at least acknowledge the existence of Porter’s work, primarily as one who follows Fletcher’s thesis, he is grouped here with the “pre-Ireland” scholars. Porter’s subtitle, “Irony is the Key,” is an answer to the question in Fletcher’s subtitle, “Is Irony the Key?”

⁷⁵Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 128. Other interpreters had seen elements of irony even before Fletcher, but they did not apply the irony rigorously to the entire text (and some ended up with odd conclusions). For example, A. H. Baverstock, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward: An Interpretation,” *Theology* 35 (1937): 83, explains that with “unaccustomed irony” Jesus uses the story of a dishonest manager to make the point about being faithful with money. Baverstock further claims that this parable is sarcastically pointed against Judas. This assertion is quite a stretch since Luke only mentions Judas in chapters 6 and 22—neither close in the narrative to this parable. This theory is also weakened by the comparative lack of references to Judas and money in the Synoptics. In only one passing reference does Luke associate Judas with money (22:3-5), and this reference is merely a repeat of the material in Mark 14:10-11. On the other hand, John makes the association much more explicitly clear. In sum,

departs from Fletcher is the ultimate point of the parable; while Fletcher sees the irony of the parable with respect to the proper use of money, Porter sees the monetary emphasis, although present, as a subordinate analogy for the values that guide decisions about the kingdom.⁷⁶

In order to establish his position, Porter must first dismiss the other major contender for the “dishonest steward” understanding, the traditional view. After easily dismantling the argument that ὁ κύριος (v. 8a) could refer to Jesus himself,⁷⁷ Porter critiques the traditional view (that the parable is about shrewdness, especially with money, in the face of crisis) on several counts: (1) the master’s approval “seems” to be the result of the steward’s means of accomplishing the action; (2) his action is an example to the “sons of light”; and (3) the steward is not a good example because his plan is so ill-conceived that he is caught both times.⁷⁸ Porter feels that these are “insuperable difficulties with the *prima facie* reading of the parable”; as such, the parable cannot be read in a straightforward manner.⁷⁹

Baverstock’s application of irony was an idiosyncratic dead end inferior to Porter’s more careful analysis. Other interpreters before Fletcher who had detected elements of irony include J. F. McFadyden (1925-26), R. Pautrel (1940), J. A. A. Davidson (1954-55), Clavier (1956), and G. Paul (1958). They too attracted few followers.

⁷⁶Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 147.

⁷⁷Ibid., 129, 145.

⁷⁸Ibid., 131-32. Porter’s three critiques are themselves open to counter-critique: contention (1) is subjective, as the word “seems” suggests; contention (2) is weakened because the example is only metaphorical; and contention (3) ignores the fact that whether he is caught is beside the point. It is ironic (dare I say?) that Porter criticizes Derrett for “framing his argument using such words as . . . ‘seems’ but his conclusions are ‘made with confidence’” (133), even though Porter himself does the same here (and on p. 140 also)!

⁷⁹Ibid., 132.

Porter identifies the “common flaw” of most interpretations as “acontextual” analysis that ignores the parable’s relationship to its surrounding literary units.⁸⁰ He then briefly summarizes the continuity of thought between this parable and the sayings in verses 8b-13, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the parables in chapter 15, the themes of the travel narrative, and Lukan theology in general.⁸¹ In agreement with Marshall and Seccombe, Porter contends that a contextual reading of the parable recognizes that throughout Luke, especially in this central section, there is “an undeniable connection between economics and eschatology, a theme which can be denied only at the risk of skewing interpretation of the parables of Lk. 15 and 16.”⁸² For example, the unjust steward’s master, by all evidence a benign character, has a similar role to the father in the Prodigal Son because he is “the one who decides whether one is included or excluded,”⁸³ a clearly eschatological motif. Moreover, in chapters 15 and 16, the prodigal, the steward, and the rich man all fail in their use of worldly material goods and are thereby alienated from the kingdom (metaphorically for the first two, literally for the rich man) in both a monetary and even eschatological reversal of fortunes.⁸⁴ For the parable’s whole context, economic inclusion mirrors the themes of repentance and the resultant eschatological inclusion.⁸⁵

⁸⁰Ibid., 134.

⁸¹Ibid., 134-37.

⁸²Ibid., 137.

⁸³Ibid., 140.

⁸⁴Ibid., 150.

⁸⁵Ibid., 137.

The steward forsakes one master and turns to another (wealth) to try to secure his future.⁸⁶ The situational irony of the kosher prodigal son's eating with the swine is a vivid reminder of what happens when one tries to secure a future with such wealth.⁸⁷ In the same way, there is situational irony in the fact that the steward, dismissed for "untrustworthy behaviour," resorts to the same behavior to secure his future by ingratiating himself with the "sons of this world."⁸⁸ Having been caught twice, the steward is sarcastically praised by the master. The master's praise must be seen as "clearly ironic," and Jesus' parallel exhortation for someone to do the same, therefore, is not to be taken at face value; if such behavior failed the steward the first time, it will be no more efficacious the next time.⁸⁹ Since the reader can assume that the steward's plan has failed (again) in the end, the passage is best understood as ironic. In sum, the intention of the parable is that "Jesus is commending his followers for using worldly wealth in its most negative sense to secure reward," an impossibility that both the prodigal son and the rich man learn in their own ways.⁹⁰

That irony is further developed in the commentary provided by verses 10-13, where Jesus mocks the "secular wisdom" that drove the prodigal son, unjust steward, and rich man to rely on mammon to secure "friends" that were ultimately evanescent.⁹¹ Verses 10-12 criticize those who, like the manager, trust in possessions to ensure reward,

⁸⁶Ibid., 151.

⁸⁷Ibid., 138.

⁸⁸Ibid., 142, 146.

⁸⁹Ibid., 146.

⁹⁰Ibid., 148-49.

⁹¹Ibid., 150.

and verse 13 ironically alludes to the manager, who has chosen to serve two masters.

Here Porter must make the last part of verse 13 into a question (rather than a statement, as it has been translated by “virtually all commentators”).⁹² Since the question begins with οὐ, the anticipated answer is affirmative. The unit then concludes with a censure of the on-looking Pharisees (vv. 14-18), who have chosen the same course as the steward and are thereby doomed to failure.⁹³

F. E. Williams. In support of the traditional, non-ironic approach, F. E. Williams regards the steward’s debt reduction as illicit and considers the parable an exhortation to manage material possessions prudently.⁹⁴ In his 1964 article, which he explains is a response to Fletcher’s ironic, non-almsgiving thesis, he explicitly lays out his conclusion: “the parable of the Unjust Steward was intended to recommend a positive course of action, and that with regard to a specific matter, almsgiving.”⁹⁵ Although the main point of the Unjust Steward is focused on one’s use of monetary resources, the parable is not lacking an eschatological edge. He continues, “If the parable is intended to

⁹²Ibid., 152.

⁹³Ibid., 153.

⁹⁴Others in favor of charity in general, or almsgiving specifically, as the main point of the parable are these older interpretations: Arndt, Bigo, Bruce, Godet, Hiers, Hoyt, Johnson, Koster, Krämer, Lagrange, Moore, Samain, Stoll, and Weiss.

⁹⁵F. E. Williams, “Is Almsgiving the Point of the Unjust Steward?” *JBL* 83 (1964): 293, 297. Cf. also B. Byrne, “Forceful Stewardship and Neglected Wealth: A Contemporary Reading of Luke 16,” *Pacifica* 1 (1988): 3, and Kyoung-Jin Kim, *Stewardship and Almsgiving in Luke’s Theology*, JSNTSup 155 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 157, who sees the steward as a “model who makes use of material possession in a right way by distributing them to those in great debt.”

encourage almsgiving, its appeal is to a motive which may be called ‘eschatological self-interest.’”⁹⁶

Marshaling ancient Jewish literature to support his thesis, Williams explains that in Jewish practice, a person who gives alms is merely distributing property that is already God’s, an idea that is represented by the steward’s allocation of the master’s resources.⁹⁷ If, indeed, the debt reduction is a dishonest elimination of the master’s own wealth, the commendation is curious. Still, the steward’s commendation by the master could be more easily accepted if Williams’ claim that “Jewish parables often turn upon apparently paradoxical behavior on the part of a king or property owner” is accurate.⁹⁸ Unfortunately for the researcher, however, he provides no specific examples to support this claim. Even if the claim is specious, though, Williams does make a point that can still salvage the “dishonest steward” argument. He correctly explains that in an *a fortiori* argument, it is logically proper to introduce the behavior of an “evil” person as “relevant to some issue under discussion,” for it is the lesser (i.e., inferior) example in the comparison.⁹⁹ Although Williams recognizes 8b to be a bit of “homiletic sarcasm,”¹⁰⁰ he does not admit irony as the interpretive key for the entire parable. On the contrary, he

⁹⁶Williams, “Is Almsgiving the Point of the Unjust Steward?” 293. So also Holmes Rolston, “Ministry to Need: The Teachings of Jesus concerning Stewardship of Possessions,” *Int* 8 (1954): 145, who claims that the single main point of the parable is that one should use his limited time on earth to use possessions wisely because one’s use of material possessions is an indicator of his or her fitness to enter into the kingdom. Similar promises of eschatological blessing in Synoptics appear in Matt 6:19-21 (// Luke 12:33); Mark 9:43-48; 10:21 (pars.); 10:30; Luke 6:38; 14:13-24; and implicitly in Luke 16:19-31 and Matt 25:31-46.

⁹⁷Williams, “Is Almsgiving the Point of the Unjust Steward?” 294, following *Pirqe ’Abot* 3.7, which is commenting on 1 Chr 29:14.

⁹⁸Williams, “Is Almsgiving the Point of the Unjust Steward?” 294.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 295.

argues, if the parable is to be understood as ironic, it would be so subtle that it would be unexpected “in a piece of popular preaching” such as this parable.¹⁰¹ Williams also employs Jewish literature to support his contention that the “friends” are the personification of alms, for a similar wording can be found in rabbinic literature.¹⁰²

Other interpreters. The six positions discussed above represent all of the major solutions of the parable that have been offered since the nineteenth century. Nearly all other explanations are simply variations on or responses to these positions. A few other types of solutions have been offered in the past century. None of these other proposals, however, could be considered a “major” solution or warrants a full discussion because they all are either so outdated or idiosyncratic that they have received few adherents in recent years. For example, some interpreters (mainly from the turn of the century) have recognized elements of neither eschatology nor material possessions as primary. Their dismissal of the two most obvious interpretive possibilities usually comes as the result of overly vague, homiletical, or peculiar exegesis. The most notable representative of this group is A. Jülicher, who saw neither theme as primary. His position (that the parable offers a nondescript exhortation for one to use the present to prepare for the future) had lost most of its momentum by the mid-twentieth because it was too prosaic to satisfy most later interpreters.¹⁰³ Another scholar who was frequently quoted but failed to generate much scholarly interest was Lunt, whose convoluted,

¹⁰¹Ibid., 297.

¹⁰²*Pirqe 'Abot* 4.11; *B. Bat.* 10a; *Šabb.* 32a (Williams, “Is Almsgiving the Point of the Unjust Steward?” 295-96). (Of course, Williams’ use of rabbinic literature is subject to the same criticism of anachronism as that of Derrett.)

¹⁰³More will be discussed regarding Jülicher’s approach to parable interpretation, specifically as it concerns this parable, in Chapter 5, which focuses more on the parable’s literary context.

allegorizing interpretation that the debt reduction represents “relaxation of some of those ceremonial laws on which the Pharisees insisted”¹⁰⁴ gained few followers. His assertion that “Jesus appears to be urging those in positions of spiritual leadership not . . . to make reformation too hard”¹⁰⁵ simply stretches the parable’s more obvious meaning(s) beyond recognition and has rightly been ignored by later scholars. Another dead-end route that a few interpreters have chosen is an appeal to textual corruption or translation error.

Although each points to a different word or phrase in the text, Compston, R. B. Y. Scott, Schwarz, C. C. Torrey, and Wansey have all posited some kind of mistranslation of the original Aramaic words of Jesus or a textual error in the Greek;¹⁰⁶ most interpreters, though, have rightly agreed with Porter that “resorting to mistranslation of a non-existent document or body of material seems an implausible, to say nothing of unverifiable, solution.”¹⁰⁷

Ireland and His Reviewers

With a journal article on the parable’s history of interpretation and a monograph of over two hundred pages focused exclusively on the same parable, Dennis Ireland did more for reaffirming the traditional view of the Unjust Steward than any other scholar in the twentieth century. In his 1989 article, Ireland laid bare the thesis driving both that article and his monograph: “It is my contention that the best interpretation of the parable of the Unjust Steward is the traditional one, difficulties notwithstanding. Luke

¹⁰⁴Ronald G. Lunt, “Expounding the Parables: III. The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-15),” *ExpTim* 77 (1965-66): 136.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 33-35; Porter, “Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 128.

¹⁰⁷Porter, “Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 128-29.

16:1-13 is, to use D. P. Seccombe's words, 'a fundamental evaluation of possessions in light of the Kingdom which will lead the wise disciple to use his possessions in the service of the needy.' Such a message is surely as relevant in our own day as it was in Luke's."¹⁰⁸ Ireland's method for interpreting the parable is simple: examining "its various contextual levels," beginning with the narrower pericope level and eventually widening to the broader Luke-Acts level.¹⁰⁹ In his monograph, Ireland accomplishes this goal in four main chapters, in addition to a brief summarizing chapter.

The first chapter establishes the background by presenting the parable's history of interpretation for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Admitting from the start that the parable's interpretive history "almost defies comprehensive systematization," Ireland chooses to segregate the literature based on the how each scholar views the steward's actions (honest or dishonest) and how each explains the lesson Jesus is intending to convey.¹¹⁰ With good reason, Ireland laments that the sheer

¹⁰⁸Ireland, "Recent Interpretation of the Unjust Steward," 318.

¹⁰⁹Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 2.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 6-7. Ireland's categories and subcategories have already been mentioned, so they do not need to be repeated here. Moreover, lest this study contain a survey of yet another survey, the present writer sees no benefit in listing all the specific scholars and positions mentioned already by Ireland. Those searching for a full review of every major interpretation from the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries should consult Ireland directly.

Ireland begins his survey with the traditional "monetary" interpretation (ibid., 7-14), but the sheer number of scholars representing this position prohibits Ireland in many cases from making more than a brief footnote or single passing reference to each. Having read many of the works that Ireland lists only in passing, the present writer has determined that Ireland was justified in discussing in detail only the most notable studies, for many of the others in the same category merely reiterate the same basic points. While there are minor variations among the interpretations (e.g., whether the eschatological crisis faced by humans is the shortness of life or the coming of the kingdom—or both), all are in general agreement about the main lines of interpretation. The main division within the "traditional" camp is the bifurcation between the Catholic scholars, who tend to view the proper use of possessions as "in some way meritorious in itself" with respect to one's salvation, and Protestant scholars, who tend to view the proper use of possessions (merely) as a testimony to the giver's faith (ibid., 11, 102).

number of overlapping yet contradictory interpretations is often “disheartening.”¹¹¹

Despite the vexation that systematization inevitably causes the interpreter, his survey at least has helped to identify the crucial questions that many interpreters have recognized as important: the parable’s relationship to its literary context (especially chapter 15); the meaning of each “application” after the parable proper; the relation of these “applications” to the parable; and the identity of ὁ κύριος in verse 8a.¹¹²

In chapter two, Ireland provides his own detailed exegesis of Luke 16:1-13. His thesis is that the parable itself (16:1-9) and the attached material (16:10-13) “together deal with the matter of the Christian’s wise use of money, possessions, and/or material goods.”¹¹³ The coming kingdom forms the background for this teaching, inspiring Ireland to assign the title “Christian Stewardship in an Eschatological Key” to the parable.¹¹⁴

First in chapter two, Ireland addresses the parable itself (16:1-8a). Ireland argues that the manager is one charged with legal power of the rich absentee owner’s estate.¹¹⁵ The accusation, whose legitimacy cannot be determined, probably involves mere carelessness since the steward is not arrested or even forced to remunerate the master.¹¹⁶ The debtors are probably tenants on the master’s land, rather than merchants,

¹¹¹Ibid., 47.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Ibid., 48.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 50.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 50-51.

although their exact identity is not of great importance to proper interpretation.¹¹⁷ Ireland takes the introduction (16:1), where the disciples are named as Jesus' target audience, "at face value."¹¹⁸ Since the master of the parable has already been called ὁ κύριος in verses 3 and 5, and since no change is implied in verse 8a, it is better to consider the master, rather than Jesus, as the referent of the same term in verse 8a.¹¹⁹ The praise (ἐπήνεσεν) of the master is delimited by the phrase ὅτι φρονίμως ἐποίησεν, which indicates that this is not a commendation of the steward in general, but of one particular quality, his shrewdness.¹²⁰ The most natural referent of this steward's dishonesty in verse 8a ($\tau\hat{\eta}\varsigma\acute{a}\delta\iota\kappa\acute{a}\iota\alpha\varsigma$, a phrase that probably carries an eschatological nuance, which is made more clear in verse 8b) is his action in verses 5-7, not the questionable actions that led to the accusation in verses 1-2.¹²¹ Ireland argues against the interpretations that view the steward's debt reductions as honest on four grounds: if the steward's description as "dishonest" points only back to verses 1-2, it is a convoluted reading; contra Derrett and Fitzmyer, any commission or interest due to the steward directly would have been "under the table"; to consider the steward honest "robs the parable of its element of surprise"; and interpretations, like Derrett's, that rely heavily on a Jewish background to make sense would have been inexplicable for Luke's non-Jewish audience.¹²²

¹¹⁷Ibid., 53-54.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 60.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 62-63.

¹²⁰Ibid., 67-68, 72-73.

¹²¹Ibid., 69-71.

¹²²Ibid., 80-81.

Next in chapter two, Ireland explains the applications to the parable (16:8b-13). Ireland concludes that verse 8b is original and that Jesus, the speaker here, is endorsing the master's praise.¹²³ Jesus uses the words "light" with both soteriological and ethical implications; moreover, the phrase "sons of light" is an eschatological category.¹²⁴ The point of the comparison is "restricted to one point": that the steward was commended because he demonstrated the prudence that the children of the world exhibit when dealing with one another.¹²⁵ The heretofore halfhearted disciples then are exhorted to exhibit the same wisdom, albeit with respect to God.¹²⁶ Verse 9's introductory formula and its close parallels with verses 4 and 8 argue in favor of its originality.¹²⁷ In this verse, Jesus recommends an ethical activity in light of an eschatological backdrop by exhorting his disciples "to press wealth into service for the kingdom of God."¹²⁸ With each component understood eschatologically, verse 9 explains how Jesus' disciples can "practice in their own sphere of existence the wise preparation for the future which the steward exercised in his."¹²⁹ Ireland sees a unity in verses 10-13, which he believes to be authentic words of Jesus even if secondarily appended to the parable; regardless, the interpretation of verses 1-9 does not depend on the originality of 10-13, although the

¹²³Ibid., 85-86.

¹²⁴Ibid., 87-88.

¹²⁵Ibid., 89.

¹²⁶Ibid., 89-90.

¹²⁷Ibid., 94-95.

¹²⁸Ibid., 99.

¹²⁹Ibid., 105.

verses do correlate well with verse 9 especially.¹³⁰ In sum, “if v. 9 is a positive exhortation to charity, vv. 10-12 are a warning about the consequences of a lack of charity.”¹³¹ Verse 13, then, is the final generalizing summary that one cannot serve both God and wealth.¹³²

In chapter 3, Ireland first examines the parable in the larger context of Luke 15-16. Since the setting of chapter 16 continues that of chapter 15, Ireland regards the Unjust Steward as a “sequel” to the parables that preceded it.¹³³ The parables of Luke 15 are aimed at the grumbling Jewish leaders (15:1-2), and the Unjust Steward is directed at the disciples; they all cohere, functioning on two levels, to justify Jesus’ actions toward sinners while simultaneously indicting the Pharisees and scribes for not acting like this.¹³⁴ Therefore, “the polemic nature of Jesus’ apologetic in chapter 15 sharpens his teaching to the disciples in 16:1-13 and gives it a note of urgency.”¹³⁵ Then, 16:14-18 discusses the relationship between the law and the kingdom, which, along with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31), “amplifies the polemic against greed” introduced in verses 1-13.¹³⁶ The Pharisees mock (v. 14) Jesus’ admonition about wealth probably because they saw no tension between piety and possessions, and the rest of the chapter is a direct

¹³⁰Ibid., 106-07, 112.

¹³¹Ibid., 112.

¹³²Ibid., 112-13.

¹³³Ibid., 117.

¹³⁴Ibid., 117-18.

¹³⁵Ibid., 121.

¹³⁶Ibid., 122.

challenge to those assumptions.¹³⁷ Ireland disagrees with the majority view that verses 16-18 are unrelated to one another and misplaced in their context, although he does admit that the links to the surrounding material have been lost in transmission.¹³⁸ These verses address the same theme as chapter 15, the Pharisees' self-righteousness, while also precluding possible charges of antinomianism.¹³⁹ Verse 18 looks especially out of place to many interpreters, but Ireland sees this verse as a specific point of criticism against the Pharisees for their "laxity and misuse of the OT."¹⁴⁰ Finally in the chapter 15-16 context, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus illustrates the connection between one's earthly wealth and one's eternal destiny.¹⁴¹

Next in chapter three, Ireland locates the parable within the even larger context of Luke's Central Section (9:51-19:44). Ireland notes that the apparent journey from Galilee to Jerusalem offers so few specific topographical and chronological references that it makes outlining of the section nearly impossible.¹⁴² Moreover, the number of journeys represented by the section, the main location(s) of the ministry, the literary framework, and the theological purpose have all been the source of numerous scholarly opinions.¹⁴³ Although the Central Section "defies analysis," Ireland opts for a "didactic-

¹³⁷Ibid., 125.

¹³⁸Ibid., 128.

¹³⁹Ibid., 128-29, 132.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 133.

¹⁴¹Ibid., 136.

¹⁴²Ibid., 140-42.

¹⁴³Ibid., 143, 154.

paranetic” approach.¹⁴⁴ Ireland defines this approach by explaining that Luke’s main concern in this section was the teaching of the “rejected Messiah” and addressing the practical concerns of his readers, so he arranged the material topically, rather than geographically, chronologically, or with specific details of the journey in mind.¹⁴⁵

Within the context of the Central Section, the parable is surrounded by the theme of discipleship, an undivided loyalty to God that is specifically tied to one’s use of money in 14:33, and an eschatological background that is also tied to the idea of the wise use of possessions.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, it is in light of this context that the parable should be interpreted.

Chapter 4 examines the parable within the context of Lukan theology, namely Luke’s attitude toward poverty and riches. Contrary to the popular view that Luke was both inconsistent in his characterization of possessions and biased against the rich, Ireland argues that Luke is neither inconsistent nor biased, but is aiming to explain to his rich readers how much of an obstacle wealth is to their “wholehearted discipleship.”¹⁴⁷ Ireland explains that those who have argued for Luke’s alleged bias in favor of the poor (and against the rich) have based their proposals mainly on Luke 1:50-53; 4:18-19; and 6:20-26; however, in all three instances the “poor” ($\pi\tau\omega\chi\sigma\iota$) should be seen primarily as a spiritual category representing those who are fully dependent on God, not a literal

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 155. Blomberg, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, *WTJ*, 351, comments that this “didactic-paranetic” function of Luke’s Central Section is where Ireland is least clear in his explanation.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., 155-56.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., 158.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 166.

monetary category.¹⁴⁸ Luke does point to the danger of riches in 12:13-21 and 18:18-30, but these passages are mainly a criticism of those who have misplaced loyalties rather than a criticism of riches per se.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, although 12:33, 14:33, and 18:22 command a renunciation of possessions, these passages are not universal commands; they are conditional commands directed at those too loyal to their riches and are intended to demonstrate the necessity of a wholehearted commitment to Jesus.¹⁵⁰ In Luke-Acts, the main use for possessions is charity, as demonstrated best by the paradigmatic story of Zacchaeus, who gives not because it is mandatory but as an expression of his changed heart.¹⁵¹ In sum, Luke's understanding of riches and poverty "lends weight to the traditional interpretation," which emphasizes the use of material possessions.¹⁵² This thesis is supported further by the fact that the parable precedes the parable of the rich man and Lazarus because Luke had a propensity for juxtaposing parables of wise and foolish use of possessions.¹⁵³

Finally in Chapter 4, Ireland addresses Lukan eschatology, especially as it pertains to the parable under examination. In disagreement with Conzelmann, who argued that Luke coped with a delayed parousia by replacing references to the imminence of the kingdom with futuristic references, Ireland believes that eschatology "is in a real

¹⁴⁸Ibid., 167-75.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 175-80.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., 181-88.

¹⁵¹Ibid., 189-92.

¹⁵²Ibid., 196.

¹⁵³Ibid., 197. Cf. Luke 12:13-21 and 12:22-34; 18:18-23 and 19:1-10; and Acts 4:36-37 and 5:1-11.

sense the most basic context for understanding the parable of the unjust steward.”¹⁵⁴ The monetary idea coalesces with the eschatological backdrop in this parable because prudent use of material wealth “is both proof of one’s citizenship in the kingdom and an actualization of the value of the kingdom in anticipation of its final manifestation.”¹⁵⁵ While some scholars in previous generations have argued for an exclusively futuristic eschatology (e.g., Weiss, Schweitzer, Conzelmann) and others have argued for an imminent eschatology (most notably, Dodd), the recent consensus is that Luke-Acts “undeniably includes both present and future aspects.”¹⁵⁶ Both present and future elements have a bearing on ethics by adding a measure of hope, incentive, and present instruction for the disciple, especially in the matter of the proper use of possessions.¹⁵⁷ Here Luke demonstrates the “intimate relationship between eschatology and ethics” because the exhortation to use wealth charitably gives one both a “foretaste of the life of the kingdom in advance of its consummation” and “concrete evidence that kingdom has come.”¹⁵⁸ This interweaving of imminent and future eschatology creates a “two-strand eschatological thread [that] provides both the incentive and dynamic” for such works of charity.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 198.

¹⁵⁵Ibid.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., 199-200, 209.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., 211.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 214-15.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 216.

Critical Reviews of Ireland

One of the most frequent criticisms of Ireland's monograph is that he fails to address a particular scholar's work. For example, Mathewson states, "One of the most glaring omissions of Ireland's work is his failure to interact with the work of [Bernard B.] Scott."¹⁶⁰ Blomberg offers the same criticism and finds that Ireland has also omitted works by Austin, Merkelbach, Molina, Steinhauser, and Löwenstein/Schramm.¹⁶¹ Also, from Blomberg's perspective, Ireland has too easily dismissed chiasmus (so Bailey) and midrash (so C. F. Evans) as legitimate literary devices for interpreting the section.¹⁶² Brawley, although he in general lauds the book, nevertheless reprimands Ireland for not interacting with notable sociological studies (especially studies concerning patron-client relationships and the Mediterranean view of limited goods, like the study by Moxnes) and studies dealing with the nature of the parable.¹⁶³ (Similarly, Blomberg notes that Ireland could have paid more attention to theories of parable interpretation.¹⁶⁴) Brawley further observes that Ireland spends much time arguing against Luke Timothy Johnson's total renunciation of wealth but ignores most of the central points from Johnson.¹⁶⁵ Brawley

¹⁶⁰Dave L. Mathewson, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13): A Reexamination of the Traditional View in Light of Recent Challenges," *JETS* 38 (1995): 30.

¹⁶¹Blomberg, review *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, *WTJ*, 352; cf. also idem, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, *Them*, 26-27. It should be noted that in Cheong's monograph on the same parable (C.-S. Abraham Cheong, *A Dialogic Reading of The Steward Parable [Luke 16:1-9]* [New York: Peter Lang, 2001]), published more than a decade later, Scott's work is the only one of these included in the bibliography.

¹⁶²Blomberg, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, *WTJ*, 351.

¹⁶³Robert L. Brawley, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God*, by Dennis J. Ireland, *JBL* 113 (1994): 542-43.

¹⁶⁴Blomberg, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, *Them*, 26.

¹⁶⁵Brawley, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 542.

also criticizes Ireland for slighting Crossan's work,¹⁶⁶ while Marguerat bemoans the fact that Ireland discards the purely eschatological interpretation of not only Crossan but also Via and Jeremias.¹⁶⁷ Without naming specific scholars that Ireland should have consulted, Kurz, in his otherwise complimentary review, complains that "there is almost no account taken of the current explosion of narrative, reader-response, and poststructural approaches."¹⁶⁸

The most common criticism of a particular topic covered by Ireland is that of his handling of the Lukian understanding of riches and the poverty. For example, Brawley criticizes Ireland for considering the "poor" in Luke-Acts to be a religious rather than an economic or political category, claiming that Ireland's understanding of the "poor" eviscerates the gospel of much of its social implications.¹⁶⁹ So too Marguerat declares that Ireland's handling of the Lukian denunciation of riches is "trop faible."¹⁷⁰ Likewise, Blomberg chastises Ireland for passing too "glibly over the hard Lucan sayings on the renunciation of wealth" and for overestimating the affluence of Luke's community.¹⁷¹

While the poverty-riches issue is a criticism worth considering, some of the criticisms lodged against Ireland are themselves clearly lacking much force. Marguerat

¹⁶⁶Ibid.

¹⁶⁷Daniel Marguerat, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God* by Dennis J. Ireland, *ETR* (1996): 594.

¹⁶⁸William S. Kurz, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God* by Dennis J. Ireland, *CBQ* 56 (1994): 140.

¹⁶⁹Brawley, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 542-43.

¹⁷⁰Marguerat, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 594. So too Blomberg, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, *Them*, 26.

¹⁷¹Blomberg, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, *Them*, 26.

implicitly criticizes Ireland for the parameters of his history-of-research chapter, explaining that Ireland's history of interpretation is limited to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but then asking "mais pourquoi?"¹⁷² Marguerat apparently missed the first two paragraphs of Ireland's first chapter, where Ireland clearly explains the perfectly reasonable threefold rationale behind the parameters he established: no systematization existed for works of the twentieth century, nineteenth-century works were included to make sure the study was not "too narrow," and Schreiter's 1803 study adequately summarizes all the works before that.¹⁷³ Another weak criticism of Ireland is offered by Kurz, who implicitly reproves Ireland for not taking seriously enough the incompatibility of Luke's pejorative portrayal of the Pharisees (viz. the Lukan theme of pharisaic greed) with extrabiblical evidence.¹⁷⁴ No doubt, however, Kurz has in mind primarily rabbinic "evidence," which not only post-dates Luke by a century or more but also was compiled only after the crucial events of AD 70. To suggest that Luke disapprovingly misrepresents the main Jewish party of his own time, especially given that he is the Evangelist who often paints the most benign portrait of the Pharisees in both Luke and Acts, is an ineffective argument that Chapter 4 of this dissertation challenges. Another weak criticism is the only one offered by Denaux: Ireland did not consider the authenticity of the parable closely enough.¹⁷⁵ It is likely that Ireland deliberately does not address the matter of authenticity because it would be of little benefit to do so, for Ireland

¹⁷²Marguerat, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 594.

¹⁷³Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 5-6.

¹⁷⁴Kurz, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 140-41.

¹⁷⁵A. Denaux, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God*, by Dennis J. Ireland, *ETL* 70 (1994): 476-77.

accurately claims that “the authenticity of the parable itself is seldom questioned,” mainly because of the great difficulty that the passage presents.¹⁷⁶

These criticisms notwithstanding, almost all reviews of Ireland have been largely favorable and have regarded the alleged weaknesses as aberrations in an otherwise meticulous examination of the pericope. Practically all recognize it to be “impressively argued and documented,”¹⁷⁷ “a most welcome addition to the scholarly literature,”¹⁷⁸ a “careful” study,¹⁷⁹ “a model of clarity,”¹⁸⁰ “readable and well structured,”¹⁸¹ and conducted “avec prudence.”¹⁸² Even Bock, who is in fundamental disagreement with the traditional view, commends Ireland’s work as “comprehensive,” “fair,” and “the best currently available discussion” of the traditional approach.¹⁸³ Blomberg believes that Ireland is correct in emphasizing the eschatological point of the ethics presented by the parable, a point missed by a number of previous scholars who are only able to see the ethical dimension.¹⁸⁴

As long as the traditional position fails to convince some scholars, there will always be those, like Bock, who are still not convinced that Jesus would have used an

¹⁷⁶Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 49.

¹⁷⁷Blomberg, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom, Them*, 26.

¹⁷⁸Blomberg, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom, WTJ*, 352.

¹⁷⁹Kurz, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 141.

¹⁸⁰Brawley, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 543.

¹⁸¹Denaux, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God*, 477.

¹⁸²Marguerat, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 594.

¹⁸³Darrell L. Bock, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God*, by Dennis J. Ireland, *EvQ* 67 (1995): 271.

¹⁸⁴Blomberg, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom, WTJ*, 352.

example in which a dishonest act is praised (despite its shrewdness).¹⁸⁵ Indeed, this is the greatest obstacle for those unpersuaded by the traditional understanding. Nevertheless, Ireland's work is, as most reviewers acknowledge, the most careful and comprehensive defense of the traditional position to date and has done well to undermine the theses of the scholars before him who attempted to vindicate the steward, who have dismissed the eschatological component of the parable, or who have resorted to thorough use of irony to explain the meaning. Ireland has done well in resuscitating a position that has been waning in recent years. Most scholars after him, however, have not followed his impressive lead.

Interpretations since Ireland

Most of the works on the Unjust Steward after Ireland that are in fundamental disagreement with his thesis (mainly, those that attempt to vindicate the steward of wrongdoing) offer a critique of Ireland merely by way of omission. Most articles do not offer so much as a passing reference to his monograph, while others offer only that. By and large, those who depart from the traditional position spend their time criticizing or agreeing with older articles that had already been addressed directly by Ireland. Presented here is a survey of the major articles published on this parable since the late 1980s, when Ireland's dissertation was being completed. Although some of these works precede the publication of Ireland's work by several years, none of the following interpretations was covered in Ireland's survey. Space limitations prohibit a

¹⁸⁵Bock, review of *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 271. Bock's reason for rejecting the act as dishonest is that Jesus tells no other parable in which a bad act is praised (*ibid.*).

comprehensive survey of all works addressing the Unjust Steward, so below are discussed some of the most significant.

Interpretation Extending the Derrett/Fitzmyer Thesis

Brad H. Young. Given the major interpretations discussed above, Young's thesis most closely resembles that of Fitzmyer. Young believes that charity to the poor is the main point of the passage.¹⁸⁶ He reaches this conclusion by a provocative, albeit unconvincing, route. He describes the steward as "downright dishonest" from the very beginning and one who acted with the sole motivation of "sav[ing] his own neck."¹⁸⁷ Young makes no attempt to vindicate the steward's initial action, claiming that the "scattering" of which he is accused refers to "dishonest business dealings rather than ineffectual management . . . first by overcharging clients and second by embezzling his master's goods."¹⁸⁸ Despite the steward's unscrupulous start, Young sees the subsequent actions of the steward as honest because he seeks to restore to the debtors the excessive commission that he had garnered for himself. The consequence is that "all the people are blessed by the steward's cleverness."¹⁸⁹

Based on Flusser's argument that the "sons of light" language in the parable application reflects language of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Young argues that this parable

¹⁸⁶ Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 245.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 232.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 233.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 247. Walther Bindemann, "Ungerechte als Vorbilder? Gottesreich und Gottesrecht in den Gleichnissen vom 'ungerechten Verwalter' und 'ungerechten Richter,'" *TLZ* 120 (1995): 961-62, proposes a similar argument vindicating the steward; based on the work of Derrett, Fitzmyer, and Moxnes, he claims that the Torah is fulfilled by the steward's clever debt reduction (*kluger schuldennachlass*).

gives Jesus' negative parody of the Essenes' communal wealth.¹⁹⁰ The Essenes believed in a "strict separatism" from the rest of the world; consequently, they took advantage of their adherents by confiscating their possession upon entrance to the community and considered money outside of their community to be "mammon of unrighteousness."¹⁹¹ Their "closed community of wealth" is a "sharp antithesis to the teachings of Jesus and the rabbis," who taught a freer distribution of alms.¹⁹² In light of this historical context, the parable is an exhortation for proper stewardship; such stewardship is different from that of the Essenes, who were "the antithesis of active social reform" because they "kept their money in their own bank and harbored a sectarian hatred for outsiders and their unrighteous mammon."¹⁹³

In addition to the monetary understanding of the parable, Young adds a soteriological layer of understanding. Unlike Jesus and the Pharisees, he explains, the Essenes believed in "double predestination," so they physically and economically separated themselves from the predetermined, non-elect "children of darkness"; it was this narrow definition of the "sons of light" and their concomitant separation from the non-elect that Jesus condemns in this parable.¹⁹⁴ Young appears also to offer another soteriological meaning to the parable: "God's grace is unlimited," because He releases

¹⁹⁰Ibid., 233-34.

¹⁹¹Ibid., 233, 243. See Luke 16:9.

¹⁹²Ibid., 244.

¹⁹³Ibid., 234.

¹⁹⁴Ibid., 246.

man from sins through Jesus in the same way the master allows the release of debts at the hands of his steward to stand.¹⁹⁵

Young sees the thematic connection of this parable to the Zacchaeus pericope,¹⁹⁶ but he inverts the connection made by other interpreters, who typically argue that Zacchaeus' financial restitution is parallel to the steward's actions. Young argues instead that Zacchaeus represents the social outcast whom Jesus now invites into the kingdom.¹⁹⁷ The two thematic ideas, of course, are not mutually exclusive; in the Lukan context, in fact, they are inextricably linked. Zacchaeus represents one whom the Jews despise because of his dishonest gain, and, when he accepts Jesus' message, he proves that more than just his theology has changed—his perspective on money has changed.

Interpretation Emphasizing the Theme of Justice

Bernard B. Scott.¹⁹⁸ Scott employs reader-response criticism to argue that the master is introduced as the antagonist and that the social expectation of the peasant hearers would be predisposed against him.¹⁹⁹ Since Jesus' parables anticipate animosity between master and servant, one may assume that the master's accusations are false,²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁵Ibid., 247.

¹⁹⁶Ibid., 248.

¹⁹⁷Ibid.

¹⁹⁸Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 260. The chapter on the Unjust Steward in this book is the same as his article (Bernard Brandon Scott, "A Master's Praise [Luke 16, 1-8a]," *Bib* 64 [1983]: 173-88).

¹⁹⁹Scott, "A Master's Praise," 179-80.

²⁰⁰Ibid., 180-81. Cf. also Mary Ann Beavis, "Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8)," *JBL* 111 (1992): 48.

which evokes sympathy for the steward.²⁰¹ Moreover, when the steward refers to the rich man as “my master,” it emphasizes the distance between the steward and master and evokes further sympathy for the steward.²⁰² Although the steward is initially the object of pity by the peasant audience, he is not exculpated of wrongdoing. Instead, the parable offers an “off-color cast,” where both protagonist and antagonist are disreputable characters.²⁰³ The story of a despised, despotic character condoning the dishonesty of someone who has embezzled from him is intended to create a cognitive dissonance for the hearer, resulting in more questions than answers.²⁰⁴ Consequently, “the parable challenges the reader’s implicit world by challenging the way justice operates in that world.”²⁰⁵

Scott’s thesis shares many similarities with the traditional view. For example, Scott agrees with the traditional position that attempts to exonerate the steward (viz., those by Derrett and Fitzmyer) are “unconvincing.”²⁰⁶ The debt is owed to master, so the steward’s elimination of the debts was dishonest and was his way of “getting even” for the unjust accusation; the master praised him merely for his prudence, not for his righteousness. Scott departs from the traditional view, however, in that he sees no emphasis on wealth or even a direct emphasis on eschatology. Instead, he sees the

²⁰¹ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 181.

²⁰² Ibid., 183.

²⁰³ Ibid., 186.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 187.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 177.

parable's emphasis as "justice."²⁰⁷ In the new perspective of the kingdom, justice is not associated with "power" but with "vulnerability."²⁰⁸ The point of the parable, then, is that the "kingdom is for the vulnerable; for masters and stewards who do not get even."²⁰⁹

Justin S. Ukpong. Ukpong approaches the parable from a Third World reader-response perspective, which he terms an "inculturation hermeneutic" that reads the parable from the perspective of "ordinary West African peasant farmers."²¹⁰ Although he, just like Combrink (discussed below), describes the meaning of parables as "plurivalent,"²¹¹ he, also just like Combrink, still manages to find a single interpretation to espouse. Viewed from the "Robin Hood" point of view, this parable portrays the steward as a noble paragon. Ukpong explains that, in his twentieth-century Nigerian context, interest rates on agricultural commodities are often an exploitative fifty to one hundred percent, similar to rates implied in the steward parable if interest is assumed.²¹² Read from this West African perspective, the parable presents a manager who is a "hero" because the poor farmers needed the money more than the rich man.²¹³

Ukpong claims his interpretation is different from that of "Western scholars," who typically see the parable from the perspective of the rich landowner rather than the

²⁰⁷Ibid., 187-88.

²⁰⁸Ibid., 188.

²⁰⁹Ibid.

²¹⁰Justin S. Ukpong, "The Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-13): An Essay in Inculturation Biblical Hermeneutic," *Semeia* 73 (1996): 190.

²¹¹Ibid., 191.

²¹²Ibid., 193.

²¹³Ibid., 190.

poor debtors.²¹⁴ While Western interpreters often assume the steward to be “dishonest” because of the description in verse 8, Ukpong believes that the title “unjust” should be understood as what the greedy rich man called the manager.²¹⁵ The manager is a poor, exploited “victim” (like the poor farmers) because he did much of the work on the estate for the absentee landlord, who rarely showed his greedy face at the estate.²¹⁶ It is only under the rich man’s perverted sense of justice, in which “the poor have no right to anything,” where the manager’s reducing of debts is considered unjust.²¹⁷ In sum, Ukpong contends that the parable is a critique of oppressive and exploitative economic systems, whether they be in contemporary West Africa or ancient Israel. Economic justice is the point.

Interpretation Emphasizing the Honor-Shame Background

The post-Ireland position that has gained the most momentum has been that which argues that the honor of the master should in some way be considered as a major factor in the proper interpretation of the parable. The chief progenitor of this recent development is Bruce J. Malina,²¹⁸ whose works about the ancient Mediterranean world’s honor-shame culture has swayed a number of scholars to produce quite a

²¹⁴Ibid., 190, 195.

²¹⁵Ibid., 204-05.

²¹⁶Ibid., 204.

²¹⁷Ibid., 206.

²¹⁸Some of his most notable works are Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); Bruce J. Malina, “Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament and Its World,” *Int* 41 (1987): 354-67; Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, “Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jerome Neyrey, 25-65 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991). Malina has

proliferation of articles applying the honor-shame idea directly to the Unjust Steward.

Kloppenborg was the first NT scholar after Ireland to make the connection; he was followed a few years later by Combrink, whose thesis is quite similar. Whereas both Kloppenborg and Combrink still retained part of the traditional view (i.e., that the steward was dishonest throughout the story), later interpreters, Landry and May, S. I. Wright, and Lygre, picked up the same honor-shame arguments and used them instead to vindicate the steward, thus moving this development farther from the traditional view.

John S. Kloppenborg. Kloppenborg's thesis relies heavily on the alleged honor-shame background in the ancient Mediterranean world. He explains the parable's meaning in this way: since the "squandering" manager was bringing a bad name to his estate, the master dismisses the manager in order to uphold his honor. Although the steward perpetuates the dishonesty (and thereby the dishonor to the master) by reducing the bills, the master surprisingly commends the manager. When the master praises the subordinate steward who threatened his social standing, it, therefore, "fracture[s] the cultural codes and expectations of the listener," just like the preceding parable, the Prodigal Son. It celebrates the master's 'conversion' from the myopia of his society's system of ascribed honour."²¹⁹ The parable's message, therefore, is that the master, who has risen above the honor/shame codes of his society is a reflection of the kingdom, where one does not insist on honor but rather chooses the "lesser seat."²²⁰

written, co-written, or edited no fewer than two dozen books and articles in the past twenty years, almost all of which attempt to apply social-scientific insights to the Gospels.

²¹⁹John S. Kloppenborg, "The Dishonoured Master (Luke 16, 1-8a)," *Bib* 70 (1989): 492-93.

²²⁰Cf. Luke 11:43; 14:8-11.

Kloppenborg accomplishes this thesis first by agreeing with B. B. Scott on a number of critical points: that the actions of the rich were regarded as antagonistic toward peasants, that the original audience would have viewed the rich man as “capricious and unfair,” and that the master was more concerned about his social standing than his money.²²¹ He further claims that it is “certain” that the debtors were wealthy, that the original audience would not have assumed usury or commission was being remitted, and that the steward’s actions were “injurious to the master’s interests.”²²²

Following Malina, Kloppenborg assumes that the parable must be understood within the context of the honor-shame culture, in which honor was more important than possessions, in which subordinates were “embedded in the honour of the dominant male,” and in which possessions were the means to acquire the ultimate end—honor.²²³ As such, the parable assumes that the ancient audience will understand that the master’s honor, not the steward’s character, is what is at stake.²²⁴ Since honor is the key idea in the parable, therefore, the redactor who added verses 10-12 ignored the parable’s original meaning by turning it into a “negative example story.”²²⁵ In agreement with Crossan,²²⁶ Kloppenborg does not find an eschatological element to the parable: “nothing in the parable evokes an apocalyptic situation” because the master is not “returning” and because the original

²²¹Kloppenborg, “Dishonored Master,” 487-88. Kloppenborg, in agreement with Donahue, departs from Scott by stating that v. 3 evokes sympathy for the steward rather than a distancing the hearer (490-91).

²²²Ibid., 482, 486.

²²³Ibid., 488-89.

²²⁴Ibid., 489.

²²⁵Ibid., 475.

²²⁶John Dominic Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” *Semeia* 1 (1974): 46.

agrarian audience was concerned with matters of money and harvest, not apocalypse.²²⁷ Moreover, it is illegitimate to read an eschatological meaning into the parable because Jesus would not have used an example such as this to teach such “crass self-interest.”²²⁸

Kloppenborg finds fault with the major authors who attempt to vindicate the steward. He first argues that even when an intermediary agent was involved in brokering deals, contracts were generally forged between the lender and the borrower.²²⁹ This fact, then, works against Fitzmyer’s “commission theory” because the money would have been explicitly due to the master (as even the steward’s own words betray explicitly in 16:5 and implicitly in 16:7). Kloppenborg then argues against Derrett’s thesis by pointing out that not only does the parable lack any reference (or even allusion to) Jewish usury regulations, it does not even state that any of the parties involved were Jews.²³⁰ He accuses Derrett of retrojecting rabbinic decisions (viz., *m. B. Mes.* and related material from the Talmud) onto this first-century parable, although there is no evidence for the financial practices stated therein prior to the Temple’s fall.²³¹ Since the steward’s action cannot be legitimately categorized as commission- or usury-reducing, the steward’s debt reductions constituted nothing short of “outright fraud.”²³² Kloppenborg also argues against the traditional interpretation by claiming that the peasant audience would not have

²²⁷Kloppenborg, “Dishonored Master,” 478-79.

²²⁸Ibid., 478.

²²⁹Ibid., 481.

²³⁰Ibid., 484.

²³¹Ibid., 485.

²³²Ibid., 490.

been sophisticated enough to distinguish between the abstract idea of prudence (monetary or otherwise) and “the fraud in which it is imbedded” in the parable.²³³

Hans J. B. Combrink. Combrink provides yet another interpretation based on honor-shame assumptions. Combrink asserts that the parables are “polyvalent in nature,” so the meaning of this parable “cannot be exhausted by any one interpretation”;²³⁴ he still attempts to offer a single interpretation that he presumably understands to be correct (and which contradicts a number of more traditional understandings of the parable). He applies insights from the social sciences to the parable to conclude that the manager was acting righteously in his debt reduction, because he was “redistributing wealth and re-establishing balance in the society of limited good.”²³⁵ The manager created a win-win-win situation that worked to the advantage of the master’s honor, the debtors’ financial situation, and his own future. Though, the steward’s actions are corrupt “*throughout the story,*”²³⁶ there is still a good reason for the master to have praised him.

Combrink begins his analysis by stating that the typical first-century recipient of the parable would have viewed the master as “strong, powerful, greedy and dishonorable (because he accumulated wealth [presumably at the expense of others]).”²³⁷ As soon as the manager received word of his dismissal from this master, all subsequent actions he did in the name of the master were “not binding” and could have been

²³³Ibid., 479.

²³⁴Hans J. B. Combrink, “Social-Scientific Perspective on the Parable of the ‘Unjust’ Steward (Lk 16:1-8a),” *Neot* 30 (1996): 303.

²³⁵Ibid.

²³⁶Ibid., 293. Italics his.

²³⁷Ibid., 300.

rescinded by the master.²³⁸ Combrink adds that in ancient Israel, a cheated master could demand repayment of the squandered funds from the steward under threat of imprisonment; however, the master would have lost more honor to drag him to court, so in the parable he simply dismisses the steward and cuts his losses.²³⁹

Having lost his position, the steward must find a means of survival and surveys the possibilities. In the Mediterranean honor-shame society, the manager's admission of his inability to dig or beg (v. 3) is an indication that one of his social status could not envision condescending to such menial labor.²⁴⁰ Day labor is not an "appropriate" activity for a twenty-first century white-collar executive; in contemporary society, a white-collar executive could grudgingly be reduced to day labor if financial emergency required it. However, in first-century Israel, the division between the two extremes was more profound, and this kind of white-collar steward would have considered almost any other solution preferable. Combrink identifies the debtors as "peasant farmers" who were "of lower social strata" than this white-collar manager; consequently, the steward capitalizes on his higher social position by offering, albeit without authorization, financial relief to them, thus generating appreciation by them for his master and for himself.²⁴¹ In sum, although the steward's actions were unauthorized, that is of secondary importance to the fact that the end justified the means here for all parties involved.

²³⁸Ibid., 301-02.

²³⁹Ibid., 301.

²⁴⁰Ibid., 301-02.

²⁴¹Ibid., 302. He does not, however, explain how such impoverished peasants could have amassed debts large enough to be "the tax debts of an entire village" or how they could have been of much use to the manager later.

David Landry and Ben May. Landry and May claim that their study is a “relatively novel interpretation.”²⁴² Most of their argument, however, makes practically the same points that Kloppenborg had already put forth; not only do they simply reiterate the arguments from Kloppenborg but they also use numerous quotations from him (or those whom Kloppenborg quotes, like Crossan) to support their argument. Landry and May’s thesis is that the steward loses his job because his squandering has led to his master’s loss of honor, which he seeks to mend by making his master look generous.²⁴³ They resist the traditional interpretation’s negative appraisal of the steward with the same objection that several other recent interpreters have lodged: “it seems unlikely that Jesus (or Luke) would want or need to resort to an example of a person who acts immorally to make a point about resolve or decisiveness in the face of the kingdom.”²⁴⁴ They criticize the traditional view not only because of its skeptical evaluation of the steward but also because of its emphasis on eschatology. They claim that Jülicher’s proposal, along with later eschatological readings, “has clearly waned in recent decades.”²⁴⁵ Consequently, like Crossan and Kloppenborg, they argue that “there is no compelling reason to think of this parable in eschatological terms.”²⁴⁶

²⁴²David Landry and Ben May, “Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke 16:1-8a),” *JBL* 119 (2000): 287.

²⁴³Ibid.

²⁴⁴Ibid., 292.

²⁴⁵Ibid. Landry and May here fail to make a distinction between Jülicher’s vaguely ethical, non-eschatological reading and the later readings that perceive an eschatological message; they seem to conflate the two positions under their common understanding that the steward is “dishonest,” although they actually label the section in which Jülicher is included as “eschatological solutions.” It seems clear, though, that they are saying that both positions have waned recently.

²⁴⁶Ibid., 293 n. 24.

They depart from Kloppenborg only in his claim that the steward is perpetrating a fraud by reducing the debts. These two scholars criticize Kloppenborg for not explaining why fraud would have been praised by the master and for not addressing the idea of the master's honor beyond verses 1-2.²⁴⁷ In other words, they see honor, not fraud, as the interpretive key for the debt reduction. Honor, they explain, is important not just in verses 1 and 2, but needs to be applied consistently to the entire parable, especially the debt reduction. Based on statements by Xenophon, Socrates, and Seneca, they favor the assumption that in Jesus' day "superiors were judged by the behavior of their subordinates," so the steward's initial misappropriation of the master's wealth would have been directly detrimental to the master's own honor.²⁴⁸ Landry and May rely heavily on Derrett to claim that the eliminated debt was interest.²⁴⁹ This interest elimination makes the steward's master "appear generous, charitable, and law-abiding."²⁵⁰ They also use Derrett's explanation of the Jewish laws of agency to claim that the "people would assume that the steward was acting on the master's orders," and would thereby evaluate both the generous master and his direct agent with increased honor.²⁵¹

In considering the literary context, Landry and May claim that "the similarities between the Prodigal Son and the preceding parables have been overstated, and the

²⁴⁷Ibid., 294.

²⁴⁸Ibid., 299.

²⁴⁹Ibid., 301.

²⁵⁰Ibid.

²⁵¹Ibid., 309.

similarities between the Unjust Steward and the Prodigal Son underappreciated.”²⁵² They then rely on Austin’s research to claim that the lost sheep and coin parables in chapter 15 do not form a united trio with the Prodigal Son because of differences in plot, opening questions, ending material, and the interrupting εἰπεν δέ in 15:11; on the other hand, the Prodigal Son is more similar to the Unjust Steward because both share a “squandering” theme, internal dialogue, moment of realization, a “crucial question,” motives of self-interest, similar grammatical and syntactical features, and an end where the protagonist is accepted without explicit contrition.²⁵³ If one takes the Prodigal Son and Unjust Steward parables together, one sees that neither protagonists do anything illegal or immoral, both attempt to make up for their wrong living, and both are greeted back with no need for apology because of the generosity of the ones they have offended.²⁵⁴

Stephen I. Wright. Wright also combines assumptions from the Derrett/Fitzmyer position with a bit of the “honor” position. Wright argues that the manager is canceling the illegal, hidden interest due to himself and reissuing the debt simply in terms of what was borrowed.²⁵⁵ He further argues that the manager’s objective was to endear himself to the master, whose esteem would have risen among the debtors,

²⁵²Ibid., 305.

²⁵³Ibid., 305-06, following Michael R. Austin, “The Hypocritical Son,” *EvQ* 57 (1985): 308-13.

²⁵⁴Landry and May, “Honor Restored,” 307. The authors appear to contradict themselves here (or at least are unclear in their explanation), first claiming that the steward’s actions in vv. 4-7, like those of the Prodigal Son, “are not immoral or criminal” (307), but then say shortly thereafter that “what we really have in each story is a character who has acted immorally” (308). One must presume that what they are attempting to say is that the steward was immoral only at first, in his initial squandering or misappropriation, but was not immoral in his restoring to the master the honor lost by his own earlier dishonorable actions, which had reflected back onto the master.

²⁵⁵Stephen I. Wright, “Parables on Poverty and Riches (Luke 12:13-21; 16:1-13; 16:19-31),” in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 225.

so that the master would either accept him back or at least recommend him to another employer.²⁵⁶ Wright, therefore, agrees with a primarily ethical, secondarily eschatological, argument in which the steward is to be admired: he, unlike the Pharisees, is “faithful to God’s covenant as it concerns usury and justice for the poor” and will reap the benefits in the eschaton.²⁵⁷ Wright also dismisses both the ironic and non-monetary interpretations in one fell swoop: “there is no need to resort to tortuous arguments about irony in the words of 16:8b . . . or in the exhortation of 16:9 . . . as if Jesus meant the opposite of what he seemed to have said. Nor need we evacuate the story of its details or its social resonances by saying, with Joachim Jeremias, that the parable’s sole point has to do with the man’s shrewdness in a time of crisis, which is the only proper response of every person to the urgent message of the kingdom.”²⁵⁸

John G. Lygre. Lygre’s study is the most recent based on honor-shame assumptions. His arguments are heavily based on the socioeconomic setting of the parable, as demonstrated by the fact that around half of the works cited in his bibliography are articles and books dealing with ancient culture and society, rather than works that directly address the Unjust Steward. Lygre begins by explaining that the culture in which the parable was delivered was an agrarian society composed of ninety to ninety-five percent peasants with a small retainer class mediating between the peasants and the elite.²⁵⁹ This society was dominated by patron-client relationships that were manifest by reciprocity codes and dyadic contracts, in which the superior patron offered

²⁵⁶Ibid., 226.

²⁵⁷Ibid., 229.

²⁵⁸Ibid., 227. See Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 182.

some benefit to the inferior client who was not obliged to repay.²⁶⁰ In this culture, honor was the highest virtue and was “at least as important as wealth.”²⁶¹ Wealth, in fact, was often viewed with suspicion, because this society perceived goods to be limited in a zero-sum economy, where the rich were assumed to have amassed wealth only by depriving it from someone else, namely the poor.²⁶²

Lygre attempts to exonerate the steward from start to finish, explaining that “there is no direct evidence in the parable” that the squandering of the steward was a foolish or selfish misappropriation or dissipation of funds.²⁶³ Lygre favors, instead, a less odious charge against the steward: “scattering” of the master’s agricultural possessions (seed, tools, records, etc.) by carelessly or inefficiently lending out too much of the master’s property.²⁶⁴ He exculpates the steward by explaining that the debt reduction would have led to a direct increase in the master’s honor, his most prized commodity. In this instance, therefore, “the end justifies the means. The owner has no choice but to commend his steward for preserving and accentuating his reputation as an honorable owner.”²⁶⁵ The steward is not guilty of anything illegal or immoral but perhaps dereliction, favoritism to some of the tenants, poor supervision of slaves, or

²⁵⁹John G. Lygre, “Of What Charges? (Luke 16:1-2),” *BTB* 32 (2002): 21.

²⁶⁰Ibid., 22.

²⁶¹Ibid., 22, 26.

²⁶²Ibid., 22.

²⁶³Ibid., 23. However, he ignores the possibility that the squandering of the prodigal son is one piece of contextual evidence.

²⁶⁴Ibid., 24.

²⁶⁵Ibid., 26.

mismanagement of contracts.²⁶⁶ Lygre concludes, therefore, that to call the steward “dishonest, shameful, unjust, unrighteous, or wicked is too much.”²⁶⁷ Lygre prefers, on the other hand, to assign the most devious motives to the tenants, whom he portrays as the probable source of the allegations because they were “motivated by jealousy, retribution or greed”; moreover, they are “hypocritical” in their acceptance of the debt reduction from the man whom they had vilified before the master.²⁶⁸

Interpretation Emphasizing Irony

I. J. du Plessis. Du Plessis is the most recent to pitch his tent squarely in the irony camp. He thinks the traditional interpretation, which argues for using material possessions with a kingdom perspective in mind, looks too much like “calculated life insurance”; such self-interest, he argues, is “irreconcilable and inconsistent [*sic*] with Luke’s presentation of Jesus’ teaching with regard to charity as well as to the rich and poor.”²⁶⁹ Since the parable cannot be read in a straight manner, one must instead catch the irony present in the parable. The irony is most notable in verses 8 and 9, which would contradict Jesus’ teachings elsewhere if they were not understood as ironic. He explains, “Verse 9 remains enigmatic as long as one tries to understand it literally because it does not agree with the remainder of Jesus’ preaching. That is why we consider an ironical or even a sarcastic understanding of the text as the only reasonable

²⁶⁶Ibid., 27.

²⁶⁷Ibid.

²⁶⁸Ibid., 23, 27.

²⁶⁹I. J. du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?—Another Look at the Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13),” *Neot* 24 (1990): 13-15.

explanation.”²⁷⁰ If this parable is understood to be a bad example, as he argues, verse 9 cannot be recommending the self-interested use of material possessions to earn an eternal reward, which the traditional interpretation favors.²⁷¹ Du Plessis’ paraphrase of verses 8-9 demonstrates how one should understand the ending: “Make friends by applying your money or worldly possessions and find out whether it can earn you eternal life! See if these ‘friends’ will receive you into their ‘eternal homes.’”²⁷² Then, the warning in verses 10-12 implies that the story of the dishonest manager is a bad example and acts as the basis of this warning.²⁷³

Du Plessis further critiques the non-ironic philanthropy interpretation vis-à-vis its appeal to the literary context. He explains that proponents of the philanthropy position point to the Rich Man and Lazarus as having a similar theme; however, he contends, the rich man’s neglect of charity was not the main theme “but rather the fact that he did not have his priorities right.”²⁷⁴ Therefore, the main point of the parable is not generous use of money but a “call for the utmost zeal for true discipleship in general—which would include the right attitude towards riches but was not limited to that issue.”²⁷⁵

Interpretation Defending the Traditional Position

David A. DeSilva. DeSilva was one of the first after Ireland to reassert the traditional position. His aim is to investigate the effect the parable had on hearers and

²⁷⁰Ibid., 16.

²⁷¹Ibid., 15.

²⁷²Ibid., 13.

²⁷³Ibid., 15.

²⁷⁴Ibid., 14.

readers in order to demonstrate that the manager would be viewed as one who “prudently responds to the present, though unexpected, eschatological moment of decision,” which centers on “the expedient use of material wealth.”²⁷⁶ His conclusion is that the main point of the parable is “eschatological readiness, but within it provides the key to its concrete application, namely that the use of material goods.”²⁷⁷ Although some fail to see the eschatological significance of the parable, DeSilva explains that terms like the “summoning” and the order to “give an account/reckoning” (and perhaps the “return” of the master, regardless of his reaction) do connote judgment.²⁷⁸ Moreover, the fact that the master summarily dismisses the manager who then has an indefinite amount of time to collect his accounts reflects the “already/not yet” eschatological tension that Jeremias saw as the background of Jesus’ parables.²⁷⁹ Thus, although the firing is “already,” the final effect of the termination is “not yet.” Having established the eschatological and monetary import of the parable, DeSilva then explains the applications following the parable proper in this way, “In the move ‘from the eschatological to the admonitory,’ as Jeremias puts it, the tradition elaborates on the proper use of possessions (9), the proper

²⁷⁵Ibid., 17.

²⁷⁶David A. DeSilva, “The Parable of the Prudent Steward in its Lucan Context,” *CTR* 6 (1993): 255. Perhaps the only distinctive feature of DeSilva’s work is his explanation of what the first-century hearers would have expected when the rich man was first introduced in the parable. He explains that “the rich were stereotypically despots” by these hearers (*ibid.*, 257). The use of πλούσιος in 6:24; 12:16; 14:12; 16:19, 21, 22; 18:23, 25; 19:2; and 21:1 all show the rich characters to be objects of contempt. Indeed, “all those depicted as rich in the text are in one form or another excluded from the redeemed community or disapproved, with the single exception of Zacchaeus, whose salvation comes when he ceases to be notably *plousios*, giving away (or giving back) more than half his possessions” (*ibid.*). Although other interpreters have pointed out the despotism of the master, most of these interpreters have argued so from the “honest steward” perspective. Whether the master is despised or not, however, does not affect the ultimate meaning of the parable.

²⁷⁷Ibid., 266.

²⁷⁸Ibid., 259. Cf. Luke 19:15; Rom 14:12; Matt 12:36; 18:23; Heb 13:17; and 1 Pet 4:5.

qualities to exhibit with respect to possessions (10-12), and the proper relationship one is to have with possessions (13).²⁸⁰ The parable, when read in light of these applications, incorporates various related themes: the proper use of wealth, decisive action in light of imminent crisis, and the “abiding demand of the Law,” especially in the forsaking of wealth for the benefit of the poor.²⁸¹

Other Novel Interpretations

William R. G. Loader. Loader is similar to Paliard²⁸² in that he offers a Christological interpretation for the Unjust Steward, whereby Christ is “the accused one”²⁸³ who brings a “rogue ministry of grace to the least deserving.”²⁸⁴ Loader argues that the parable is intended to explain Jesus’ own authority as a “roguey of divine grace.”²⁸⁵ Loader could not be more emphatic when he explains that the parable is a “rogue story, with rogue values, and a rogue ending, and probably a rogue who is doing

²⁷⁹Ibid., 260.

²⁸⁰Ibid., 266.

²⁸¹Ibid., 267.

²⁸²Charles Paliard, *Lire l'Ecriture, Écouter la Parole: La Parabole de l'Économie Infidèle*, Lire la Bible 53 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1980), a work also not mentioned by Ireland.

²⁸³William R. G. Loader, “Jesus and the Rogue in Luke 16, 1-8a: The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” *RB* 96 (1989): 529. Paliard’s view is that the master represents the law, the two approaches of the master (vv. 2, 8) represent the old and new understandings of the law (i.e., judgment and grace), and the parable itself anticipates the rejection of Christ and the crucifixion.

²⁸⁴Ibid., 531. This theory is somewhat similar to that of Capon, who devotes five pages of his recent monograph about the parables of Jesus to this parable. He offers a similarly unconvincing allegorical interpretation that equates unjust steward with Christ himself. According to Capon, the unjust steward, like Jesus, is “not respectable,” and “is nothing less than the Christ-figure in this parable” since the steward’s loss of job and presumed restoration is parallel to the death and resurrection of Jesus (Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, combined ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 304-09).

²⁸⁵Ibid., 521, 532.

the admiring at the end as well.”²⁸⁶ Although it appears surprising that Jesus would use such scoundrel to portray himself, Loader resolves the tension by explaining that, while the steward is truly a scoundrel, he is representative of Jesus only as some (incorrectly) perceive him. Like the unjust steward, Jesus met with opposition, was considered a rogue by those in authority, and ultimately found vindication by the Father. Loader assumes the parable must be ready ironically because the steward was lacking authority, while Jesus had authority but was accused otherwise.²⁸⁷

He argues that the problem with the Derrett and Fitzmyer solutions, which attempt to vindicate the steward by claiming that he is doing something righteous, is that in both interpretations the master’s reaction is “almost bland and superfluous”—not surprising like one would expect from a parable of Jesus.²⁸⁸ Loader, instead, is in accord with Bailey that the debt represents land tenancy fees rather than usury (Derrett) or commission (Fitzmyer).²⁸⁹ By reducing a portion of the debts, the steward is bringing financial harm to the master and is, therefore, unrighteous in his action. The religious leaders presume that Jesus is acting with the same illegitimacy, harming the master (God) rather than representing him as an honest agent.

Except for this negative evaluation of the “rogue” steward, Loader departs from the traditional position in every way; he avers that the parable’s primary emphasis is neither monetary nor eschatological. Although he is not willing to admit eschatology as

²⁸⁶Ibid., 528.

²⁸⁷Ibid., 521.

²⁸⁸Ibid., 523.

²⁸⁹Ibid., 526.

the main thrust of the parable, Loader does admit the presence of “motives suggestive of eschatological hope,” like images of harvest, reckoning, and debt reduction.²⁹⁰ And, although he is also not willing to admit monetary concerns as the main thrust of the parable, Loader does admit that the understanding of the parable that focuses on the proper use of wealth has been the lesson drawn by scholars for “much of Christian history,” and has even been interpreted as such by Luke in verses 8b-13.²⁹¹ Loader dismisses eschatological and monetary points by arguing that the original meaning of the parable has been lost with the result that Luke supplied one by the additions that deviated from the original meaning.²⁹² Consequently, the coherence of verses 8b-13 with the parable is “very tenuous” and is marked by an “awkward transition to ethical interpretation.”²⁹³ Although the steward is dishonest and the point being made in the Lukan context is the proper use of possessions, the parable originally had a christological focus: the steward represents Christ in his releasing of debts, which is a “thinly disguised” allusion to forgiveness of sins.²⁹⁴ Although Loader disavows allegory (at least six times explicitly) as an interpretive key for this parable,²⁹⁵ his allegorizing tendencies are difficult to miss. The parable mixes motifs of unauthorized agency and debt

²⁹⁰Ibid., 531-32.

²⁹¹Ibid., 519.

²⁹²Ibid., 520-21. (So also Bultmann.)

²⁹³Ibid., 520.

²⁹⁴Ibid., 532.

²⁹⁵Ibid., 528-29.

reduction as an analogy to the unauthorized (outside of the Law) offering of forgiveness to sinners.²⁹⁶

Colin Brown. It is clear that Brown will offer a thesis quite similar to that of Loader when he begins his discussion with a reiteration of Loader's main points.²⁹⁷ He admits that there is but a "hair's breadth to the christological interpretation offered by Loader and myself [sic]."²⁹⁸ Brown also agrees with Kamlah that the parable is a critique of the Pharisees, agrees with Derrett that there is interest implied in the bill, and agrees with Porter that irony is key to interpreting the parable.²⁹⁹ He combines these arguments to conclude that the parable represents the "reaction of Pharisees and scribes to Jesus" (along the lines of Loader's "rogue" thesis).³⁰⁰ Brown differs from Loader only in the purpose of the parable, which Brown explains thus: "The parable presents the grim challenge of rejection and stark choices."³⁰¹

Richard Dormandy. Although Dormandy agrees that the point of the parable deals with wealth, he dismisses almost all previous types of interpretations by criticizing

²⁹⁶Ibid., 530.

²⁹⁷Colin Brown, "The Unjust Steward: A New Twist," in *Worship, Theology, and Ministry in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Ralph P. Martin*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and Terence Paige, JSNTSup 87 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 128-29.

²⁹⁸Ibid., 139.

²⁹⁹Ibid., 138-39.

³⁰⁰Ibid., 139. Although he is apparently working independently from Brown, Loader, and Paliard, Binder purposes a similarly allegorical-Christological interpretation. Binder explains that the Unjust Steward, like the parables immediately preceding and following it, is a critique of the Pharisees' and scribes' chagrin over Jesus' acceptance of sinners. Thus, in the parable, the steward represents Jesus because both eliminate debts (sins) owed to their masters (Herrmann Binder, "Missdeutbar oder eindeutig? Gedanken zu einem Gleichnis Jesu," TZ 51 [1995]: 41-49).

³⁰¹Brown, "The Unjust Steward," 140.

the eschatological, christological, soteriological, ironic, and traditional almsgiving approaches. He proposes, contrary to almost all previous interpreters, that the focus of the parable be shifted away from the steward and toward the master; he even assigns a new title to the parable, “Parable of the Rich Man Converted.”³⁰²

Dormandy dismisses interpretations that see this parable as an exhortation to prepare for the imminent judgment of God because “there is absolutely no sense at the end of the story of a coming judgment” as there are in other crisis parables (e.g., Luke 6, 12, 18, 20).³⁰³ He also dismisses interpreters, like Parrott, who see the main point as repentance, because this emphasis is so general and so ubiquitous throughout the Gospels that it is “almost ineligible as a *special* theme.”³⁰⁴ He then dismisses those, like Porter, who see the parable as ironic or a negative example simply by stating that “there is very little justification” for this reading.³⁰⁵ He also criticizes the traditional almsgiving interpretation because the steward is clearly self-interested, not benevolent, and the debtors are probably dealers in “high finance,” not poor subsistence farmers.³⁰⁶

Having dismissed most of the major positions, which nearly all focus on the steward as protagonist, Dormandy claims that the focus of the parable should be the conversion of the rich man, because “it is the Master whose attitude changes, the Master whose response surprises us, and the Master whom we are left wondering about at the

³⁰²Richard Dormandy, “Unjust Steward or Converted Master?” *RB* 109 (2002): 513

³⁰³Ibid., 519.

³⁰⁴Ibid., 514. (Italics added.) Parrot, “The Dishonest Steward,” 500, claims that the main theme of the L material, including this parable, is repentance.

³⁰⁵Dormandy, “Unjust Steward or Converted Master?” 519. Dormandy does admit later that the parable has an “ironic teaching” but that Porter’s version of it is “unnecessary” (524).

end.”³⁰⁷ This master began with a “ruthless acumen for increasing his riches” and is so “blinded by his fixation with wealth” that he “hoards” wealth rather than producing friendship through it.³⁰⁸ Blinded by his own greed, the master does not consider the future welfare of the steward and does not even bother to ask whether the charges are true; on the other hand, the steward, rather than hoarding money, puts it to work and does not worry about to whom it belongs.³⁰⁹ Granted, the steward is justly called “dishonest” by Luke and is “purely self-interested,” but he has at least opened the eyes of his rich master, who now sees how un-hoarded wealth can be used to secure friendship and save lives.³¹⁰ So, there is “ironic subtlety” to the fact that, although the steward has “grubby hands,” his passion was for people; thus, he is still superior to the aloof rich man.³¹¹

Summary

While the traditional monetary-eschatological view of the steward parable attracted the largest number of adherents until the mid-twentieth century, the steward-vindicating works of Derrett, Fitzmyer, and others of similar persuasion in the 1960s and 1970s, those who appealed to ancient Jewish culture, helped to chip away that lead. By the time Dennis Ireland wrote his dissertation in the late 1980s, the traditional view was in jeopardy; although it still could have claimed a plurality, it by no means could boast a

³⁰⁶Ibid., 520-21.

³⁰⁷Ibid., 515-16.

³⁰⁸Ibid., 516, 517, 525.

³⁰⁹Ibid., 517, 520.

³¹⁰Ibid., 521-22.

³¹¹Ibid.

majority. Ireland, as his critics admit, offered an excellent defense of the traditional view, but his work did not prevent scores of others after him from continuing to deviate from the traditional position. In the time since Ireland's work, several positions have gained ground; among these, works that point to some feature in the honor-shame background of the ancient Mediterranean culture as an important interpretive component have proliferated most briskly. While defenders of the traditional interpretation have not been fully silent in the past two decades, interpretations against them have been accumulating at a more rapid pace. As such, the environment is ripe for another defense of the traditional view, this one fending off the numerous challenges to the position that have amassed since Ireland. Although, no doubt, there will continue to be no shortage of alternate views, this dissertation will perhaps play a part in stemming the tide.

CHAPTER 3

TEXT AND LANGUAGE OF THE PARABLE

Establishing the Original Text

The textual variations in verses 1-13 are few, and those that do exist are fairly inconsequential for interpretation. In fact, for all of verses 1-13, the UBS⁴ lists only a single, insignificant textual variant.¹ There are a few other variants noted in NA²⁷, but these are also of little importance and do not substantially affect the meaning of the text. Because of the relative uniformity among manuscripts, few scholars have attempted to argue that a textual variation solves the numerous problems presented by the text. In fact, given the opacity of the parable, it is surprising that more radical textual variants do not exist—those created by well-meaning scribes who intended to make sense of the passage by “clarifying” certain words or phrases. Even when the text is without question, there are still major points of contention in almost every verse, so most interpreters have wisely avoided arguing that one differing reading in a particular instance could be a panacea for all of the interpretive ills contained in these verses.

In verse 1, a number of manuscripts and the Majority Text add αὐτοῦ after τοὺς μαθητάς. There is good evidence that Luke has a propensity to add the pronoun αὐτοῦ after τοὺς μαθητάς. There are twelve occurrences of τοὺς μαθητάς in the Third Gospel;

¹The only variant noted in the UBS⁴ is in v. 12, where the well attested, “A”-rated ὑμέτερον is spelled differently in a few texts and has an extra insignificant word in a few other texts (including a few Patristic citations).

eight of these unquestionably add the pronoun $\alphaὐτοῦ$, three do not, and one is uncertain.²

So, if one argues from the Lukan tendency, there is a case that $\alphaὐτοῦ$ should be included; on the other hand, the evidence proves that Luke sometimes did simply refer to “the disciples” (in accusative plural) without further qualification. At any rate, the meaning of verse 1 is not changed at all whether “his” is added or not; the disciples may be assumed to be those of Jesus unless stated otherwise.

In verse 2, a few texts add a *sigma* to $\deltaύνη$ to make it future. The textual evidence is much stronger for the present tense. A scribal change to future is understandable given that the manager must first submit an account of his management before his duties are truly completed, even if his official authority has ended immediately. Moreover, the debtors presumably understand him still to be manager when reducing their debts, so, from their (mistaken) perspective, the termination has not happened yet. Bailey, probably correctly, explains that the shifting time references between present and future accounts for the Byzantine text’s homogenizing error of changing to the future here.³

In verse 3, a few texts add $\kappaαὶ$ before $\epsilonπαιτεῖν$. It is not worth considering closely because there is scant support for this reading, and it does not change the sense of the verse anyway.

In verse 4, the $\epsilonκ$ is changed to $\alphaπό$ by a few texts and is omitted entirely by a

²Places where $\alphaὐτοῦ$ is added are these: Luke 5:30; 6:13; 6:20; 9:14; 9:43; 11:1; 12:1; and 17:1. Places where $\alphaὐτοῦ$ is not added are these: Luke 10:23; 17:22; and 22:45. In Luke 12:22, the addition is uncertain, although the textual evidence is strongly in favor of excluding the word. Both NA²⁷ and UBS⁴ include the word in brackets.

³Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 96.

few others. Between the two alternatives, the omission has greater support (including support from the Majority Text), yet it is still weakly supported compared to the quality of texts supporting the accepted reading. Verse 4 also contains a much more challenging textual decision. The NA²⁷ text reads αὐτῶν at the end of the verse with support of P⁷⁵ A D L W Θ f^{1.13} Μ q vg^{mss}, while an alternate reading of ἐαυτῶν is supported by Χ B N P Ψ 070. 579 pc. Although the balance is slightly in favor of the NA²⁷ reading, for purposes of English translation (and even considering the meaning in Greek), the difference is negligible.

In verse 6, the unit of measurement is challenged by a few readings. The βάτους is κάδους in D and 1241. If mss. D and 1241's reading of κάδους ("jars") is to be accepted, then the amount of oil owed would be "considerably smaller."⁴ However, the sparse textual support for this reading argues strongly against the "jars" reading. D² and a few others read κάβους (from Hebrew קב, meaning "corn-measure" of approximately 1.5 liters [LSJ]), which is not used elsewhere in the NT and is only used once in the LXX (2 Kgs 6:25). Not only is this reading poorly attested, but BDB identifies the *kab* as a "dry measure" (thus not appropriate for this context, where olive oil is mentioned). Also, instead of βάτους, a few first-order texts (including Χ) spell the unit βάδους; however, LSJ identifies this form merely as a variant spelling of βάτους. The pronunciation simply shifts from one dental sound to another.

In verse 7, there are several connecting words added by a few manuscripts. One manuscript (D) adds ὁ δὲ, a few add just δὲ, and a few others add καὶ. The καὶ is

⁴Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981-85), 2:1100.

best attested (supported in part by the Majority Text), but, as with many of the other variants in this passage, the change in meaning would be minimal even if it were accepted. Also in verse 7, some manuscripts (including the Majority Text) change τὰ γράμματα into a singular. This is an understandable scribal alteration, given that there was probably just a single bill (albeit with various financial “writings” on it). However, the change does not alter the meaning significantly and is not even necessary, because BDAG offers ample biblical and extra-biblical evidence that the “document” or “piece of writing” meaning of γράμμα is “mostly in plural, even of single copies.”⁵ Thus, Marshall is correct in stating that the third declension τὰ γράμματα is a plural used to denote a single promissory note.⁶

In verse 8a, Parrot rejects the interpretations that focus on cleverness in preparation for the future. He suggests that Jesus’ parable, in its original Aramaic form, ended with a question, which the Greek translation has obscured. According to him, the reading should be, “Would the master have commended the dishonest steward for his cleverness?” (with a negative answer anticipated). Thus, the point of the parable is that one cannot trust one’s own cleverness for security.⁷ The problem with this reading is that it presents a relatively unparalleled idea in the Gospels while ignoring the more abundant Lukan themes of material possessions and crisis of decision.

⁵Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilber Gingrich [BDAG], 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “γράμμα.”

⁶I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 618.

⁷Douglas M. Parrott, “The Dishonest Steward (Luke 16.1-8a) and Luke’s Special Parable Collection,” *NTS* 37 (1991): 36.

Also in verse 8a, C. S. Mann has suggested that the ἀδικίας may have been a misreading of ἀλικίας (“experience”), since a capital *delta* and a capital *lambda* are easy to confuse.⁸ This is a tenuous hypothesis, given that the form ἀλικίας is not found anywhere else in the NT and is not even listed in BDAG. LSJ identifies this form as a Doric variation of ἡλικία, which does appear eight times in the NT (considering all cognate forms), three of which are in the Third Gospel. Mann’s suggestion is highly speculative and is weakened by the fact that the only appearances of this word in the Third Gospel are spelled differently. Moreover, this explanation, which Mann (rightly) claims to be “no more than intelligent guess-work,” still fails to explain the main question in the verse: why would have the master praised the steward, experienced or otherwise? Certainly, there are elements of the story that warrant the steward’s identification as “dishonest,” but the elements justifying an “experienced” label are not so clear. Another major weakness with Mann’s proposal is that the word ἀδικίας appears in the next verse to modify “mammon.” Did the scribe err in verse 8 (as Mann claims) but copy verse 9 correctly? This scenario is unlikely. Lastly, the most important weakness of Mann’s hypothesis is that there are no textual variants to support this claim.

In verse 8b, only D adds διὸ λέγω ὑμῖν. This addition appears to be intended to help the reader identify Jesus as the speaker of verse 8b also. Whether 8b represents the words of Jesus or Luke is unclear; however, resorting to this textual variant is not a feasible solution for several reasons: (1) the reading is poorly attested, (2) it places διὸ before λέγω ὑμῖν, which is an unprecedented construction in all of Luke-Acts, and (3) it sounds redundant given the λέγω ὑμῖν in verse 9.

⁸C. S. Mann, “Unjust Steward or Prudent Manager?” *ExpTim* 102 (1990-91): 235.

In verse 9, quite a few manuscripts switch the order of ἔαυτοῖς and ποιήσατε. The reversed word order is one of the most strongly supported alternate readings in this pericope, so a strong textual argument could be made in its favor. Nevertheless, the meaning in either case is the same (except perhaps that the ἔαυτοῖς might be slightly less emphatic if placed second), and, for our purposes, it is irrelevant. Another, less convincing suggestion has been made for an alternate reading in this verse by Wansey, who speculates that a “restored” text of 16:9 in Sinaiticus (ς) would read ἔαυτοῖς ποιήσατε φίλους ἐκτος τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας. The change from ἐκ to ἐκτός makes the reading, “Make to yourselves friends *without* the mammon of unrighteousness”; thus, one should base friendship on something more trustworthy than money.⁹ Most scholars have rightly ignored this conjecture. Not only is there no corroborating evidence from variant texts, but also this word is such a rarity in the NT, used only once in Acts (26:22) and never in Luke, that the whole suggestion is weak speculation at best.

The only other significant textual variations in verses 1-13 are in verse 12. The first variation is mentioned above (the only variation noted by UBS⁴). The other variation is simply the switching of the order of the words ὑμῖν and δώσει at the end of the verse. There is nearly even support for both readings, but the meaning and English translations are the same for both.

Lexical, Grammatical, and Syntactical Features of the Passage

16:1 Ἐλεγεν δὲ καὶ πρὸς τοὺς μαθητάς, Ἀνθρωπός τις ἦν πλούσιος ὃς εἶχεν οἰκονόμον, καὶ οὗτος διεβλήθη αὐτῷ ὡς διασκορπίζων τὰ ὑπάρχοντα αὐτοῦ.

⁹J. C. Wansey, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward: An Interpretation,” *ExpTim* 47 (1935-36): 39.

"Ἐλεγεν δὲ καὶ. There is a growing consensus about the intimate connection between the Prodigal Son and this parable, partly based on the words that bridge the two. Porter explains that the **καὶ** establishes a connection between chapters 15 and 16 because it modifies **ἔλεγεν** and indicates a “continued parabolic discourse.”¹⁰ As further evidence, Topel notes that all nine uses of **ἔλεγεν** followed by **δὲ** in Luke “connect what follows with what went before.”¹¹ Three factors make it clear that this case is not an exception: the **δὲ** alone “obviously” denotes the connection, the imperfect verb makes the continuation of thought more clear, and the three other Lukian uses of **ἔλεγεν δὲ + a parable + audience** all clearly make the connection.¹² So clear is the connection between the two chapters that Kilgallen believes that these first words suggest that the parable to follow “might well be complementary” to the one(s) that precede(s) it.¹³ Moreover, the **καὶ** is best translated “also,” for here Luke is expanding the scope of the audience from the scribes and Pharisees (15:2-3) to the disciples, although the Pharisees are within earshot (16:14).¹⁴

¹⁰ Stanley E. Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16.1-13): Irony is the Key,” in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*, ed. David J. A. Clines, S. E. Fowl, and S. E. Porter (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 139. Cf. also Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, 109, who argues the same for **δὲ καὶ**.

¹¹ L. John Topel, “On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward: Lk 16:1-13,” *CBQ* 37 (1975): 222.

¹² Ibid. Note that the two parable groups in chapter 15 (the “lost” parables and the Prodigal Son) both begin with **Ἐλέπεν δέ** (15:3, 11), which does not carry the same continuous force.

¹³ John J. Kilgallen, “Luke 15 and 16: A Connection,” *Bib* 78 (1997): 369.

¹⁴ John Nolland, *Luke*, WBC, vols. 35a-35c (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1989-93), 2:796. Kilgallen, “Luke 15 and 16: A Connection,” 369, makes practically the same claim, but instead uses the **δὲ** as the evidence. B. A. Hooley and A. J. Mason, “Some Thoughts on the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-9),” *AusBR* 6 (1958): 51, claim that the main function of the **καὶ** is not so much to emphasize a change in audience as it is to indicate that the Pharisees are still present in the background. Regardless, that there is a shift in audience—from Pharisees and scribes to the disciples—and that all parties are at least within earshot is without question.

"Ανθρωπός τις ἦν πλούσιος. Jeremias identifies two basic introductory formulae characteristic of Luke's parables: (1) those beginning with a nominative noun and (2) those beginning with a dative noun (both forms are similar to those of rabbinic parables).¹⁵ This parable begins with the nominative ("Ανθρωπός), which is the more common introductory formula in Luke. Although this story is not explicitly called a parable, this common element makes it clear that it is to be considered as such.

οἰκονόμον. There is debate about whether this word denotes that the manager was a slave or a hired professional.¹⁶ Fitzmyer explains, "The Greek *oikonomos* was often, but not necessarily, a slave born in the household . . . who was specially trained and tested in the supervision of a farm-estate."¹⁷ It will be argued in chapter 5 that the manager should be considered a free employee rather than a slave.

διεβλήθη. The word διεβλήθη is a challenge to interpret because it is a hapax for the NT (including all possible cognates of the verb), and its use in the LXX is infrequent and is split between meanings of false accusations (2 Mac 3:11; 4 Mac 4:1) and accusations in general (Dan 3:8). Therefore, there is little precedence from biblical literature to determine whether the verb in this instance should be understood as a false accusation or a mere accusation. Although διεβλήθη is sometimes used outside of the NT

¹⁵ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1972), 100.

¹⁶ Older translations call the character a "steward" (KJV, ASV, RSV, NKJV), while the newer translations tend toward "manager" (NIV, NASB [1995], NRSV, NET, NLT, HCSB); neither word, however, makes any necessary implication about whether the character was a slave. In this dissertation, the two English words, "steward" and "manager," will be used interchangeably and will denote only that the character is under the authority of the master and is in charge of some (or all) of the master's domestic business affairs.

¹⁷ Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1099. For more discussion about the word οἰκονόμος see W. L. Hendricks, "Stewardship in the New Testament," *SWJT* 13 (1971): 25-33.

to imply a false accusation, that is only one part of the wider semantic range, which simply means to “accuse” with no inherent consideration of the legitimacy of the accusation.¹⁸ For διαβάλλω, LSJ offers a range of definitions—from charging falsely with hostile intent to charging with hostile intent (but with no implication of falsehood) to charging in general (with no implication of malice or falsehood).¹⁹

There are some, like B. B. Scott,²⁰ who opt for a slanderous reading such that the charge against the steward is unfounded; however, most of these scholars take this position in order to vindicate the steward of any wrongdoing in general and thereby explain the commendation at the end. For example, Beavis, a recent apologist for the steward’s actions, claims (based on her reading of the abridged LSJ) that the “normal meaning” of the word is “to accuse falsely” and that those like Fitzmyer who choose a

¹⁸Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 418. Geldenhuys does not list any of the other sources outside of the NT. Similarly, A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, 5th ed., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1922), 382, states that the word indicated the charge was behind the steward’s back but with no implication one way or another regarding the veracity of the charge. Examples of where a form of διαβάλλω is used as calumny: Hdt. *Hist.* 5.96; 8.90; Th. 3.109; 5.45; Jos. *A.J.* 6.224.5; 7.11.3; 16.246.3; *B.J.* 4.257.4. Uses where no slander implied: Ar. *Thesm.* 1169; Strab. *Geogr.* 3.5.1; Dion. Hal. *Ant. rom.* 5.77.4; Th. 3.4.4; Antiphon *Trag.* 2.4.4; Jos *A.J.* 7.225.2; 12.4.4; *Ap* 1.70.3; *B.J.* 2.593.5 (where the accusation is hypothetical but clearly true); 2.626.2. The present author’s survey of these and other ancient texts reveals that, indeed, forms of διαβάλλω convey a slanderous meaning more often than not. Cf., for example, Jos. *A.J.* 17.80.40, where someone is being simply charged with slander; the simple charge is a form of κατηγορέω, while the false charge is a form of διαβάλλω. When used as “calumny,” the word’s context usually makes it clear that this is the meaning it is supposed to convey; however, where there is no such contextual evidence, the claim that it should be understood as slander is vitiated. Cf. also Jos. *A.J.* 7.11.3, where Josephus does not use a form of διαβάλλω to denote slander, but the more clearly slanderous κατεψύσατο κακουργῶν.

¹⁹Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. by Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie [LSJ], 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), s.v. “διαβάλλω.” This is the lexical range when some kind of accusation is in view; there are also more literal definitions, like “put through,” but those are clearly not in play for this verse.

²⁰Bernard Brandon Scott, “A Master’s Praise (Luke 16, 1-8a),” *Bib* 64 (1983): 181. Cf. also Dan Otto Via, “Parable and Example Story: A Literary-Structuralist Approach,” *Semeia* 1 (1974): 124.

more neutral definition do so based on “the presumption of what can be.”²¹ Assuming the hostility behind the charge, Robertson also does not believe the accusations to be true: “[T]he charge is given by Jesus as that of the slanderer ($\deltaι\epsilon\beta\lambda\eta\theta\eta$), and the context implies that it is untrue (only alleged).”²² Although Robertson does not appear to have a steward-vindicating agenda, he does not explain what part of the context implies his innocence, thereby weakening his assertion. Wright is more cautious in claiming that, since retainers were unpopular with the peasants and could even engender resentment from the master, “the balance is slightly in favor of viewing the aorist passive verb *dieblēthē* as signaling a false or slanderous accusation.”²³

On the other side are those who see the charge as fair. For example, although Fitzmyer enumerates examples in ancient literature where $\deltaι\alpha\beta\alpha\lambda\lambda\omega$ can be either calumnious or not, he decides that there was no slander involved in this parable.²⁴ W. Foerster presents an even broader range of examples from classical Greek sources and also concludes that “there is here [in the parable of the unjust steward] no necessary thought of calumny.”²⁵ Similarly, Moulton and Milligan present evidence from papyri to demonstrate that “malice need not be assumed in Lk 16¹ any more than

²¹Mary Ann Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8),” *JBL* 111 (1992): 48.

²²A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 4th ed. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 1140-41.

²³Stephen I. Wright, “Parables on Poverty and Riches (Luke 12:13-21; 16:1-13; 16:19-31),” in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 224.

²⁴Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1099. See also Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *EDNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), s.v. “ $\deltaι\alpha\beta\alpha\lambda\lambda\omega$,” where the only definitions are “accuse” and “charge (with)” with no implication of slander. Here are listed similar uses in Herodotus, Plato, and Xenophon where the word implies no calumny.

²⁵Gerhard Kittel, *TDNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), s.v. “ $\deltaι\alpha\beta\alpha\lambda\lambda\omega$, $\deltaι\alpha\beta\omega\lambda\omega$,” by Werner Foerster.

falsehood.”²⁶ Likewise, although Nolland admits that this word is used merely “at times with the implication of falsity and slander,” the reader of this parable should assume that the manager’s corruption had been “found out.”²⁷ So also, Kloppenborg explains that διαβάλλω can mean “to bring charges with hostile intent,” the word has a wider semantic range than just that rendering; one would expect other contextual clues to support that reading, but instead, the simple reading is that the hearers of the parable are to assume that the charges are warranted.²⁸ Moreover, even if charges are brought against the steward “with hostile intent,” that in no way implies that the charges are not valid. In fact, as Forbes claims, the compound word διαβάλλω indicates a repeated behavior rather than a mere isolated event.²⁹ If Forbes’s claim is true, this word would imply that the master was receiving repeated reports, perhaps from all kinds of people, that his steward was involved in foul play. Thus, it appears not to be a single, isolated, unsubstantiated instance of slander by someone adversarial to the steward; instead, Luke implies that

²⁶James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), s.v. “διαβάλλω.”

²⁷Nolland, *Luke*, 2:797.

²⁸Greg W. Forbes, *The God of Old: The Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke’s Gospel*, JSNTSup 198 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 156.

²⁹Ibid., 156-57. This argument, of course, focuses more on the lexical meaning of the word, not the aorist (undefined) tense. Unfortunately, Forbes provides no further elaboration or evidence in support of his claim. After much searching, the present author has found two pieces of evidence that might help corroborate his claim. The first piece of evidence comes from James Hope Moulton and Wilbert Francis Howard, *Accidence and Word-Formation*, vol. 2 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1929), 300-01, which explains that δύo (whether word or prefix, as in this case) is probably related to δύc, which comes from the Indo-European *dui*, which means “twice”; they then observe that the abundant use of δύo-compounds in Luke-Acts does demonstrate “the etymological connexion with *two*” as well as a perfectivizing force. The second piece of evidence comes from LSJ, s.v., “διαβάλλω,” which explains that the prefix δύo- in composition sometimes adds an element of thoroughness; in this parable, “thoroughness” could imply repetition. Neither line of evidence is definitive for proving that a repeated action is in view here, but they do at least allow for the possibility of Forbes’ claim. In the context of the parable, it makes sense that if the master is not to be understood as acting rashly, he would terminate the

there is a host of witnesses willing to testify against the manager (more than enough to convict him under Mosaic law, according to Deut 19:15; cf. also 1 Tim 5:19).

DeSilva claims that closest cognate to διαβάλλω in the NT is the adjective διάβολος, the “slanderer,” “accuser,” or “false accuser,” mentioned in 2 Tim 3:3; 3:11; and Titus 2:3.³⁰ However, rather than looking first for cognates in the Pastoral Epistles, it seems wiser to begin the search for cognates within Luke’s own writings in order to ascertain his meaning in 16:1. The use of διάβολος as an adjective is confined to the aforementioned references in the Pastoral Epistles, but the noun (same lexical form) is used several times in Luke-Acts. Whenever Luke uses a form of διάβολος as a noun, it is always a specific reference to “the devil” (Luke 4:2, 3, 6, 13; 8:12; Acts 10:38; 13:10), which is the LXX translation for “the adversary” (πάπ). Foerster points out that this LXX use of the word “seldom suggests ‘calumniator,’ but rather ‘accuser’ [less often] or ‘adversary’ [more often].”³¹ While one may generally regard the devil as a slanderer and false accuser, the Greek word διάβολος does not necessarily convey that message. So, even if one concludes that Luke, when using cognates of διαβάλλω, had the semantic range of its cognate διάβολος in mind, he (like the LXX) probably did not necessarily intend to imply calumny; instead, it is likely that he thought of cognates in the adversary/accuser sense. Luke, therefore, probably did not mean to imply calumny by using διεβλήθη in 16:1 either.

manager only after the multiple accusers had confirmed the squandering. Thus, the preponderance of the evidence is slightly in favor of a reading that assumes a repeated accusation here.

³⁰David A. DeSilva, “The Parable of the Prudent Steward in its Lucan Context,” *CTR* 6 (1993): 258.

³¹Foerster, *TDNT*, s.v. “διαβάλλω, διάβολος.”

ώς διασκορπίζων. Of the nine uses of the word διασκορπίζω in the NT, seven clearly have a more literal meaning of “scatter” (as in seed or people); the other two less literal instances are in the parable of the Prodigal Son and here. According to Robertson, this ώς + participle gives the “alleged reason, which may be the real one or mere assumption.”³² BDF identifies the use here as one that may be used to show “subjective motivation,” translated as something like “with the assertion that” or “on the pretext that.”³³ As many interpreters after Robertson have pointed out, the ώς is not determinative in telling whether the accusations are legitimate or not.³⁴ The severity of the charge, assuming it to be true, is debatable. Plummer claims that the construction does not refer to neglect or extravagance, but fraud.³⁵ On the other hand, Marshall argues that the verb “could imply neglect of duty or misappropriation of funds, but since there is no suggestion of having to pay compensation, the former is more likely.”³⁶ So, at best, the manager had been irresponsible, at worst, fraudulent. Although the Greek word could denote either, something more flagrant than what Marshall claims is implied here.

³²Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 966. See, for example, Luke 23:14, where this construction is used for a (false) allegation against Jesus. See also Acts 23:15 and 23:20, where it is used for a guileful plot, and Rom 15:15, where Paul uses it to denote a genuine reason. According to Dana and Mantey, in this verse the participial διασκορπίζων denotes cause in this structure because “ώς with a causal participle implies that the action denoted by the participle is the supposed or alleged cause of the action of the principle verb” (H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [New York: Macmillan, 1955], 275.)

³³BDF §425.3. But see 1 Cor 7:25, where Paul’s self-identification “as one who by the Lord’s mercy [ώς ἡλεημένος] is trustworthy” is certainly more than a mere pretext.

³⁴Dennis J. Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: An Historical, Exegetical, and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1-13*, NovTSup 70 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 50. He lists several scholars, from Jülicher on, who admit that the ώς is not determinative.

³⁵Plummer, *Gospel According to S. Luke*, 382. However, Plummer does not explain why his claim is true.

³⁶Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 617.

Some have argued that the steward is guilty of the charge but that the charge itself implies no malicious behavior, only carelessness or unprofitability. For example, Parrot claims that διασκορπίζων “does not in itself connote criminal activity . . . only that he steward was not doing his job effectively.”³⁷ Along similar lines, Crossan claims that the problem was that he was not producing enough of a profit for the master.³⁸ Even some proponents of the traditional “dishonest steward” position, like Geldenhuys, are willing to concede that the steward’s squandering might not have implied any immoral or illegal activity. In fact, since the master did not have the manager arrested, but merely asked for a detailed statement of the estate’s finances, it is possible that Luke is depicting a master who did not believe the manager to be consciously dishonest; he simply wanted to ascertain the extent of the damage and have an account for his successor.³⁹ All things being equal, one should be more disposed to assume that squandering does not convey an immoral action unless the context weighs against this reading.

Here, though, there are contextual clues to indicate that the *prima facie* reading is outweighed in favor of something more sinister. The contextual clues for this reading are found in the Prodigal Son. (See Chapter 5 for evidence that the two parables are to be read in conjunction with one another). That the same word for his “squandering” is used for the prodigal son’s flagrantly wasteful lifestyle (behavior that Luke describes in 15:13 as ἀσώτως, a hapax in the NT that connotes dissolution or immorality; cf. Plut. *Galb.*

³⁷Douglas M. Parrott, “The Dishonest Steward (Luke 16.1-8a) and Luke’s Special Parable Collection,” *NTS* 37 (1991): 504.

³⁸John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 110.

³⁹Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 414.

163.7; Isoc. *Antid.* 5.8; Jos. *A.J.* 12.203; and D.C. *Hist. Rom.* 57.13.3) argues for a legitimate indictment of corruption when the same word is used to describe the steward's prior activity. The prodigal son was wantonly profligate (as his traditional identification implies), so, unless there is a clear reason to believe this "unjust" steward to be above reproach, the Unjust Steward's immediately preceding context argues in favor of his guilt. Both the son and the steward were caught up in intemperate living until the living caught up with them and threw their world of revelry into crisis. It will be established, in Chapter 5, that there is a strong literary and thematic link between the Prodigal Son and the Unjust Steward parables. There is not an inherent implication that the "squandering" per se was criminal in the steward's case (his activity was "negligent, but not dishonest,"⁴⁰ as DeSilva calls it); however, the repetition of the word, otherwise unknown in the NT, from the previous pericope strongly suggests at least that there was some kind of willful recklessness—whether that be poor bookkeeping, foolish investments, or excessive, unnecessary spending.

16:2 καὶ φωνήσας αὐτὸν εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Τί τοῦτο ἀκούω περὶ σοῦ; ἀπόδος τὸν λόγον τῆς οἰκονομίας σου, οὐ γὰρ δύνῃ ἔτι οἰκονομεῖν.

Tί τοῦτο ἀκούω. The *tí* may be taken as "Why . . . ?" or even "What! [Do I hear this about you?]," but the latter reading emphasizes the "you" without warrant.⁴¹ The lack of a linking verb represents a "Semitic, idiomatic, and forceful" wording, maintained by all other Semitic translations of the passage.⁴² Fanning identifies this verb

⁴⁰David A. DeSilva, "The Parable of the Prudent Steward in its Lucan Context," *CTR* 6 (1993): 259.

⁴¹Porter, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward," 140.

⁴²Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 96.

as a perfective present, which implies the occurrence of an action that has produced the present state or condition.⁴³

ἀπόδος τὸν λόγον. This demand to “give an account” is a common idiom in ancient Greek.⁴⁴ Bailey notes, however, that when the term is used as a general accounting of one’s activities, the *λόγος* is anarthrous, so in this parable it must be understood as a turning in of the account books.⁴⁵ The aorist (which, in this case, “grammaticalizes the action as complete”) combined with the context (in which the steward attempts to secure employment by another person) indicate that the effects of the firing are immediate, not that the books are being turned over so that the master can make a decision whether to fire the steward.⁴⁶ If the steward’s authority ends at this point, it makes all subsequent actions that he takes as one ostensibly still in power (and still in the name of the master) illegitimate.

16:3 εἶπεν δὲ ἐν ἑαυτῷ ὁ οἰκονόμος, Τί ποιήσω, ὅτι ὁ κύριος μου ἀφαιρεῖται τὴν οἰκονομίαν ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ; σκάπτειν οὐκ ἴσχύω, ἐπαιτεῖν αἰσχύνομαι.

⁴³Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 239-40. Cf. the verb ἔκει in 15:27, which has the same function. Wesley J. Perschbacher, *New Testament Greek Syntax: An Illustrated Manual* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 284, also cites this occurrence of ἀκούω as a perfective present, a “present state based upon a past action.” Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 96, notes that the Syriac version of this verse retains the same word order but adds a present participle to match this Greek syntax, thus implying that the master had been hearing the reports for a long time and was still continuing to receive a “steady stream” of accusations.

⁴⁴Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, SP, vol. 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 244. See Matt 12:36; Acts 19:40; Heb 13:17; Eur. *Orest.* 150 (“give an answer” [LCL]); Plu. *Alc.* 4; and Dem. *I-3 Aphob.* 27.48. The last example is very similar to Luke’s use because here the phrase denotes a financial account that is later used to prove that sums have been embezzled.

⁴⁵Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 97.

⁴⁶Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 141.

Tί ποιήσω. The ποιήσω may be either a future or a deliberative aorist subjunctive.⁴⁷ A survey of all the uses of this form in the Third Gospel does not lend weight to either possibility because all but one of the occurrences of ποιήσω in Luke are in the same kind of discourse (i.e., an interior monologue beginning with the phrase τί ποιήσω [12:17; 16:3; 20:13] or a declaration within the same interior monologue that a decision has been made [τοῦτο ποιήσω, 12:18; ἔγνων τί ποιήσω, 16:4]). The only other use of ποιήσω in Luke is found in Jesus' question to the blind man, τί σοι θέλεις ποιήσω; (18:41a), which is an equally ambiguous form.⁴⁸ In the context of this parable, the point of the manager's question and his resultant resolve to save himself in no way depends on whether the verb is aorist subjunctive or future indicative; besides, the semantic difference between the two categories is negligible. The whole point of the question is to indicate that the manager, at this point in the plot, has no idea how to handle the crisis and is thinking through the options until he stumbles onto the plan (ἔγνων τί ποιήσω, v. 4).

The interior monologue gives a glimpse into the mind of one facing imminent crisis without any recourse. The thought of taking a job as a manager of another's estate is not even given consideration; the manager's reputation after such an inauspicious dismissal would be badly damaged such that menial labor (or worse) was the only option left, but even digging and begging were not realistic alternatives according to the manager's estimation of his own abilities. Moreover, even if he had the physical ability

⁴⁷Max Zerwick, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, trans., rev., and adapted by Mary Grosvenor, 5th ed. (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1996), 246.

⁴⁸The form in 18:41a is probably a subjunctive, because the blind man responds to Jesus' question here with a ἵνα + subjunctive (18:41b). Although it appears to be a subjunctive question with a

for manual labor (an unlikely assumption if he had been a manager into late adulthood), one who had been a bureaucrat-retainer would have had little experience doing manual labor and, therefore, would have found it difficult to compete for a job with those who had done it all their lives.⁴⁹ That these options are undesirable last resorts is made clear by the language of the text.

ἀφαίρεται. This startling word emphasizes the suddenness and intensity of the crisis into which the steward has been thrown and offers proof that the parable should be understood with an eschatological backdrop. The word often denotes a forceful removal or “cutting off.”⁵⁰ Luke only uses the word four times, one of which is when the disciple cuts off (*ἀφέιλεν*) the ear of the high priest’s slave (22:49; so also Matt 26:51 and Mark 14:47, the only instance of this word in the other Synoptics). Rather than simply saying that his job has been “taken away,” the steward uses this cutting off metaphor, a verb that Scott recognizes as “a matter of violence.”⁵¹

σκάπτειν οὐκ ἴσχύω . . . ἐπατεῖν αἰσχύνομαι. Both infinitives have a complementary function (BDF §392), as they complete the thought of the main verbs. Their position preceding the main verbs, however, is peculiar and emphatic.⁵² It is clear

parallel subjunctive response, there is no parallel *ἴνα* to anticipate a subjunctive in v. 41a. For the purposes of this study, the results are inconclusive.

⁴⁹Wright, “Parables on Poverty and Riches (Luke 12:13-21; 16:1-13; 16:19-31),” 225.

⁵⁰BDAG, s.v., “ἀφαίρέω.” Cf. similar forceful or violent connotations of the word in the LXX: Gen 40:49; Exod 33:5; 1 Sam 5:4; 17:46; 30:18; 2 Sam 4:7; 16:9; 20:22; Ezek 23:25; Jdt 13:8; and many others (including many examples in which a body part is amputated or someone is decapitated).

⁵¹Scott, “Master’s Praise,” 183. It is puzzling, though, that Scott fails to recognize the eschatological dimension of the parable even after acknowledging the crisis implied by this word.

⁵²A survey of Luke’s infinitive use demonstrates unambiguously that when he uses a complementary infinitive, it almost always follows the controlling verb. In both narrative and parabolic

that emphatic placement of the infinitive reveals the steward's distress about these lowly options. Since the participle contemplates action as real, while the infinitive contemplates action as possible, the infinitive ἐπαιτεῖν in this verse, coupled with the meaning of the verb, “contemplates an undesirab[le] possibility” that the manager views as distasteful.⁵³

16:4 ἔγνων τί ποιήσω, ὅνταν μετασταθῶ ἐκ τῆς οἰκονομίας δέξωνται με εἰς τοὺς οἴκους αὐτῶν.

ἔγνων τί ποιήσω. Moule explains that although ἔγνων is aorist, the tense here is not as much a reflection of past time as it is simply denoting a punctiliar quality to the action, so the English would be simple present, although the moment of action—the epiphany, as it were—has technically already passed in the steward's mind.⁵⁴ However, due to recent Greek studies in verbal aspect, most notably those by Stanley Porter and

units, the complementary infinitive rarely precedes the main verb, much less does it fall at the beginning of the clause. See Luke 4:21; 6:39; 6:42; 7:2; 7:15; 7:38; 7:49; 8:18; 9:12; 9:31; 11:29; 11:53; 12:25; etc.

⁵³Dana and Mantey, *Manual Grammar*, 222. In antiquity, digging was considered the hardest kind of work and might include hard labor in a quarry, construction, agriculture, or landscaping (Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 150). That “digging” was a lowly, degraded employment, see Ar. Av. 1432, where the character Sycophant says σκάπτειν γὰρ οὐκ ἐπίσταμαι [LCL]. See also “οκάπτω” in BDAG. So, for the manager to claim that he lacked strength to do this labor is probably quite literal. Moreover, digging was reserved for those of the lowest social standing—quite a precipitous fall from managing a rich man's estate. Even worse, the plight of a beggar was as bad as a formerly distinguished manager could have imagined for himself. Later in the chapter, in 16:20-22, Luke makes explicitly clear how undesirable the life of the beggar was—the very opposite of a “rich man.” A first-century Jew, however, did not need to hear a parable to know how debased the status of the beggar was. For example, Sir 40:28-29 advises death over the life of begging: “My child, do not lead the life of a beggar (*ζωὴν ἐπαιτήσεως*); *it is better to die than to beg*. When one looks to the table of another, one's way of life cannot be considered a life. One loses self-respect with another person's food, but one who is intelligent and well instructed guards against that” (NRSV, italics added). In sum, both the vocabulary and the word placement—with the infinitive used in the emphatic first position in both clauses—underscores the intense crisis the steward is contemplating.

⁵⁴C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 7, 11. In support of this view, F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and ed. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 166 (§318, “Tense”), explains that the punctiliar is the most salient *Aktionsarten* for the aorist. So also James Hope Moulton, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), 108-09; Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 823;

Buist Fanning, the view that the aorist necessarily indicates a punctiliar quality has become obsolete.⁵⁵ Even before the Porter-Fanning revolution in verbal aspect, Liefeld diverged from the punctiliar aorist view here, claiming that “exegetes have tended to read too much into the simple aorist and to stress too much its punctiliar aspect.”⁵⁶ In fact, Fanning explicitly mentions Luke’s use of this verb here as the only clear instance in the NT of the classical dramatic aorist.⁵⁷ Wallace agrees in defining this verb as an “immediate past aorist/dramatic aorist” because it is used with a verb of understanding and refers to a recently completed event; it may be translated with a phrase like “just

and Nigel Turner, *Syntax*, vol. 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, by James Hope Moulton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 59, 71, commented on the aorist’s punctiliar nature.

⁵⁵ Fanning argues that the aorist reflects the writer’s perspective on the occurrence rather than the duration of the action. He states, “The aorist presents an occurrence *in summary, viewed as a whole from the outside, without regard for the internal make-up of the occurrence*. This ‘external, summarizing’ viewpoint concerning the occurrence is what is invariant in the meaning of the aorist itself” (Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 97. Italics his.). Along the same lines, Porter rejects the inherent punctiliar nature of the aorist, contending that “we cannot be dogmatic about the aorist as a past tense or as indicating one-time or punctiliar action, no matter how true we may believe the concepts to be” (Stanley E. Porter, “In Defence of Verbal Aspect,” in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson, JSNTSup 80 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993], 43). Porter’s view is that “examples of the present or aorist or perfect can be found with refer to past, present, or future or to omnitemporal events” (Buist M. Fanning, “Approaches to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek: Issues in Definition and Method,” in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson, JSNTSup 80 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993], 58). Porter inextricably associates the aorist with the “perfective aspect,” which is “least heavily weighted” of the three aspects; it is used as the default tense regardless of whether the verb indicates a momentary event or one that spans “a significant length of time” (Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992], 21-22). Even before the Porter-Fanning development, Frank Stagg, “The Abused Aorist,” *JBL* 91 (1972): 222-31, argued that the tendency to view the aorist as punctiliar was ill founded. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 500, criticizes explicitly Stagg’s (and implicitly Porter’s) assumption that the aorist should often be taken as the unaffected, “default” tense because this position says “too little.” Porter and McKay argue that tenses in the indicative are inherently nontemporal, while Fanning, Schmidt, Silva, and Wallace all argue that there is some time indicator associated with the tenses (Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 499-504).

⁵⁶ Walter L. Liefeld, “Luke,” in *Matthew-Mark-Luke*, vol. 8 of EBC, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 990.

⁵⁷ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 276.

now” to bring out its force.⁵⁸ Burton, who also uses Luke 16:4 as the primary example of the dramatic aorist, explains this category as “a state of mind just reached The effect is to give to the statement greater vividness than is given by the more usual Present.”⁵⁹ So too Nunn considers the verb a “dramatic aorist,” which is used “to state vividly the state of mind” of the manager.⁶⁰ Although he does not call it such, Marshall translates the phrase with a similar understanding: “I know what I will do” or, more precisely, “I found out (a moment ago) what I will do.”⁶¹ The asyndeton is an additional hint about the suddenness of the action, an indicator that the plan is “just now” entering the steward’s mind.⁶² In sum, if Luke was using the aorist for a particular reason, it was probably to denote the suddenness of the action.⁶³ The suddenness of the verb should be regarded as an indicator of a vivid and dramatic, even epiphanic (based on context, not on a grammatical feature demanding it be punctiliar), event that impels the steward in his subsequent actions. Given the parable’s context, immediate crisis and hastened debt-reduction, the dramatic stress on the verb is beyond question (and vice versa).

⁵⁸Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 564-65. So also Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1100, who labels this a “dramatic aorist” that is used to indicate that a decision has been made. These interpretations are similar to that of Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 892-93, who categorizes this verb as an “aorist of an action just accomplished,” which is similar in meaning to the present perfect.

⁵⁹Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1900; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978), 22. Burton continues, “This usage is in classical Greek mainly poetical and is found chiefly in dialogue. It is sometimes called ‘Aoristus tragicus.’”

⁶⁰H. P. V. Nunn, *A Short Syntax of New Testament Greek*, 5th ed. (New York: Cambridge, 1938), 70. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 36, explains this verb similarly.

⁶¹Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 618. (See Mark 1:11 and Luke 12:32.)

⁶²Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 141. See also Geldenhuys, *Gospel of Luke*, 418, following Plummer and Easton.

⁶³So also Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 52; J. M. Creed, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (London: Macmillan, 1930), 203; Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 618; Plummer, *Gospel According to S. Luke*, 383.

ἵνα ὅταν . . . δέξωνται. The *ἵνα* indicates the motivation behind the steward's action, and the *ὅταν* clause modifies *δέξωνται*, "rather than implying that the stewardship is still in question."⁶⁴ Porter claims that the impersonal third person plural *δέξωνται* "illustrates the desperate situation of the steward."⁶⁵ This claim may be valid, but Porter does not offer any further explanation.

16:5 καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος ἔνα ἔκαστον τῶν χρεοφειλετῶν τοῦ κυρίου ἐαυτοῦ ἐλεγεν τῷ πρώτῳ, Πόσον ὀφείλεις τῷ κυρίῳ μου;

ἔνα ἔκαστον. The manager calls in the debtors *ἔνα ἔκαστον*, which the NRSV translates "one by one." Although the story only presents two debtors, Fitzmyer, probably correctly, claims that these two examples "are to be understood as sample cases."⁶⁶ In other words, more debtors beyond these two are implied.⁶⁷ If this is the correct understanding, then Zerwick's translation "each and every" conveys better the larger number of debtors. Ireland points out that those who emphasize the secrecy of the transaction translate it "one by one," while those who emphasize the inclusiveness of the debtors translate it or "each and every" (or "without exception").⁶⁸ However, Ireland

⁶⁴Porter, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward," 142. Although v. 2 has already made it clear that the manager's dismissal was a completed decision, this portion of v. 4 reinforces that understanding such that the decision's finality is indubitable.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1100. Cf. also Porter, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward," 142, who explains that this construction is used to imply "all of his master's debtors."

⁶⁷So also Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 108, who explains that the word "another" (v. 7) also implies a number larger than what is explicitly described.

⁶⁸Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 53.

rightly notes, the two ideas are not mutually exclusive, and the context of this parable probably makes use of both possibilities, regardless of the English translation.⁶⁹

Ἐλεγεν. Wallace calls the verb an “instantaneous imperfect” (also aoristic or punctiliar imperfect), which is often used for a vivid or emotional statement.⁷⁰ If that is the case, then it heightens the intensity of the drama. The manager is acting with haste to make future provision for himself in the final few moments that he has available.⁷¹

Πόσον ὀφείλεις τῷ κυρίῳ μου; Taken at face value, the wording here unambiguously demonstrates that the debt was owed to the master himself. If any of the debt mentioned on the promissory notes was a commission for the manager, then the debtors apparently did not know about it. Thus, if he reduces a debt that is entirely the master’s (as the text suggests), then the plainest reading is that the manager is doing something dishonest. He is operating with possessions that are not his own. However, if he is reducing merely the amount owed to him as commission, he is still dishonest—just in a slightly different way—by passing the debt off as “the master’s.”

16:6 ὁ δὲ εἶπεν, Ἐκατὸν βάτους ἐλαίου. ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα καὶ καθίσας ταχέως γράψον πεντήκοντα.

⁶⁹The steward had ample reason to conduct these deals in stealth. If the activity was illegal, a secret deal would have bought him time before the master learned of the deed. But, even if the steward’s actions were legal, his reduction of the debtors’ bills by different amounts would have provoked the envy of the debtors receiving lesser reductions; keeping the debt reductions secret held the steward in good standing with all the debtors, the very ones to whom he was trying to ingratiate himself. The steward also had ample reason to conduct the deals with as many debtors as possible (more than two, at least). If reducing the debts of two wealthy debtors was beneficial for him, then how much more so would a reduction for all the debtors—as many as possible—“pay off” for him.

⁷⁰Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 543.

⁷¹For another reason for the imperfect here, see the discussion below on the verbs of v. 7.

Ἐκατὸν βάτους ἐλαῖον. Metrology is a complicated discipline because “weights and measures change in their values over time without necessarily changing their names.”⁷² The complication is exacerbated in the NT (compared to the OT) because not only are there relatively few metrological references to use for comparison but also there are various writers who are influenced differently by Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures and who may be using the same terms to mean different amounts.⁷³ Therefore, the exact *bath* (v. 6) and *kor* (v. 7) amounts owed to the master cannot be stated with certainty. However, it is possible to state a general range of quantities specific enough to be adequate for understanding this parable. The exact amount is not as important as long as one understands that each debtor owes a large quantity both before and after the debt reductions.

The *bath* in OT times was a liquid measure normally used to quantify oil, water, or wine.⁷⁴ Josephus (*A.J.* 8.57) states the *bath* to be seventy-two sextarii (i.e., around thirty-nine liters); in close corroboration, a Qumran jar suggests ten gallons.⁷⁵ These figures would make the amount mentioned in the parable around one thousand gallons. On the other hand, a bath in OT times was around five gallons, making the parable amount only around five hundred gallons.⁷⁶ Jeremias (and later Young) chooses a figure in the middle, a total of eight hundred gallons, which would represent the oil

⁷²E. M. Cook, “Weights and Measures,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, rev. ed. [ISBE] (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 4:1054.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid., 4:1050.

⁷⁵Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 618.

⁷⁶Ibid.

produced from 146 trees and would be valued around one thousand denarii.⁷⁷ Fitzmyer estimates the total to be slightly higher, around nine hundred gallons.⁷⁸ Given that Josephus and the Qumran community were closer to the time of Jesus, their figures are likely closer than the OT-based estimates of five hundred gallons. Regardless of which figure one chooses, however, the amount mentioned in this parable is considerable, at least five hundred gallons and probably closer to double that. A denarius is equivalent to a day's wage for a laborer.⁷⁹ Therefore, if one estimates the value of the debt to be at least six to twelve hundred denarii, it becomes apparent that the debtors in this parable owed enormous amounts—the equivalent of many years' pay for a typical laborer.

Δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα. Jeremias assigns the most devious motives to the steward even in this phrase. He translates *Δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα* as “There is your bill,” explaining that the steward had the promissory notes in his possession and allowed the debtors to make the changes themselves, “hoping that the fraud, being in the same handwriting, will pass unnoticed.”⁸⁰ Alternatively, perhaps the steward simply returned the bill so that the debtor could rewrite the amount on the original bill.⁸¹ Nolland indicates that IOU's were kept by the creditor or manager and that the debtor's own handwriting is what legally validates the contract;⁸² therefore, even if the action were

⁷⁷Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 181 (who follows G[ustaf] Dalman for most of his calculations); Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 238.

⁷⁸Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1100.

⁷⁹Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 136.

⁸⁰Ibid., 181.

⁸¹As Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 619, states as a possibility.

⁸²Nolland, *Luke*, 2:799.

legal, the steward would at some time have to return the bill in order for them to execute their end of the transaction. The language, then, does not necessarily imply the action's illegality, although the following language more clearly does.

καθίσας. Wallace identifies this as an attendant circumstance participle, which introduces an ingressive action that is semantically subordinated to the main verb ("write" in this case) and thereby places greater emphasis on that main verb (relative to the participle).⁸³ As such, the force of the proximate imperative, "write," indicates that the "sitting" should also be understood imperatively, with slightly less emphasis on the sitting than the writing.⁸⁴ Thus, although the writing of the new bills was more important for the steward's plan, the debtors first had to sit down (quickly) in order to accomplish the writing. All words in this structure reinforce the argument that there is an urgency about the steward's plan; everything must be conducted in haste before the matter catches word of his scheme. In case the urgency is still not clear enough, Luke insinuates the word **ταχέως** between the "sitting" and the "writing."

Ταχέως. The urgency of the manager's actions is intensified by the adverb, which syntactically goes with the "writing" but semantically also goes with the "sitting" (as one may infer from the previous discussion about the attendant circumstance participial). The implied exigency tends to support the argument that the actions that the

⁸³Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 640-43. The structure meets all five criteria typical of the attendant circumstance participle: an aorist participle, an aorist main verb, an imperative main verb, the participle preceding the main verb, and the occurrence within narrative literature (*ibid.*, 642).

⁸⁴This structure is roughly parallel to the angel's urgent command to Joseph (where, again, all five criteria for the attendant circumstance participle are met) in Matt 2:13b: Ἐγερθεὶς παράλαβε τὸ παιδίον καὶ τὴν μητέρα αὐτοῦ καὶ φεῦγε εἰς Αἴγυπτον (so Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 641). Here Joseph's "rising" semantically adopts the imperative mood of the main verbs, thereby emphasizing the urgent immediacy—just like in the Unjust Steward—of both the rising and the fleeing.

manager is taking are shady because they need to be completed before his plan is discovered.⁸⁵ The parable suggests that the manager had little time to execute his plan because the master is still waiting to receive his written account. He had an unknown, yet dwindling, amount of time to execute his plan, and he does not hide his anxiety well; he is terse in his directions and urges haste in a seemingly mundane (though fortuitous) financial transaction that normally would not warrant such a rush. The reason for his haste is clear: all participants must act “quickly” lest his scheme be discovered and foiled by the master.

γράψον. The manager uses an imperative for the debtors to write their own debt reductions on the bill. Nolland claims that the bills were written by the debtors, rather than the lender, in order to discourage falsification.⁸⁶ If this is true, there is subtle irony in the fact that the entire transaction is based on a falsification (by the steward).

16:7 ἐπειτα ἐτέρω εἶπεν, Σὺ δὲ πόσον ὀφείλεις; ὁ δὲ εἶπεν, Ἐκατὸν κόρους σίτου. λέγει αὐτῷ, Δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα καὶ γράψον ὡρδοήκοντα.

Ἐκατὸν κόρους σίτου. In OT times the *kor* was a dry measure equaling around forty-eight gallons; although Josephus (*A.J.* 15.314) places the quantity at 131 gallons, this figure is probably an error because it conflicts with his own appraisal of the same unit (*A.J.* 3.321).⁸⁷ The *kor* mentioned in this parable is probably between six-and-a-half and twelve bushels.⁸⁸ So, the debtor owed between 650 and 1200 bushels of grain,

⁸⁵Forbes, *The God of Old*, 159.

⁸⁶Nolland, *Luke*, 2:803. Unfortunately, he cites no evidence for this claim.

⁸⁷Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 619; R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke,” in *Luke-John*, vol. 9 of *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck [NIB] (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 308.

⁸⁸Culpepper, “Luke,” 308.

which was reduced to an amount between 520 and 960 bushels. Jeremias (and later Young) explains that the original quantity would represent the yield of around one hundred acres and would be valued around 2500 denarii—so much money that it would represent around a full decade’s salary for a typical laborer.⁸⁹ Therefore, one may see that, even after the substantial debt reduction, the second debtor, like the first, still owed to the master an amount equivalent to many years’ pay for a typical laborer. The reduction was a sizeable amount, but the amount he still owed was much greater.

The OT mentions both the *bath* and *kor*, and a few of these references may help comprehend the relative magnitude of the debtor’s liability, even if they do not provide an exact quantity to calculate. In Ezekiel 45:10-14, whose purpose is to exhort traders to use honest measurements, the *ephah* and *bath* are considered equal, and both a *homer* and a *kor* are reckoned as ten times larger than each.⁹⁰ So, here, the *bath* is one-tenth of a *kor*. (Since it would require a much larger volume of grain to equal the value of a given volume of olive oil, a more valuable commodity, it is no surprise that the grain-debtor in the parable of the unjust steward owed a greater volume of grain.) That the debt owed was stated in terms of grain ($\sigmaίτου$) rather than hard currency is no surprise. Such loans were common in ancient Jewish society. For example, the usury laws in *m. B. Mes.* 5:8a-b state, “A man may lend his tenant farmers wheat [to be paid in] wheat, [if] it is for seed, but not [if it is] for food.”

⁸⁹Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 181 (who, again, is basing his calculations on the work of Dalman); Young, *Parables*, 238.

⁹⁰Cook, “Weights and Measures,” 4:1049. In OT times, the *homer* was principally a dry measure, although it could denote a liquid measure (*ibid.*). In Ezek 45:10, the mention of a *bath* probably refers to the container itself (*ibid.*).

Coincidentally, quantities of wheat and oil identical to those listed in the parable are also mentioned in Ezra 7:22.⁹¹ This verse in Ezra is part of the Aramaic decree issued in 398 BC by Artaxerxes II to the provincial treasurers to allow Ezra to claim extra supplies.⁹² The amounts are significant relative to this study because the letter authorizes the use of “up to one hundred talents of silver, one hundred cors of wheat, one hundred baths of wine, one hundred baths of oil, and unlimited salt” (NRSV), which Williamson calls a “generous provision” because he estimates it to be the amount needed to supply the temple for around two years.⁹³ If the letter was intended by Aratxerxes to be a reflection of his grand beneficence (and it was), then it would have been counterproductive for him to have authorized amounts anything less than awe-inspiring. Therefore, even if the “one hundred baths of oil” and “one hundred cors of wheat” had changed in quantity a bit from Ezra’s time to Luke’s, it is nevertheless clear that the debtors owed exceptionally large amounts regardless of the local or temporal standard. The very large amounts clearly imply that the debtors were large-scale businessmen rather than desperate small-scale peasants or subsistence farmers. Since the primary audience throughout Jesus’ ministry was the peasant class, many of whom presumably were in debt, it is unlikely that they would have identified directly with the large-scale debtors mentioned in this parable. Indeed, the amount mentioned in the parable—enough to supply the temple for months and enough to reflect a king’s

⁹¹Nolland, *Luke*, 2:799.

⁹²Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah: An Introduction & Commentary*, TOTC, vol. 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 63.

⁹³H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, WBC, vol. 16 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 103, 106.

philanthropy—is more than any of them were ever likely to see all at once in their lifetimes.

λέγει αὐτῷ. The present tense **λέγει** is a surprise entry here, since the far more common aorist tense **ἔπειν** had appeared five times in the parable already. One would have expected the action to wrap up with a sixth (and final) aorist. Instead, there is a historic present, which Luke typically avoids (and even routinely changes when following Mark). What is interesting is that four of the five uses of **ἔπειν** in this parable are concentrated in the parallel events of verses 6 and 7. The precedent for **ἔπειν** established in the first half of the parallel, in verse 6: ὁ δὲ **ἔπειν** αὐτῷ, Δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα (“He said to him, ‘Take your bill . . .’”), so one would expect the parallel in verse 7 to be worded similarly. Indeed, the steward’s order is an exact repeat, but the narrative introduction shifts to present tense in verse 7: **λέγει αὐτῷ**, Δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα (“He said [literally, ‘says’] to him, ‘Take your bill . . .’”). The three most likely options for explaining this aberration are these: (1) The wording is exactly as Luke found it in his source, and he merely copies it verbatim; (2) The original wording contained all historical presents, which Luke changed to aorist, except for this one instance that he forgot to change; or (3) Luke intentionally departs from the string of **ἔπειν** aorists. The first two options are unlikely because they posit unexplainable inconsistency on someone’s part. If option (1) were true, it still would be odd for the source to have worded it thus; it still would leave the question, Why did Luke’s source shift tenses unexpectedly? This option also leaves unexplained why Luke did not make his typical “correction” to make it aorist. If option (2) were true, it would be even more odd; it is impossible to argue seriously that Luke took the liberty to change all the

historical presents but then missed the climactic one. That leaves option (3) as the most likely candidate.

In fact, an argument could be made that the whole series of λέγω verbs has been deliberately engineered to reinforce the drama of the imminent crisis theme. The proposal made here is that Luke consciously changed the tense of the verbs because each verb serves a different function in the narrative. First, he uses the imperfect ἐλεγεν (v. 5) either to heighten the drama (as explained above) or to emphasize the continuous aspect of his debt reduction. These two debtors exemplify the many debtors whose debts the manager was continually reducing—until he either ran out of debtors or was caught.⁹⁴ Even the “continual” (or “durative”) reading of the verb has its own dramatic overtones, though, because the steward is working non-stop to fend off consequences of his former life. Then, Luke has four consecutive uses of εἶπεν (vv. 6-7b) because the aspect or dramatic element of these verbs is not as important; Luke simply needed to make it through several plot points in rapid succession, and the best tool for such quick narration that does not call too much attention to the verb itself is the aorist. Finally, Luke ends the unit with a historic present λέγει (v. 7c) to make the steward’s command more vivid and immediate, thus signaling that this eleventh-hour plan is now in its final anxious moments and rhetorically propelling the action right up to the reader’s immediate existence.⁹⁵ In

⁹⁴It is duly noted that in English there is a slight difference in denotation between “continuous” and “continual.” If the manager reduced the debts of many debtors, one after another, it is a *continual* action, although the grammatical category of the verb’s aspect is formally *continuous*.

⁹⁵As described by Wallace (*Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 526-28), the salient characteristics of the historical present fit well for this verb: vividness is its *raison d’être*, the aspectual value is “reduced to zero,” the action is found within the midst of aorists, and the time element is rhetorical rather than real. Wallace also notes—tellingly—that the Third Gospel uses only eleven historic presents (compared, for example, to 151 uses in the much shorter Second Gospel). These statistics strongly imply that if Luke uses (or retains) the historic present, it is probably with a purpose.

sum, the string of six λέγω verbs in verses 5-7 includes somewhat of an *inclusio* of “dramatic” tenses at each end of the execution of the steward’s plan, while in the middle are the four more ordinary, yet quick, aorists that carry the plot to its end.

Δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα καὶ γράψον ὄγδοήκοντα. The directions here are even more compact than with the first debtor. The parable depicts the manager using an economy of words here probably for several reasons: (1) the rest of the request is implied from the previous request; (2) as the manager’s time grows shorter, the parable’s language becomes more concise, thus cultivating the sense of growing urgency (just like the verb shifts described above); there is no time to waste with unnecessary words; (3) if the two debtors mentioned in the story are to be taken as merely two representatives of a larger number who had their debts reduced, then an abbreviated command better gives the sense that there is more to this story than what is expressly stated. Luke is implying that this is not the only place where the hearer must supply the missing details (or, missing debtors, as the case may be). The reduction of this debt by twenty percent (instead of the fifty percent) probably serves the same purpose: to demonstrate that this episode is just one of a varied assortment of debtors and debt reductions that one should assume. Jeremias claims that the cash value of the two reductions would have been equivalent (around 500 denarii).⁹⁶ However, given the aforementioned metrological vicissitudes, Jeremias’s calculation is not certain, but, even if it were, it is debatable whether Luke could have assumed his readers to make this connection. Therefore,

⁹⁶Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 181.

Marshall is correct in saying that the corresponding values are “probably [a] coincidence.”⁹⁷

16:8a καὶ ἐπήνεσεν ὁ κύριος τὸν οἰκονόμον τῆς ἀδικίας ὅτι φρονίμως ἐποίησεν.

ὁ κύριος. The identity of the κύριος is one of the main points of disagreement in this pericope. Some argue that it refers to the master of the steward, while others argue that it is the “Lord” Jesus himself. Even though the identity of the κύριος will be dealt with in more depth, regarding the literary context and logical flow of the pericope, in Chapter 6, here some of the basic grammatical concerns will be addressed. The linguistic weight favors the κύριος being the steward’s master. Not only is the master unambiguously referred to by that title in verses 1, 3, and 5, but also there is “no linguistic indication” that the reference has shifted to Jesus.⁹⁸ Although there is no indication of a shift in verse 8, there is a clear shift in verse 9. Here the direct speech of Jesus marks a transition from parable (application) with an emphatically placed ύμῖν before the verb, which denotes a contrast between Jesus and his listeners.⁹⁹

ἐπήνεσεν. The word αἰνέω (aorist ἔνεσα) means “to praise” or “to extol” in general; however, it is frequently used for a more unrestricted praise of a deity in ancient Hellenistic literature, usually for praise of YHWH in the LXX, and “only of the praise of God” in the NT.¹⁰⁰ Thus, it appears that the closer one moves (culturally and

⁹⁷ Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 619.

⁹⁸ Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 144.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 145, 148.

¹⁰⁰ BDAG, s.v., “αἰνέω”; TDNT, s.v., “αἰνέω.” Cf. Ar. *Ran.* 673; Hdt. *Hist.* 5.102; Theocritus *Id.* 4. Although the word could be used in the LXX in reference to a human (e.g., Gen 49:8), the LXX far

thematically) toward the NT, the more precise the denotation of $\alpha\acute{\iota}\nu\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ becomes; the semantic weight by the NT times favors an unrestricted praise of God Himself. On the other hand, as Zerwick explains, the $\acute{\epsilon}\pi(l)$ prefix on $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\acute{\eta}\nu\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ qualifies the root verb such that the “praise” is given “with regard to a particular point.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, Luke’s precise use of $\alpha\acute{\iota}\nu\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ and $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu\acute{\epsilon}\omega$, respectively, supports this claim about the lexical distinction between the two related words. All but two of the uses of $\alpha\acute{\iota}\nu\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ in the NT are in Luke-Acts (Luke 2:13; 2:20; 19:37; 24:53 [textually questionable]; Acts 2:47; 3:8; 3:9), and all refer to a glorifying of God, thus implying a more unqualified praise. On the other hand, Luke’s only use of $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ is in 16:8a and is directed at a human.¹⁰² The weight of this evidence suggests that the “praise” in this verse it to be understood as limited in scope; therefore, it more likely refers to the manager’s single shrewd action rather than his character or works in general.

$\tau\acute{\eta}\varsigma \acute{\alpha}\delta\iota\kappa\acute{\iota}\alpha\varsigma$. The syntactical function of $\tau\acute{\eta}\varsigma \acute{\alpha}\delta\iota\kappa\acute{\iota}\alpha\varsigma$ is another of the thorny interpretive difficulties in this parable. Interpreters generally have understood the steward’s description as $\tau\acute{\eta}\varsigma \acute{\alpha}\delta\iota\kappa\acute{\iota}\alpha\varsigma$ in four possible ways: (1) the “unrighteousness” refers to the manager’s entire dishonest character and career, although it does not

more often uses the word specifically for praising God: Ps 17:4; Neh 12:24; Jer 20:13; 1 Chr 16:4, 7, 10, 35-36, 41; 23:5; Dan 4:34; Jdt 13:14; 2 Esdr 3:10; Pss Sol 5:1; 1 Macc 4:33.

¹⁰¹Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis*, 246. The present author’s examination of the primary sources vindicates Zerwick’s claim. Cf. Dem. *Fals. leg.* 234.7; Plb. *Hist.* 27.2.5; 28.3.2 (in both instances, Thebes and its people are praised for one thing: their loyalty to Rome); D.S. *Hist.* 27.4.7 (used for “praise” of a single act); Jos. *A.J.* 14.293 (where a work [$\tau\acute{o} \acute{\epsilon}\rho\gamma\acute{o}\nu$] is praised); *Vita* 232 (where Josephus praises himself), 279.

¹⁰²The only other occurrences of $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ in the NT are from Paul (Rom 15:11; 1 Cor 11:2, 17, 22), who uses the word to refer to humans three times (twice in a pejorative manner [1 Cor 11:17, 22!] and God only once. Moreover, the use in 1 Cor 11:2 is praise with respect to a particular action: $\delta\acute{t}\iota\pi \pi\acute{a}\nu\tau\alpha \mu\acute{o}\nu\mu\eta\sigma\theta\acute{e}$. Therefore, although this word may be used to indicate a more unqualified praise (of God, for example, in Rom 15:11), it more commonly (compared to $\alpha\acute{\iota}\nu\acute{\epsilon}\omega$) is restricted to a particular deed or quality of a human.

necessarily refer to any one specific action in or before the parable; (2) the “unrighteousness” refers only to the action of reducing the debts but makes no comment on the initial accusation or his character in general; (3) the “unrighteousness” does not have anything to do with the steward’s debt reduction but instead refers exclusively to the actions that led to the master’s initial accusation; or (4) the “unrighteousness” is more a comment on the worldly sphere in which the manager operates—that is, his general worldliness.

The explanations for the type of genitive used here are myriad, and many of the proposed types still do not answer the question of which of the four options above is involved. Nunn categorizes this as a “genitive of definition” (i.e., it functions just like an adjective before the noun it is modifying), a syntactical category that does not appear in Classical Greek or Latin (it is probably instead indebted to Semitic syntax), thus implying that the steward is unrighteous in general.¹⁰³ That understanding might support option (1), but (2) and (3) are not out of the question either. Similarly, Fitzmyer reads the term as a genitive of quality (or Hebraic genitive), “dishonest steward,” which is syntactically parallel to the description of the “dishonest judge” (18:6).¹⁰⁴ However, as with Nunn’s suggestion, if the steward is understood to be “dishonest,” it is not clear whether that dishonesty is with respect to a particular action (option [2] or [3]) or his character in general (option [1]). Even if it is understood to be with respect to a particular action, there are still two possibilities, both (2) and (3), but these two options offer opposite

¹⁰³Nunn, *Short Syntax of New Testament Greek*, 43-44.

¹⁰⁴Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1101. So also BDF §165; Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 620; Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 69-70. DeSilva calls this the “subjective genitive,” but it appears that his terminology lacks precision. The overlapping grammatical nomenclature (in addition to the differing uses

conclusions. Pointing to similar constructions from Qumran, Kosmala argues that the ἀδικίας merely refers to the nature of the world in which the steward is working (“this world in which ἀδικία is the ruling principle”) but not the specific character or specific action of the steward.¹⁰⁵ This position supports option (4) and does not offer an opinion about the honesty of the steward or on any of his actions. Porter adds yet another suggestion, “Whereas most interpreters see the genitive as adjectival or as a genitive of quality, possibly Semitic in background [as Kosmala], there is good reason for seeing it as causal or objective.”¹⁰⁶ DeSilva, who assumes that there are only two possible choices (subjective or objective genitive), also argues for the objective genitive, claiming that it defines “the sphere in which the steward has been operating.”¹⁰⁷ This option also sounds like support for option (4). Donahue also offers support for the objective genitive reading, claiming that an inherent part of the manager’s daily dealings (namely contracting loans with illegal interest) was dishonest; therefore, he was formerly the steward with charge over dealings that were dishonest—until he renounces those dishonest business practices by reducing the debts.¹⁰⁸ The problem with both the subjective and objective genitive proposals is that both require a head noun that is a

of the same term) is one of the difficulties for interpreters attempting to classify all of the competing suggestions.

¹⁰⁵H. Kosmala, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward in Light of Qumran,” *ASTI* 3 (1964): 115.

¹⁰⁶Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 143-44.

¹⁰⁷DeSilva, “Parable of the Prudent Steward,” 264-65. Cf. Rom 6:13 and 2 Pet 2:13-15. In the same way, DeSilva argues, the judge in the parable of Luke 18:1-6 should not be called the “unjust judge” because he is “no respecter of persons” (*ibid.*, 265).

¹⁰⁸John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 165. This position, of course, makes presumptions about the usurious nature of the contracts and is, therefore, open to the same criticisms as Derrett’s and Fitzmyer’s theses.

verbal idea (typically transitive).¹⁰⁹ While it is not impossible to understand “steward[ing]” as an activity, this is not the most obvious understanding of verse 8a’s genitival construction. The Hebraic genitive that refers either to the steward’s debt reduction or entire career is a more natural reading (cf. the similar construction in 16:9 and 18:6). This brief (and very incomplete) survey of some of the positions on this word and the positions’ ramifications on the understanding of the parable exemplify the interpretive difficulty at this point in the text.

The most plausible solution is that the dishonesty mentioned is in some way associated with the only action that the steward is described as doing—reducing the debts. Thus, Loader is correct in stating that the most elementary explanation is that the immediate context in which this description is found “implies a direct reference to the action which has just preceded.”¹¹⁰ This reading favors option (2), although (1) is possible as well if one assumes that a manager who is described as being “dishonest” in general is probably involved in continued dishonesty in verses 5-7 as well. Furthermore, the *prima facie* reading of the text suggests that the simple attributive (Hebraic) genitive is the best candidate unless there is a compelling reason to resort to another, less common type of genitive. Here there is no compelling reason to do so. In a few paragraphs, we argue that the genitival construction τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας (v. 9) should be understood as a Hebraic genitive that simply attributes a characteristic to the head noun (in a way that it more clearly does in v. 11). Since the two genitival constructions, here and verse 9,

¹⁰⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 112; BDF §163.

¹¹⁰ William R. G. Loader, “Jesus and the Rogue in Luke 16, 1-8a: The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” *RB* 96 (1989): 526.

appear to be similar, it makes the most sense to understand them both as simple attributives.

Option (3) is the least convincing because it is the most convoluted; it makes the word refer to an action that occurred outside of the parable's scope, even though the word bypasses the action sitting right before it. Option (3) is further mitigated when one considers the fact that the steward's guilt in the initial charge is up for debate; although unlikely, it is possible that the accusation was just slander. However, even if he is considered guilty in the initial charge, it is further debatable whether his offense was a matter of true dishonesty or something less morally egregious, like dereliction or wastefulness. Option (3) pins its hopes on material that is both assumed and debatable. Those who attempt to vindicate the steward in verse 8a do not take seriously enough the fact that there would have been other ways to describe his debt reduction action without this unnecessary, potentially misleading qualification that usually refers to one's moral character.¹¹¹ In sum, option (3) is the most unsatisfying because it is too intricate and is weakened by several plot ambiguities. Since option (3) is a favorite for those who vindicate the steward, its weakness is equally indicative of the weakness of their argument. Only if one assumes the steward to be honest in his debt reduction can one make the claim that the "dishonest" label refers all the way back to an ill-defined activity before the parable's start. On the other hand, if one takes this to be a simple attributive adjective and, if one further assumes that the use of the attributive genitive is to make the word more emphatic than a simple adjective,¹¹² it fits the context of this parable very well. The steward's plan was bold, brazen, and cunning; he was

¹¹¹Cf. 1 John 5:19; Jas 3:16; and 1QH 5:25.

emphatically dishonest, and it is this very audacity that provoked the open-jawed master's commendation.

ἢτι. Stein points out that this word “gives the ground for the commendation.”¹¹³ Thus, the steward’s “shrewdness” or “wisdom” is sole reason for the praise he receives.

φρονίμως ἐποίησεν. Aristotle uses the term φρονίμως to refer to a practical wisdom; those with this quality are able to “discern what things are good for themselves,” and this word especially describes one who is “an expert in domestic economy (*oikonomikous*).”¹¹⁴ The word φρονίμως is typically used in the Synoptics to mean “ordinary human prudence” rather than a Christian virtue.¹¹⁵ Although the φρονίμως in this parable can be translated a number of ways (e.g., “astute,” “wise,” “clever”), the Aristotelian definition, especially with its emphasis on domestic economy and self-interestedness, fits this context very well; in harmony with Aristotle’s characterization, the manager explicitly explains in his interior monologue that his plan is entirely for the purpose of benefiting himself. Moreover, as Kilpatrick observes, “as distinct from σοφός, φρόνιμος in Matthew is used [seven times] for the practical man, the man of foresight and

¹¹² Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 87.

¹¹³ Stein, *Introduction to the Parables*, 163.

¹¹⁴ Johnson, *Gospel of Luke*, 245. Cf. Arist. *Eth. nic.* 8.5.5.

¹¹⁵ Topel, “On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward,” 219. See Matt 7:24; 10:16; 24:45; 25:2-9; and Luke 12:42. In fact, in Paul’s epistles the word generally is pejorative (Rom 11:25; 12:16; 1 Cor 4:10; 2 Cor 11:19; with the possible exception of 1 Cor 10:15).

sound judgment.”¹¹⁶ It makes sense, then, that Luke would use the word similarly; thus, Kilpatrick is likely correct in stating that Luke intentionally used two forms of φρόνιμος because this word had “a bad suggestion like ‘sharp’ or ‘cunning.’”¹¹⁷ Given that the context implies some kind of duplicity on the steward’s part, an English translation with a pejorative connotation in its semantic range is preferred (e.g., canny, clever, cunning, crafty, slick, or sly).¹¹⁸

16:8b ὅτι οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου φρονιμώτεροι ὑπὲρ τοὺς υἱοὺς τοῦ φωτὸς εἰς τὴν γενέαν τὴν ἑαυτῶν εἰσιν.

οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου. Most commentators agree that the “sons of . . .” construction is an adjectival genitive reflecting a Semitic idiom that should be translated as “people worthy of/associated with . . .”¹¹⁹ or “people belonging to a particular class”¹²⁰ or “those who share the characteristics of . . .”¹²¹ This understanding of the phrase “sons of this age” is based in part on a similar description in Qumran CD 20.34, which uses the phrase to denote those outside the Qumran community (i.e., the worldly-minded and thus ungodly); conversely, the phrase “sons of light” is found in several Qumran texts as a reference to those inside the community of enlightenment (cf. 1QS 1:9-10; 2:16; 3:13, 20-21, 24-25; 1QM 1:1, 3, 7, 9, 11, 13-14; 4QFlor 1-2 i 8-9; 4Q117 10-11:7; 12-13 i 7,

¹¹⁶G. D. Kilpatrick, “φρόνιμος, σοφός and συνετός in Matthew and Luke,” *JTS* 48 (1947): 64. See especially 10:16, where Jesus advises his disciples to be “shrewd [φρόνιμοι] as serpents.”

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸I. J. du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?—Another Look at the Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13),” *Neot* 24 (1990): 9.

¹¹⁹Moule, *Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 174.

¹²⁰Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 620, following Schweizer, *TDNT*, 8:365.

¹²¹Geldenhuys, *Gospel of Luke*, 418.

11; cf. also 1 Enoch 108:11).¹²² Luke describes the dichotomy between this age and the age to come (the two spheres in which the two groups of “sons” operate) four times: Luke 16:8; 18:30; 20:34, 35. In all of these cases, worldly preoccupations (viz. money and marriage) are irrelevant. Note that 18:29-30 conveys a message similar to this verse: a proper use of money in this worldly age, which focuses so much on monetary accumulation and trust in possessions, will “pay off” in the age to come, when those possessions will have passed away and no longer hold any value.

εἰς τὴν γενεὰν τὴν ἑαυτῶν. Jeremias claims, “The words *εἰς τὴν γενεὰν τὴν ἑαυτῶν* are emphatic by their very position. The reflexive shows that they relate to the subject.”¹²³ He does not, however, explain exactly why this construction adds emphasis, in what manner it is adding emphasis, or how this emphasis helps to understand the meaning of the saying. Luke frequently refers to this “generation” (*τὴν γενεὰν*), which he characterizes as unambiguously preoccupied, faithless, condemned, and in need of repentance. In Luke, this “generation” is a sphere in which the Jewish leaders stubbornly refuse to accept the things of God (7:30-31), one that is “faithless and perverse” (9:41), “evil” and demanding a sign (11:29-30; they receive the condemning sign of the prophet Jonah), already condemned (11:31-32), guilty of shedding the prophets’ blood (11:49-51); the reference “from Abel to . . . Zechariah” [v. 51] implies that the “generation” embraces all of sinful, fallen humanity “since the foundation of the world” [v. 50]), focuses on

¹²² M. G. Steinhauser, “Noah in His Generation: An Allusion in Luke 16:8b, *εἰς τὴν γενεὰν τὴν ἑαυτῶν*,” *ZNW* 79 (1988): 154; Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 152; Stein, *Luke*, 414; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1108. Although the “sons of light” phrase is unique in the Synoptics, it is used elsewhere in the NT (e.g., John 12:36; 1 Thes 5:5; Eph 5:8) to refer to those within the Christian community (Johnson, *Gospel of Luke*, 245).

¹²³ Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 46.

shrewd use of money (16:8), rejects its own messiah (17:25), faces the arrival of the kingdom of God (21:31-32), is “corrupt” (Acts 2:4), and slaughters the “lamb” of God (8:32-33).¹²⁴ Thus, the word “generation” often conveys an eschatological nuance, for it stands condemned in light of the messiah’s arrival and imminent kingdom of God. Here, again, Luke’s pericope ties together the ideas of money and eschatology. In light of the coming kingdom, the sons-of-light generation is to prepare for the imminent crisis, namely by a wise use of possessions that mirrors (or improves upon) the shrewd behavior of those in the present generation, which falters by seeking to serve a temporary master (money and security) while ignoring the eternal master (God and his kingdom) (cf. 16:13).

16:9 Καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω, ἔμετοῖς ποιήσατε φίλους ἐκ τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας, ὥνα
ὅταν ἐκλίπῃ δέξωνται ὑμᾶς εἰς τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς.

Καὶ ἐγω ὑμῖν λέγω. The ὑμῖν + λέγω pair (in either order) is common in the Gospels and often introduces Jesus’ final judgment about a matter or “actual point” of a parable (e.g., Luke 11:8; 14:24; 15:7, 10; 16:9; 18:8, 14; 19:26).¹²⁵ It is interesting to note, however, that the λέγω ὑμῖν order is much more common in Luke (appearing thirty-eight times) than the reverse word order (appearing three times: 6:27; 11:9; 16:9) found in this verse.¹²⁶ In the other Synoptics, the phrase is usually preceded by the word

¹²⁴ Interestingly, half-way through Acts, references to a “generation” consistently refer to a time now past (13:36; 14:16; 15:21), the time in which Moses and David operated. This abrupt change in word use perhaps indicates that the shift to the messianic generation has occurred.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 177; Scott, “A Master’s Praise,” 175.

¹²⁶ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 110, states that there are four instances of this word order in Luke; this appears to be a misprint, though, because he only lists three citations. The present author’s own search also turned up only three examples.

ἀμὴν; however, Luke prefers the abbreviated form and even drops the ἀμὴν fifteen times where it is present in the Synoptic parallels.¹²⁷

The superfluous pronoun (ἐγώ) leads Fletcher to conclude that this verse is a both “direct” and “emphatic” commentary on the preceding parable.¹²⁸ Topel notes that only two of the forty-two uses of ὑμῖν and λέγω together also add the word ἐγώ (here and 11:9); this emphatic pronoun addition indicates a clear change of person, thus reducing the likelihood that the κύριος in verse 8a is Jesus, for he is only now interjecting his own comment. The “you” is the natural continuation of “sons of light” from the previous verse.¹²⁹ By virtue of this “you”/“sons of light” alignment, a division is made: the καί ἐγώ places Jesus in the role of the master, and the ὑμῖν places the disciples on the side of the steward.¹³⁰ Hiers notes also that the two emphatic pronouns here establish an implicit *a fortiori* structure: what the master says to the steward is stated in a stronger statement by Jesus (“And I say to you . . .”).¹³¹

ἔαυτοῖς ποιήσατε. Here the ποιέω (from v. 8a) is repeated but transformed into an imperative. The use of the reflexive pronoun provides emphasis, which is accentuated further by its placement before this imperative verb.¹³² Fanning explains that the aorist is appropriate for this instruction because the aorist “can be used in general precepts to give

¹²⁷ Scott, “A Master’s Praise,” 175.

¹²⁸ Donald R. Fletcher, “The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?” *JBL* 82 (1963): 19.

¹²⁹ Richard H. Hiers, “Friends by Unrighteous Mammon: The Eschatological Proletariat (Luke 16:9),” *JAAR* 38 (1970): 32.

¹³⁰ Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God*, 94.

¹³¹ Hiers, “Friends by Unrighteous Mammon,” 32.

an external or summary view of the occurrence commanded.”¹³³ In this example, the aorist imperative ποιήσατε is being used in the consummative sense “to emphasize the accomplishment or fulfillment of an effort: a command not merely to work at or attempt the action, as the present may imply, but to do it successfully or actually. The focus is on the end-point of the action.”¹³⁴

ἐκ. Beavis argues that ἐκ should be translated “outside” (a separation use) so that the point of the verse is that one should make friends by a means other than material possessions.¹³⁵ This is an untenable option because the steward, who presumably reflects this point, *does* use material possessions as a tool to curry favor with debtors. If he had been excoriated, rather than praised, by the master, then this translation would make more sense. If that were the case, Jesus would have been making the point, “It did not work for the steward, so it will not work for you either.” However, Beavis’s main premise is that there is legitimacy in seeing the praised steward as immoral in his actions; as such, the praise is not ironic and presumably implies that something that he did was right (viz. his cleverness), regardless of the immorality of his actions. If one rejects Beavis’s translation of ἐκ, then it is much easier to understand Jesus’ cogent *a fortiori* argument: if an otherwise immoral, worldly person can demonstrate shrewdness in his corrupt way of preparing for the future, then how much more so should the “children of light”

¹³²Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 148.

¹³³Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 366.

¹³⁴Ibid., 369.

¹³⁵Mary Ann Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8),” *JBL* 111 (1992): 52.

demonstrate shrewdness (read: wisdom) in their charitable way of preparing for the future. As such, the ἐκ should be understood as an instrumental use.¹³⁶

τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας. The term “mammon” probably originated from the Aramaic **רָמָן**, which refers to something in which a person puts trust.¹³⁷ Although absent from the OT, the word does appear frequently in the Targums to refer to things of monetary value, and it often connotes that those things are gained in a dishonest way.¹³⁸ For example, in the Targumic literature (for Isa 33:15 and 1 Sam 12:3), the word is used in connection with bribery.¹³⁹ In *Tg. Onq.* Gen 37:26 and *Tg. Onq.* Exod 8:21, there is also negative connotation associated with the word.¹⁴⁰ Because of this pejorative connotation for the word, Hengel states that the early church may have left the Semitic word untranslated because it represented something tantamount to an idol; the context makes it clear that if a person puts trust in mammon rather than God, the mammon has

¹³⁶ Porter, “Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 148. So also Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 621 and Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1109. One might also argue that it is being used like an ablative of source; either way, the meaning is similar. Both uses would convey practically the same message: the mammon is the source from which or the means by which one is to “make friends.”

¹³⁷ Fitzmyer, “Story of the Dishonest Manager,” 30; Du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?” 13. If “something to rely on” is the correct understanding, then there is a pun between the two words that would have been more obvious to an audience conversant in Aramaic and Greek (*TDNT*, s.v., “μαμωνᾶς”; Fitzmyer, “Story of the Dishonest Manager,” 30). Another possible pun is the Hebrew **רִמָּה** (“death”), although it is impossible to say whether Luke (must less his Gentile readers) would have recognized such a Semitic play on words.

¹³⁸ Du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?” 13, following Kosmala, “Parable of the Unjust Steward in Light of Qumran,” 116.

¹³⁹ Du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?” 13.

¹⁴⁰ Johnson, *Gospel of Luke*, 245.

idolatrously replaced God's rightful ascendancy, so a word with this negative connotation would be appropriate.¹⁴¹

Nevertheless, the word does not necessarily connote something dishonest.¹⁴² For example, in *Pirqe 'Abot* 2:12; 1QS 6:2; and CD 14:20, the word has the neutral meaning of "property."¹⁴³ Kosmala explains that "mammon" refers to "money in the widest sense," which would comprise "all kinds of possessions . . . [including] the ὑπάρχοντα of the rich man (16, 1) which the steward was squandering."¹⁴⁴ He goes on to say that both ὑπάρχοντα and μαμωνᾶς are synonymous with the Hebrew יִתָּמָר, any kind of private wealth, which the Qumran community viewed as dangerous.¹⁴⁵ Kosmala then asserts that Luke's perception of property was "much the same" as that of the Qumran—i.e., that it is "objectionable" and "evil"; however, this claim seems to press the evidence in Luke too far. His method of approaching the parable "from the thought and language of the Sectarian documents"¹⁴⁶ is not necessarily warranted, especially given that Luke is silent about the Qumran community and is not always condemnatory of material possessions.¹⁴⁷ Fitzmyer is probably closer to the mark when he points out that although

¹⁴¹ Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church: Aspects of a Social History of Early Christianity*, 1st American ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 24.

¹⁴² Contra Ronald G. Lunt, "Expounding the Parables: III. The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-15)," *ExpTim* 77 (1965-66): 133, who claims that the phrase "mammon of unrighteousness" is pleonastic because "mammon" is "used always in a bad sense."

¹⁴³ Johnson, *Gospel of Luke*, 245; Kosmala, "Parable of the Unjust Steward in Light of Qumran," 116. *TDNT*, s.v., "μαμωνᾶς," points to Targumic literature (on Gen 14:12; Ps 4:12; Prv 3:9; Isa 55:1) indicating a neutral meaning.

¹⁴⁴ Kosmala, "Parable of the Unjust Steward in Light of Qumran," 116.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 120.

¹⁴⁷ See the many citations in support of this claim that are offered in the discussion of the "Rich-Poor Chasm," in Chapter 4.

mammon was often used in a pejorative sense (especially when the word was followed by *dišqar*, to mean “wealth of deceit”) in rabbinic literature, Lukan usage is more neutral, indicating merely the “*tendency* that wealth has to make men dishonest.”¹⁴⁸ In sum, by the time the saying had been transmitted to Luke, the term “mammon” had the general meaning of “property” or “money” that was often—but not always—associated with dishonesty.¹⁴⁹ One should conclude, then, that although the denotation of the word in Luke’s usage did not convey the meaning of immorality, the connotation did imply a clear tendency toward corruption. The gist of the term in Luke, therefore, conveys the sense of “money of this world which has no value of itself for eternity,”¹⁵⁰ and might—not must—exclude one from eternity.

Although “mammon” need not necessarily be viewed as an immoral, dishonest thing, the genitive modifier in this instance makes it clear that it is to be understood as something more sinister than mere property. (Indeed, this modifier could be used as evidence that the word “mammon” by itself lacked a necessarily negative denotation; it needed a negative modifier to be pushed over the threshold.) The construction is parallel to that of the description of the steward in verse 8a.¹⁵¹ Since the steward is regarded

¹⁴⁸ Fitzmyer, “Story of the Dishonest Manager,” 30. Italics added. Fitzmyer does not provide any specific examples of the “wealth of deceit” phrase in rabbinic literature; he merely mentions that “commentators have often” pointed out this use (*ibid.*, 30).

¹⁴⁹ Contra *TDNT*, s.v., “μαμωνᾶς,” which claims that the use in Luke 16:9 means “possessions acquired dishonestly,” since the word is used in the NT “always with a derogatory sense of the materialistic, anti-godly and sinful.” If this statement were qualified by the understanding that mammon has a “tendency toward . . .” these things, it would be more accurate and would not necessitate the reading that assumes that the possessions used for making friends are acquired dishonestly.

¹⁵⁰ Topel, “On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward,” 220.

¹⁵¹ Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 148.

negatively (precisely because of the genitival modification), so too must the mammon in question here be regarded negatively because of the genitival modifier (cf. “filthy lucre”).

Moule, Wallace, and Hiers provide a similar, convincing explanation of the word in Luke. Their explanation is that “mammon” is a genitive of definition (different authors have varying terms for this same category: attributive genitive, Hebrew genitive, genitive of characteristic, genitive of quality, etc.),¹⁵² which “specifies an innate quality of the head substantive” and makes this characteristic of the substantive more emphatic (cf. also the “unrighteous judge [i.e., “the judge of unrighteousness”] in Luke. 18:6).¹⁵³ Thus, mammon’s distinguishing characteristic in this case is that it is associated with that which is morally undesirable. That is not to imply that the possession of it is necessarily unrighteous, but rather the sphere in which it works is prone to unrighteousness. Thus, “mammon” should be understood as “worldly [in the pejorative, materialistic sense] wealth” (NIV) or even “filthy lucre,” rather than wealth obtained by dishonest means, for one cannot be “trustworthy” (“faithful”) in handling what is obtained unrighteously to begin with (cf. 16:11).¹⁵⁴ Granted, there is a strong argument that the manager in the preceding parable used property (mammon) in an unrighteous way, but that is not the point of this verse.

The very similar terms “mammon of unrighteousness” ($\tauοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας$ [v. 9]) and “dishonest mammon” ($\tauῷ ἀδίκῳ μαμωνᾷ$ [v. 11]) lead the reader to

¹⁵² Moule, *Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 38.

¹⁵³ Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 86-88; Hiers, “Friends by Unrighteous Mammon,” 32. This was the reading of Clement of Alexandria, who presumed the verse was implying that private property was $\alpha\deltaικία$ at its essential level (*Quis div. 31*, as discussed by Hengel, *Property and Riches*, 24).

believe that these should be taken synonymously, even though there is a slight alteration in wording. In the first instance, there is an echo of the Hebraic syntax, where Greek typically would have used a simple adjective; then, in verse 11, that more simple form appears, although there is no clear indication that the meaning has changed at all. This simple adjectival use of “dishonest” provides retrospective evidence that the genitival use of the same word in verse 9 is tantamount to a simple adjective denoting a characteristic of the head noun. If this is the case, then this reading also supports the translation of τὸν οἰκονόμον τῆς ἀδικίας in verse 8a as “dishonest manager,” where the genitive is also tantamount to a simple adjective denoting a characteristic of the head noun. Like the structure in 18:6, these two terms also are constructed in a Hebraic genitive chain, and are thus syntactically parallel.

ὅταν ἐκλίπῃ. The ἐκλίπῃ is often translated as some sort of failure or giving out. An early textual variant shifted “when it is gone,” referring to the impermanence of money, to “when you are gone,” referring to the impermanence of humanity.¹⁵⁵ Consequently, the Vulgate translates it as *cum defeceritis* (“when you give out [i.e., die]”).¹⁵⁶ Instead of seeing the owners of the possessions coming to an end, those like Shellard who view the possessions themselves “com[ing] to an end” (perhaps when possessions are left behind after one dies)¹⁵⁷ are probably closer to the mark. In support

¹⁵⁴ Stein, *Luke*, 416. Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 621, also decides in favor of the “worldly wealth” translation. The NRSV chooses “dishonest wealth,” but this translation is equivocal enough to cover both possibilities.

¹⁵⁵ Wright, “Parables on Poverty and Riches (Luke 12:13-21; 16:1-13; 16:19-31),” 229.

¹⁵⁶ Craig A. Evans, *Luke*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 239.

¹⁵⁷ Barbara Shellard, *New Light on Luke: Its Purpose, Sources, and Literary Context*, JSNTSup 215 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 121-22.

the reading that regards the “failure” as the end of the possessions (rather than the end of the possessor), one notices that Luke’s other uses of the same word (22:32; 23:45) indicate a similar kind of failure or end (but not a death). Regardless of the verb’s referent, either reading supports the claim that this passage is to be understood eschatologically. Whether the world and its possessions pass away at the end of time or the person passes away at the end of his/her appointed time (indeed, both will happen inevitably), the call to urgent action in the face of the crisis of life is clear.

φίλους . . . ἦνα . . . δέξωνται ὑμᾶς. It is easy to see that verses 4 and 9b are parallel, probably intentionally, because of their identical constructions (*ἦνα ὅταν . . . δέξωνται*). Thus, the parallel construction emphasizes the main point by stating it first in soliloquy form and second in explicit exposition. That close wording drives Jeremias to claim that verse 4 was the model for the later-appended verse 9, which sounds like “the voice of a primitive Christian preacher who is concerned to derive a lesson for his congregation from the parable (though it is questionable whether this is really the meaning of the parable).”¹⁵⁸ The clear implication of Jeremias’s words is that verse 9 does not derive from Jesus, but from the early church.

Two of the most hotly contested questions in this passage are the identity of φίλους and the subject of the verb, for there are several possibilities for each. Part of the problem stems from the fact that the subject of δέξωνται is unclear. Moule argues that the third person plural with a “vague unexpressed subject” betrays a Semitic influence.¹⁵⁹ As

¹⁵⁸Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 47.

¹⁵⁹Moule, *Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 28. There is a warrant to this claim; as BDF §130.2 explains, the impersonal passive is common to neither Greek in general nor the NT, so the influence

such, some argue that the word is a Semitic circumlocution for God (a divine passive like one finds in Luke 6:38 and 12:10; cf. also 1:26). Jeremias, for example, argues that the natural subject of δέξωνται is God since the theological passive is a possible understanding for third-person plural verbs.¹⁶⁰ Along similar lines, some argue that the angels, God's representatives who usher one into heaven, are those who are spoken of here. In this understanding, the phrase is still a theological passive, but the assumed subject is not God himself but his intermediary delegates (his "stewards," as it were). Grundmann is one who makes this proposal by providing rabbinic examples where angels are depicted as God's agents.¹⁶¹ However, Wallace and Porter have argued that the category of theological passive is often overstated; the ubiquitous references to God, even those purportedly from Jesus' own mouth, indicate that the reticence to speak of God was not as pervasive as some have made it to be.¹⁶² Therefore, there is no need to infer here that the subject of the verb is necessarily God (or his angels). Williams offers another proposal in which the tacit antecedent is "personified almsgiving"—the beneficent deeds that the believer has been exhorted to do through the preceding parable.¹⁶³ Lunt, on the other hand, prefers to view the subject as an intentionally vague "they" or "people" like the French *on* (cf. Luke 12:20; 23:31).¹⁶⁴

of another language's syntax (viz., Aramaic) is plausible. Luke, in fact, does use the impersonal passive in 6:38 and 12:20 as a circumlocution for God.

¹⁶⁰Jeremias does admit, however, that it is possible that the "friends" are angels or good works.

¹⁶¹Cf. *Pirqe 'Abot* 4.11; *t. Pe'a* 2.21.

¹⁶²Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 438; Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 65-66.

¹⁶³F. E. Williams, "Is Almsgiving the Point of the Unjust Steward?" *JBL* 83 (1964): 295. He also cites *Pirqe 'Abot* 4.11, along with *B. Bat.* 10a.

¹⁶⁴Lunt, "Expounding the Parables," 133.

Although none of these suggestions is necessarily incongruous with the main point of the parable—the proper use of possessions in light of the eschatological kingdom—, the one that most cozily fits with the parable’s context (even if one does not accept the traditional reading of the parable) is that the φίλους refers to the recipients of one’s munificence, and these are also assumed to be the ones who do the “receiving.” This reading not only has supporters back to antiquity (at least as far back as Augustine) but also matches an immediate contextual clue, the parallel formula in verse 4, where the debtors clearly are the friends the steward is attempting to cultivate. One of the most recent supporters of this view, Michael Ball, believes that the meaning here is that the poor who have been aided by one’s benefaction in some way help in welcoming one into eternity.¹⁶⁵ Also in support of the “the poor” being the understood subject are the older works of Plummer, Hiers, Topel, and numerous others.¹⁶⁶ This reading assumes that the poor who have benefited from the believer’s charitable use of possessions will fill the kingdom of God and will greet the same benefactors when they enter the kingdom.

The parable after this also provides some contextual clues in favor of this reading. The poor who populate the kingdom and wait to greet benefactors are like Lazarus. However, since Lazarus failed to receive charity from anyone, namely the rich man, he waits to receive no one. Just as Lazarus was an unwelcome, scavenging nuisance in the earthly home of the rich man (16:21), so too the rich man becomes an unwelcome scavenger (albeit unrequited) in Lazarus’s eternal home (16:24-26). Another

¹⁶⁵Michael Ball, “The Parables of the Unjust Steward and the Rich Man and Lazarus,” *ExpTim* 106 (1995): 329.

¹⁶⁶Plummer, *Gospel According to S. Luke*, 380 (following Augustine) and Hiers, “Friends by Unrighteous Mammon,” 31, 34-36; Topel, “On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward,” 220. Cf. also 1 Enoch 39:4.

possible clue here to the identity of the “friends” that no other interpreter seems to have noticed is in 16:20. The poor man actually greets the rich man home (“at his gate”) in the earthly life, and he is also the first one to die (16:22). So, he waits after death to be a heavenly greeter in the same way he welcomed the rich man home in their lifetimes. However, the rich man has not used his possessions in a way that is characteristic of the discipleship Jesus commands in 16:9. Dishonest mammon was his idol of choice, so he had no room left to serve God; consequently, it was only his illusory mammon that waited to greet him after death, not the poor he had helped, and certainly not God.

16:10 ὁ πιστὸς ἐν ἐλαχίστῳ καὶ ἐν πολλῷ πιστός ἐστιν, καὶ ὁ ἐν ἐλαχίστῳ ἄδικος καὶ ἐν πολλῷ ἄδικός ἐστιν.

Hickling correctly states that verses 11-12 function as an epexegetical paraphrase of verse 10; each verse demonstrates a synonymous parallelism.¹⁶⁷ In addition, one may observe that this parallelism in each case is in the form of an *a fortiori* argument.

16:11 εἰ οὖν ἐν τῷ ἀδίκῳ μαμωνᾷ πιστοὶ οὐκ ἐγένεσθε, τὸ ἀληθινὸν τίς ὑμῖν πιστεύσει;

τῷ ἀδίκῳ μαμωνᾷ . . . τὸ ἀληθινὸν. The term “dishonest wealth” is merely a variation of that found in 16:9, and the meaning is the same. “Since it is the use of this worldly wealth, not the possession of it, which is condemned, worldly wealth is in itself neutral. The rich fool in the next parable is not culpable because he was wealthy but because he did not use his wealth to love God and his neighbor, Lazarus.”¹⁶⁸ Although

¹⁶⁷C. J. A. Hickling, “A Tract on Jesus and the Pharisees? A Conjecture on the Redaction of Luke 15 and 16,” *HeyJ* 16 (1975): 260.

¹⁶⁸Stein, *Luke*, 417.

Johnson claims that the dichotomy between the temporal “wicked mammon” and “the real/true riches” ($\tauὸν ἀληθινὸν$) is almost Platonic,¹⁶⁹ perhaps it would be better to understand the source of the thought as something closer to a Qumranic dichotomy between corrupting wealth characteristic of the outside world and renunciation of wealth characteristic of the sons of light. Neither Aristotle nor Qumran, however, is the direct inspiration for Luke’s juxtaposition. It is more likely that the dichotomy derives ultimately from Jesus.

16:12 καὶ εἰ ἐν τῷ ἀλλοτρίῳ πιστοὶ οὐκ ἔγένεσθε, τὸ ὑμέτερον τίς ὑμῖν δώσει;

16:13 Οὐδεὶς οἰκέτης δύναται δυσὶ κυρίοις δουλεύειν· ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἕνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἔτερον ἀγαπήσει, ἢ ἐνὸς ἀνθέξεται καὶ τοῦ ἔτερου καταφρονήσει. οὐ δύνασθε θεῷ δουλεύειν καὶ μαμωνᾶ.

In Luke 16:1-13, only this verse has a literary parallel in the Synoptics. The saying is found in Matthew 6:24 without the word οἰκέτης; it is likely that Luke added the word to make it fit the context of the preceding parable.¹⁷⁰ The sentence presents a disjunctive “either . . . or” to indicate mutually exclusive options.¹⁷¹

Translation of Luke 16:1-13

[1] And then he was saying to the disciples, “There was a certain rich man who had a manager, and this [manager] was reported to him [to be] squandering his possessions. [2] And, after calling him, [the master] said to him, ‘What [is] this I hear concerning you? Give the account of your management, for you are not able to be [my]

¹⁶⁹Johnson, *Gospel of Luke*, 246. “Possessions are always to some degree external and fictive; all things are really in God’s possession” (*ibid.*).

¹⁷⁰Ibid., 246. Cf. also *Gos. Thom.* 47, which, apparently following Luke, also includes the οἰκέτης; it is also partially quoted in 2 Clem 6:1, which also includes Luke’s οἰκέτης.

¹⁷¹Perschbacher, *New Testament Greek Syntax*, 81.

manager any longer.’ [3] And the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do since my master is cutting off the management from me? To dig—I am not strong enough; to beg—I am ashamed. [4] I just now decided what I shall do so that when I am removed from the management, they will receive me into their homes!’ [5] And, after inviting each one of the master’s debtors himself, he was saying to the first one, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ [6] Then he said, ‘One hundred baths of olive oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill and sit down quickly—write fifty.’ [7] Next he said to the other, ‘How much do you owe?’ And he said, ‘One hundred kors of grain.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill and write eighty.’ [8] And the master commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly.” For the sons of this age [are] more shrewd than the sons of the light are in their own generation. [9] And I say to you, make for yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness, so that when it ends, they will receive you into eternal homes. [10] The one trustworthy in the smallest [matter] is also trustworthy in the large [matter], and the one untrustworthy in the smallest [matter] is also untrustworthy in the large [matter]. [11] Therefore, if you are not trustworthy with the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust you with the genuine [thing]? [12] And if you are not trustworthy with the [possessions] of another, who will give to you your own [possessions]? [13] No servant is able to serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and he will love the other, or he will be loyal to [the] one and he will treat the other with contempt. You are not able to serve [both] God and mammon.

Summary

The textual variants for this pericope are sparse and seldom affect the parable’s meaning. Where scholars have suggested alternate readings that do influence the

meaning, they have been speculative, unverifiable, and unnecessarily convoluted.

Although the textual criticism of the pericope is not challenging, the lexical, grammatical, and syntactical features are far more problematic. The preceding examination of the parable's language has yielded a coherent interpretation. The parable's introductory formula not only shifts the focus of the parable to the disciples but also establishes a close connection between this parable and the parable of the Prodigal Son. The steward, a free employee of the master, is accused (probably fairly) of either irresponsible or fraudulent use of the master's possessions. Consequently, he is immediately terminated (16:2) by the master and ordered to turn in his account books. Faced with the unexpected crisis, the steward reasons to himself about the available options for saving himself. After running out of viable options, suddenly, the desperate manager has an idea: he calls in everyone he can get his hands on who might help him out after he is expelled from his job. The result is a steady stream of rather wealthy renters or merchants who owe his master large quantities of comestibles, and the steward proceeds to reduce their debts by varying large amounts. The language mirrors the steward's increasing anxiety as he digs himself deeper into this illicit plan with his illegitimate authority. After learning of the scheme, the master applauds the dishonest manager specifically for his one act of ingenious craftiness. Jesus explains the point: this worldly man who acted with acumen within his worldly sphere is an example to believers insofar as Christians should demonstrate the same extreme degree of resourcefulness in preparing for their own futures. The most obvious way in which a Christian can demonstrate this resourcefulness is by wisely putting otherwise impotent wealth to work to secure benefits for fellow humans (Luke 5:27-29; 6:34, 35, 38; 7:37, 46; 8:1-3; 10:35; 12:15-21, 33-34; 16:25; 18:22-30; 19:1-27;

21:1-4; Acts 2:44-45). Worldly wealth, which has enormous power to corrupt and is inherently prone to become an idol, also has great power to help those who will be eternally grateful, those who will greet one at “the gates” of heaven after the world and all its temporary possessions have passed away. Using temporary wealth to develop permanent friendships demonstrates that the benefactor is wise enough to be trusted with an even greater measure of faithfulness.

CHAPTER 4

SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PARABLE

In Chapter 2, the history-of-research survey demonstrated that some authors rely mainly on literary considerations, like irony, allegory, or reader-response theory, to explain the Unjust Steward's meaning. Others, instead, rely mainly on historical considerations, like the honor-shame background, the influence of Qumran, or the interest/commission in the debts. The literary context of the parable is reserved for the next chapter, but in this chapter, the historical background is the focus. An explanation of the historical, social, and economic background of Jesus' parables could fill volumes, and none of the information would necessarily answer any of the main exegetical questions presented by the Unjust Steward. Nevertheless, there is a need to examine several background issues because a number of interpreters (especially in the past few decades) have relied so heavily on the socio-historical background as the main key for interpreting the parable (and frequently this alleged background is reconstructed based on second- or third-hand data rather than primary sources). If it can be demonstrated that some of the historical assumptions upon which they base their interpretations are faulty, their theses are thereby weakened if not refuted.

This chapter will, therefore, be limited to the four main socio-historical features that have been frequently offered as interpretive keys for this parable: the rich-poor chasm, the honor-shame culture, Jewish lending practices, and the Pharisees'

relationship to money. It will be argued here that none of these elements of the historical background can be used as the main interpretive key to unlock the parable's meaning and that interpreters who do so are misguided. At the same time, almost all of these elements do have some value and, if their value is not overestimated, can help explain parts of the parable that would have otherwise been more obscure. In other words, these historical background elements in the end will be proven to be helpful, but not essential, for understanding the parable. In this way, this chapter will be more of a negative argument—a rebuttal of the claims offered by the critics who rely too heavily on an alleged historical condition and modification of those claims to make them useful.

The Rich-Poor Chasm

A burgeoning consensus among many scholars is that first-century Israel was basically a two-tiered society, in which the wealthy few demanded tribute from the peasants, who constituted the vast majority of the people.¹ The peasants lived “close to the subsistence margin” and were so indebted that they lacked any hope of rising above their state.² The wealthy few had large estates administered by tenants with their own

¹Stephen I. Wright, “Parables on Poverty and Riches (Luke 12:13-21; 16:1-13; 16:19-31),” in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 218. So also Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), 36, who posits a “wide gulf” between the two tiers, which were “unmediated by a middle class.” William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 58-59, places in the upper tier the ruler, ruling class, retainers, and a few merchants and in the bottom tier peasants, artisans, most merchants, the unclean, “the expendables,” and some of the lower members of the retainer class. Thus, merchants and retainers straddled the two tiers; a person’s status depended on his individual success.

²Hans J. B. Combrink, “Social-Scientific Perspective on the Parable of the ‘Unjust’ Steward (Lk 16:1-8a),” *Neot* 30 (1996): 299. After tithes, taxes, tolls, land rent, debt, and seed expenses, the typical tenant farmer was able to keep only around twenty percent of his annual produce (*ibid.*, 299-300). Saldarini’s claim that the taxes alone on a peasant would be thirty to seventy percent of the crop yield matches Combrink’s assessment fairly closely (Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees*, 37, 43; Saldarini does not offer any primary-source evidence but relies “extensively” for his “framework” [*ibid.*, 21] on the works of Gerhard E. Lenski and S. N. Eisenstadt). Combrink is heavily dependent on Malina and

crew of heavily exploited subordinate laborers; this type of hierarchy was the norm during Jesus' time, especially in Galilee.³ Although there was no large middle class between these two tiers, this consensus claims, there was a small group of intermediaries (the administrative tenants) who helped the master to collect the tribute; although these "retainers" were better off than the peasants (and had an opportunity to amass a small wealth by taking a cut for themselves), they nevertheless "did not rise much above the insecurity of the poor."⁴

Rohrbaugh, who claim that taxes in Roman Palestine were around 35 to 40 percent; however, they supply scant evidence (especially from ancient Palestine) for most of their statistics (Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992], 376).

³Emilio Gabba, "The Social, Economic and Political History of Palestine 63 BCE—CE 70," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. William Horbury, W. D. Davies, and John Sturdy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3:110. Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, 2nd one-vol. ed., trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 1:49-51, describes the situation in early Hellenistic Israel that resembles Gabba's description: a small but increasingly powerful upper class who are closely aligned with Greek masters, an "elaborate system of taxes and duties pressed hard" on the "simple people," "the social gulf between the thin upper stratum . . . and the mass of people be[coming] more striking," the rich lords' "boundless struggle for riches," and the increasing "subjection of the poor." There was not a simple detestation of wealth, however; opinions widely varied, from apocalyptic and Hasidic groups who vilified riches to wisdom literature's recognition of the value of riches (*ibid.*, 52). For a copious list of primary and secondary literature supporting these claim, a list far too lengthy to reiterate here, see Hengel's endnotes for this chapter. More conservative scholars will no doubt take exception to Hengel's later dating of some of the OT literature. (He does, at least, admit that "it is difficult to put a date on those writings" [*ibid.*, 107].) However, even if some of Hengel's evidence is granted an earlier date, it only strengthens his claim that "Hellenism brought about no radical break, but intensified [economic] developments which had already begun to take shape in Palestine in the Persian period" (*ibid.*, 56). As it pertains to this dissertation, Hengel's historical observations are important, for in the Unjust Steward one can see almost all of the elements that Hengel directly addressees here: "the milieu of the parables of Jesus, with its great landowners, tax farmers, administrators, moneylenders, day-labourers and customs officials, with speculation in grain, slavery for debt and the leasing of land, can only be understood on the basis of economic conditions brought about by Hellenism in Palestine" (*ibid.*, 56-57).

⁴Wright, "Parables on Poverty and Riches," 218, 225, following Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 53-66, who (like Saldarini) relies on G. Lenski and cites him dozens of times. Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*, NSBT 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 89, who numbers the retainer class at 5 to 7 percent, explains that these intermediaries were well off "as long as they retained their positions." (He cites results from "sociological studies" [*ibid.*] as the source of this information; a page later he too refers to Herzog and Lenski.) The precarious positions of these retainers are implied by Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees*, 41, who explains that "individual retainers lacked power because any one person could be easily replaced by another . . . [and] could lose their position and fall back into peasantry." So also Paul Trudinger, "Exposing the Depth of Oppression (Luke 16:1b-6a)," in *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus*

This socioeconomic gradation was the inevitable result of Israel's agrarian estate system. In first-century Israel there was a coexistence of large and small estates, but the natural tendency was for the large-land owners to expand their power and usurp the land from the small-land owners, who were often forced by famine or debts to become day-laborers on the large-land owners' estates and ultimately forfeit their own small parcels of land to the large-land owner.⁵ Poor harvests, famines, and taxes that were disproportionately weighted on the small farmers led to this expansionary process of the large estates, which gradually absorbed the small land parcels around them.⁶ Thus, owners of small farms were often reduced to the status of “‘expendables’ with little hope of economic security” or even beggars, while the estates voraciously absorbed their neighbors.⁷ Moreover, the increasing practice of lending on interest led to increased poverty and debt enslavement.⁸

Centuries before Jesus, there was already a gulf between the rich and poor in Israel. As Hengel explains, “The contrast between the great landowners and the small peasant farmers or landless tenants had already led to considerable social tensions in the late monarchy and then again in the Persian period under Nehemiah.”⁹ However, the

Today, ed. V. George Shillington (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 131: “Though not rich, the retainers were not reduced to poverty, as long as they held their position in the service of the landlord.”

⁵Gabba, “The Social, Economic and Political History of Palestine,” 108. (See *Str. Geogr.* 16.2.37.) So also Trudinger, “Exposing the Depth of Oppression,” 131, and Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 90-91.

⁶Gabba, “The Social, Economic and Political History of Palestine,” 110.

⁷Trudinger, “Exposing the Depth of Oppression,” 131.

⁸Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 173.

⁹Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church: Aspects of a Social History of Early Christianity*, 1st American ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 15. See 1 Kgs 21; Isa 5:8-23.; Mic 2:2; and Neh 5:1.

situation deteriorated in the Hellenistic period. The plight of the small-farmers was especially aggravated by the introduction of a Greek system of “dues of all kinds” during the Ptolemaic hegemony.¹⁰ The result of this system was that, first under Hellenistic period, and then under the Romans (especially after Herod), the large estates increased their power, while the free peasant farmers lost theirs and landless tenancy increased.¹¹ This exacting economic policy continued up to NT times and is the reason the *τελωναῖ*, the most visible executors of this system, were so despised.¹² Moreover, as the division between rich and poor increased, so did the social tension.¹³

At the opposite end of the socioeconomic ladder were the wealthy property owners, who were typically absentee landlords with financial managers to make sure the land was worked, to supervise the harvest, and to collect rent, debts, and taxes from the peasant workers.¹⁴ Often these managers would collect monies far exceeding the amount actually owed. The manager would then present his master with an account book that documented the legitimate payments but conveniently omitted the surplus payments, which had instead gone straight into the manager’s pocket. A manager who practiced embezzlement could accumulate great wealth quickly with impunity since he was rarely directly accountable to anyone, and the impoverished peasants had few legal remedies.

¹⁰Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:55.

¹¹Hengel, *Property and Riches*, 15.

¹²Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:55.

¹³Hengel, *Property and Riches*, 16. Hengel points out, tellingly, that “when the Jewish rebels plundered Jerusalem in AD 66 from their base in the temple, the first thing that they burned was the city archive with the land-registers and the accounts of debts” (Jos. *B.J.* 2.427).

¹⁴Trudinger, “Exposing the Depth of Oppression,” 131; John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 67 (no evidence cited for this claim).

It is this background in which Jesus' parables of masters, tenants, day workers, slaves, stewards, and debts were delivered.¹⁵ In Luke 16:1-8a, the steward himself plays the role of the intermediary retainer, an agent who acts in the master's name in making financial transactions with third parties.¹⁶ Fitzmyer speculates that the steward's master was "probably an absentee landlord, the owner of a Galilean *latifundium* [a large Roman estate with land worked by slaves]."¹⁷ Although absenteeism was common, the master in this parable might have been in residence; that would explain how he could have received word of the steward's misappropriation of funds.¹⁸ Whether the master was an absentee landlord or not is ultimately irrelevant for the interpretation of this parable: the charge against the steward is no different, and the praise is no less unusual.

Indeed, there is ample historical and biblical evidence for the ubiquity of the poor who barely eked out subsistence. There is also ample evidence of a ruling elite with much power and money. In fact, each type of person, including both a literal and metaphorical chasm between them, is found in the parable immediately following (16:19-31). All of this evidence notwithstanding, the vast chasm between rich and poor in first-century Israel should not be overstated, especially as it impinges on the interpretation of this parable. The Gospels offer evidence of what appears to be numerous examples of an intermediate economic standing. In Luke, there are abundant examples of individuals, including many of Jesus' closest associates and many who are depicted favorably by

¹⁵Hengel, *Property and Riches*, 15-16.

¹⁶Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, AB, vols. 28 and 28a (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981-85), 2:1097.

¹⁷Ibid. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 87-88, explains that latifundism increased in Palestine in the century and a half after Alexander.

¹⁸John Nolland, *Luke*, WBC, vols. 35a-35c (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1989-93), 2:797.

Luke, who do not appear to be in hopeless poverty.¹⁹ Even if the alleged chasm is exactly as wide as some historians have portrayed, Luke does not uniformly describe it as such. Luke is credited with having the greatest concern for the poor, but even in his Gospel there are plenty of examples of pious yet economically comfortable (even rich) people, including perhaps the elusive Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). Moreover, in Acts 28, numerous people in different locations (including Publius, a “leading man” [v. 7] in Malta) show Paul and his associates material hospitality (v. 2, 7, 10, 14), and even Paul himself pays for his own rent for two years (v. 30) at the book’s conclusion. If the consensus understanding of the chasm (accurate or not) is not emphasized by Luke, it is therefore problematic to posit it as the main interpretive key for any parable, particularly one like this where there is a vast array of interpretive possibilities even without this option on the table. Therefore, arguments that posit the poor listeners as empathizing with some character (e.g., the steward, who is often assumed to be a slave, or the debtors) because of his downtrodden state are weak. Likewise, arguments that claim that the parable is about releasing the poor from their debts, observance of Jubilee regulations, or

¹⁹In the Third Gospel alone, there are many notable characters who appear to be better off than mere peasants: Simon Peter, who owns his own boat and nets (5:2); James and John, who were his “partners” and who appear also to possess “boats” (5:11); Levi, a tax collector with enough money to throw a “great banquet” for a “large crowd” (5:27-29); a centurion who owned “highly valued” slave and who helped build a synagogue (7:2); a woman owning a precious jar of ointment (7:37); several women and “many others” with enough money to support Jesus (8:2-3); Jairus, leader of a synagogue (8:41); indirectly, perhaps the physicians who received (presumably many) payments from the hemorrhaging woman (8:43, which is textually questionable); Martha and Mary, who opened their home and hospitality to Jesus (10:38-42); the “very rich” young ruler (18:18, 23); the “rich” tax collector Zacchaeus (19:2); the rich people putting gifts into the treasury (21:1); the owner of a house with a “large room upstairs,” large enough to accommodate the Last Supper (22:10-12); Joseph of Arimathea (23:50-53), who provided his own tomb; not to mention plenty of scribes, lawyers, and Pharisees who, rather than toiling desperately in the field for all their waking hours, instead are depicted eating and debating with Jesus (5:30; 7:36; 11:37; 14:3; 17:20; *passim*). There are, of course, many other examples in the other Gospels, in Acts, and a number who may be presumed to be of higher social standing mentioned in the greetings and closings of Paul’s epistles. Hengel agrees with this appraisal, saying that Jesus and most of his followers appear to be property-owning day laborers who, unlike John the Baptist, were not “rigorous ascetic[s]” (Hengel, *Property and Riches*, 27; he also provides Mark 1:29; 2:13-17; 14:3-9; 14:14-15; and John 2:1-12 as corroboration).

something else directly related to the rich-poor chasm, are weakened. Granted, the point of the parable is, in part, monetary, but it accomplishes its point in a more circuitous fashion—not by simply saying something like “the steward lifted the debts of the poor, and so should you.” In fact, by all accounts none of the characters in the parable should be considered poor, and the peasants of Jesus’ day would have had no justification for feeling too close a solidarity with any of them. The parable is about a rich man and his rich debtors with the main character, who is probably middle class, trying to avoid dropping into the peasantry. Therefore, there is no one in the parable with whom the truly poverty-stricken peasants can empathize, and there is no character that directly reflects their plight.

The Honor-Shame, Limited Good, Patron-Client Culture

The feature of the historical context that has received the most currency lately is the supposed honor-shame culture in which Jesus told the parable. Combrink’s thesis will be directly addressed here because it is a good example of one that appeals to a nexus of interrelated themes: honor-shame, limited good, reciprocity, patron-client relationships, etc. However, where his study fails, so too do the other studies based on similar premises. Heavily dependent on the work of Bruce Malina, Combrink argues that the master praises the steward because he values honor over money. In ancient Israel’s “limited good” society, honor is also a limited commodity such that “envy is institutionalised.”²⁰ Since honor is the defining value of in the ancient East, “almost every interaction with non-family members has undertones of a challenge to one’s

²⁰Combrink, “Social-Scientific Perspective on the Parable of the ‘Unjust’ Steward,” 295.

honour.”²¹ Any challenge to one’s honor—anything that might change one’s honor status in society—required a response: a gift conferring honor required reciprocation, and an insult demeaning honor required retaliation.²²

Those living in this “limited good” society believed that society was a closed system in which everything (material possessions, honor, love, power, etc.) was in limited supply; thus, one can improve his position “only at the expense of others.”²³ Since the improvement of one’s status necessarily meant the detriment of the rest of the community’s good, an “honorable” man would not attempt to accumulate wealth because “every form of acquisition was understood as a form of stealing.”²⁴ Although the accumulation of wealth was frowned upon, a rich man could increase his honor by collecting in his social web as many people as possible who would bestow honor on him. Consequently, in the early Roman Empire there was a “pervasive social network of patron-client relations” in which the wealthy patrons sought to cultivate as many (usually poor) dependent clients as possible in order to gain political or economic advantage and to receive public praise from the clients.²⁵

The strength of the honor-shame thesis would be directly mitigated by indications that first-century Judaism demonstrated individuality (as opposed to a corporate “dyadic” mentality, which the honor-shame presumes). In the honor-shame

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., 298. Blomberg explains that, although not everyone in the ancient world believed the rich became such exclusively at the expense of the poor, the “limited good” analysis enjoys a “fair measure of plausibility” (*Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 90).

²⁴Combrink, “Social-Scientific Perspective on the Parable of the ‘Unjust’ Steward,” 298.

²⁵Ibid., 297.

arguments, it is assumed that Jesus' (and Luke's) audience would have taken for granted that the steward is not primarily an individual but an embedded component of the master's honor. Hengel argues that the influence of Greek education in Jewish society introduced a "new development," an emphasis on the individual personality of the teacher (cf. even rabbinic literature), "a sign that the individualism of the Hellenistic period was also gaining significance among the Jewish people."²⁶ Hengel also explains that the "marked 'individuality' of authorship" that characterizes Qoheleth is a departure from the "impersonal anonymity" of previous wisdom.²⁷ Granted, he claims this in order to demonstrate how Hellenism brought a measure of individualism to Judaism, and must therefore date Qoheleth in the third century (seven centuries after the traditional understanding, which assumes Solomonic authorship). However, if one accepts the earlier dating, it even better proves the contention of this dissertation, that elements of individualism were already well established by Jesus' time and thereby undercut the assumptions of those who argue for a pervasive honor-shame culture to interpret the Unjust Steward. (Either date, though, demonstrates the point; the only question is when this individualism was in effect.) Hengel further argues that in the era between Daniel and Bar Kochba the ideas of apostasy, individual decision about God's saving plan, individual piety, individual afterlife (hence ossuaries for individuals), a personal relationship to God, and personal revelation and visions (and later apocalyptic literature)

²⁶Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:79.

²⁷Ibid., 1:116, 126. (See also ibid., 2:79 n. 66.)

all “come more strongly into the foreground.”²⁸ In sum, it is the contention here that the “communal” mind behind the so-called honor-shame culture has been overstated by many scholars. It is too strong a claim to state that such a culture was assumed in Jesus’ time, and it is an even greater stretch to argue that this culture is the main interpretive key behind the Unjust Steward.

Although the honor-shame thesis cannot be used as the main tool for interpreting the parable, there are a few pieces of it that can be salvaged for its interpretation. Luke’s first-century readers probably would have realized that part of the cleverness of the steward’s plan was that the master would not revoke the debt cancellation for fear of losing his reputation for generosity.²⁹ In contrast with the full-fledged honor-shame thesis, it is more believable that the master would want to avoid the appearance of being greedy, fickle, or even cruel. Thus, the reader would understand why the master appears resigned to the reality of the situation: he knew it would have damaged his honor to renege on the debt reductions. Since the master did not want to cultivate a bad reputation, he had been forced into a corner by the steward’s crafty machinations without recourse.

There is a more important way in which a modified understanding of the honor-shame thesis may be used to the service of understanding the parable. Blomberg correctly explains that because of the social stability associated with the village-based connectedness among peasants in the honor-shame culture, “a wealthy

²⁸Ibid., 1:195, 196, 202. Of course, this quotation presumes that these ideas were already there—in the background—before Hellenism. Note also the increased interest in Greek philosophy and the mystery religions.

²⁹I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 615.

steward who fell out of favour with his master was actually at greater risk than the average villager, since he could move all the way from the rich retainer class to the expendables and find himself literally in danger of starving to death.”³⁰ In other words, the honor background highlights the intense crisis that the steward faces: loss of job, loss of honor, and loss of a means for living are all part and parcel. The steward faced the very real prospect of losing it all immediately. To understand the manager to be in such a precarious position, about to fall out of his retainer status, helps understand the crisis he was facing and helps to explain why he would have concocted a plan to save himself and his honor at all costs.

Inextricably linked to this honor-shame culture is the custom of obligatory gift giving in the ancient Near East. The protocol of this system allowed for one person (usually a member in a patron-client relationship) to give a gift to another, and the other would then be obliged to accept the gift and reciprocate with a gift of equal value lest his honor be decreased.³¹ This system “carried with it both a means of garnering honor as well as a method for imposing shame” because a balanced exchange brought honor to both parties, while an unbalanced exchange created “social tension” and placed the obliged member in a position of shame and subservience.³² Those in positions of power

³⁰Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 102.

³¹Victor H. Matthews, “The Unwanted Gift: Implications of Obligatory Gift Giving in Ancient Israel,” *Semeia* 87 (1999): 95.

³²Ibid., 91. This understanding of the reciprocity codes also might partially explain the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees and the Lukan material both before and after the Unjust Steward parable. The Pharisees were the intended audience of the parable of the Prodigal Son. The wasteful son, after returning to the beneficent father, could not reciprocate the generosity of his father. From his father he received a kiss (v. 20), the best robe, a ring, sandals (v. 22), a fattened calf, and a celebration (v. 23); the son presumably had nothing to offer in exchange. Although he was in a shameful position, he was treated with utmost honor by the father, and for this very reason was despised by his older brother, who had never received a gift so much as “a goat” (v. 29). The attitude of the Pharisees is clearly characterized by the

would often give a large gift that could not be reciprocated; the recipients in the lower positions could only offer an unequal gift, thus increasing the honor of the superior, increasing the shame of inferior, and perpetuating the social hierarchy. Thus, a gift from a person was often motivated by selfishness and even “enmity” or “sinister” motivations.³³ The donor would often give gifts as part of “strategically orchestrated advances,” and the intended recipient would not refuse the gift for fear of damage to his honor (and, in the context of the unjust steward parable, a detriment to his finances).³⁴

Matthews cites a number of scholars of sociology and religion who explain that reciprocity was expected in this and other cultures in order to maintain social parity; when a person gave a gift, it was more often than not a utilitarian, self-interested gesture intended to call attention to the disparity between the two parties or calculated to produce

older brother, who had “never neglected a command” (v. 29). The Pharisees, like the older brother, had never neglected a command of the Mosaic law—at least on the surface. They had given alms but with unclean hearts (Luke 11:41); they had followed the letter of the Mosaic law by tithing even “mint and rue” but had neglected the spirit of the law by “neglecting justice and the love of God” (Luke 11:42). The law instructed a giving based on the love of Yahweh and fellow humans, not on a reciprocity code. Jesus was advocating a use of money reflective of the law, not based on a manipulation of “mammon” for one’s own self-interested gain. Jesus was making an *a fortiori* argument here: if worldly humans can manipulate the reciprocity codes and their worldly money in order to gain an advantage, then how much more should those preparing for the kingdom give altruistically, not expecting something in return (Luke 6:35). The Pharisees used almsgiving as a way to increase their own honor, thus missing the point of the law. When Jesus advised a giving based on higher ideals, the Pharisees contemptuously “turned up their noses at” (*ἐξεμυκτήριζον*) the idea (v. 14).

³³ Matthews, “The Unwanted Gift,” 95-96. Ibid., 96-99, points to the reunion of Jacob and Esau (Gen 32:13-21) as an OT example of a competitive, even “malicious,” gift. In this episode, Jacob offers an enormous gift of livestock (32:14-15) to Esau, who, “attempting to dodge the responsibility to reciprocate in kind,” demurs (33:9). Jacob, however, pressures Esau to accept the gift (33:10-11) as a payment for free passage through Esau’s territory. Esau then attempts to gain the upper hand by offering protection for Jacob, which not only implies Jacob’s weakness but puts Jacob into a subordinate “client” position. Jacob, realizing the slight to his honor, rejects the offer. One weakness of Matthews’s suggestion that this story is merely an example of competitive gift giving is the moment when they meet (33:4), when the brothers embrace, kiss, and weep. The potential weakness of this Jacob-Esau example, however, does not weaken Matthews’s overall thesis that gift giving was often a form of self-interested social maneuvering.

³⁴ Ibid., 94.

some anticipated return.³⁵ If his explanation of Luke's social context is accurate, it has direct implications for the parable of the unjust steward. Nolland makes this connection in his assertion, "From the point of view of the debtors, the steward will have used his last moments in office, by means of an act that was quite within his powers, to show generosity to them on a grand scale. In accord with the demands of Greco-Roman reciprocity ethics, they would feel honor bound to repay a good turn with generosity also of a high level."³⁶ Or, to put it more frankly, the steward offered the gift of large debt reductions with clearly self-interested motivations, knowing that the debtor would have to reciprocate in equally large fashion in order to avoid falling into the mode of shame. The best way to reciprocate to a man who had just lost his job and had no other recourse would have been to open one's home to him either by providing direct financial support or another position to replace the one terminated.

Lending Practices in First-Century Israel

Since Derrett's proposal, it has been popular among scholars to explain the steward's debt reduction in terms of the elimination of usury, which was prohibited in Jewish law, while others have followed Fitzmyer's similar proposal that the loan included a commission for the steward, who then renounced it. It is this dissertation's claim that both of these proposals are weakened by an undue readiness to rely on tenuous historical assumptions. Moreover, interpreters who rely on them, who also often claim that the purpose of the parable is to decry the incongruity between OT law concerning interest (or money in general) and actual practice, are equally weakened. In order to counter the

³⁵Ibid., 91-93.

³⁶Nolland, *Luke*, 2:800.

assertions of Derrett, Fitzmyer, and followers, attention now is given to the steward's released debts.

Roland de Vaux claims that information about lending practices in ancient Israel "is so scarce that we can only guess."³⁷ However, there are enough sources from ancient Israel dealing with loans to make those guesses educated ones. The OT has a number of references to loans,³⁸ and Hillel Gamoran's statement about the ancient Jewish perspective on lending is stark and clear, "Every time lending on interest is mention in the [Hebrew] Bible, it is spoken of with disapproval."³⁹ Moreover, injunctions against interest in ancient Israel were specifically designed to protect the poor.⁴⁰ Although Gamoran claims that "it is difficult to say whether the interest laws were kept by the

³⁷de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 170.

³⁸The first mention of lending appears in Exod 22:24-25, where God commands that loans not be assessed with interest; however, that command is qualified by the fact that these are loans to "My [God's] people" who are "poor." Lev 25:35-38 states that money should not be lent with interest to someone who is "kin." Deut 15:6-8 makes the promise that the Israelites, as a sign of their blessing, would lend to other nations but that they would not need to receive loans from other nations. (See also Deut 28:12 for the same promise.) This passage also restates that the Israelites should lend to one another ("a member of your community," v. 7) and should provide for the poor ("your needy neighbor," v. 7), presumably without interest. Conversely, Deut 28:44 makes the opposite promise if the Israelites are disobedient: "They shall lend to you but you shall not lend to them; they shall be the head and you shall be the tail." Deut 23:19-21 explicitly states twice that no interest may be charged on a loan "to another Israelite," whereas it is permissible to charge interest "to a foreigner." Ps 15 describes the characteristics of righteous people, one of which is that they "do not lend money at interest" (v. 5), while Ps 112:5 states that the righteous "deal generously and lend." Prov 28:8 implies a role reversal (not unlike Luke's ubiquitous financial role reversals) by stating, "One who augments wealth by exorbitant interest gathers it for another who is kind to the poor" (NRSV). Ezek 22:12 is part of a judgment oracle in which God condemns Jerusalem because of their misdeeds; in v. 12, they are condemned because they have "taken interest." In sum, Jewish law did allow for interest on loans to those outside the Israelite community, although loans to those within the community were to be given freely and without interest because the prohibitions existed mainly to protect the poor from financial ruin.

³⁹Hillel Gamoran, "The Biblical Law Against Loans on Interest," *JNES* 30: (1971): 127.

⁴⁰Ibid., 129-31. Gamoran claims that even in the few places where the poor are not explicitly mentioned as the reason (e.g., Deuteronomy), the idea is still implicit. Cf. Deut 15:1-11; 24:10-13; 28:12; 1 Sam 22:2; 2 Kgs 4:1; Isa 50:1; Pss 37:21-26; 109:11; 112:5; Prov 19:17; 22:7; and Neh 5:4; 10:32.

[ancient] Israelites,”⁴¹ there appears to be enough evidence from the OT and Apocrypha to demonstrate that the laws were often not observed. For example, Ezekiel 22:12 indicates that one of the reasons for Jerusalem’s condemnation and Exile was their lending practices; Nehemiah 5:1-13 indicates that the problem was still around after the Exile; and even the post-Exile Temple lent at interest.⁴² By Jesus’ time, lending with interest was still a common practice if Matthew 25:27 and Luke 19:23 are any indicators.⁴³

Although Jewish law regarding usury was often abrogated, the ideal was clear: no usury to fellow Jews was allowed. By contrast, similar prohibitions on usury in all other parts of the Ancient Near East were nonexistent. Gamoran claims that “none of the legal codes of the ancient world outside the [Hebrew] Bible contains laws proscribing lending on interest.”⁴⁴ This is a significant point because it establishes that it is very

⁴¹Ibid., 133. Gamoran claims that the silence of all of the OT prophets (except Ezekiel) about loan sharking is evidence that there was a “degree of compliance” of the laws (ibid.). This argument from silence, however, is weaker than the explicit denunciations of the Israelites for ignoring the laws. Gamoran does provide evidence from five Egyptian papyri (written in Aramaic and Greek), dated variously between 456 and 174 BC that provide clear confirmation of lending with interest between two Jewish parties.

⁴²de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 170. After the Exile, the creditors were not the only ones in defiance of the Mosaic law and honor codes regarding loans and repayment; the recipients of credit were often equally guilty. For example, Sir 29:5-6 implies that a creditor would often be lucky to receive back half of the loan amount and would often receive nothing but “empty promises” from the debtors. Thus, when the steward in Jesus’ parable reduces the first debt by half (even if it included no interest), it would have reflected a reduction of the amount the creditor might never have expected to see anyway if the debtors were less than honorable. So, even if the steward were eliminating interest (or even his own commission), there would have been nothing especially honorable about it if he never expected to see repayment anyway.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Gamoran, “Biblical Law Against Loans on Interest,” 127. He makes this claim based on the works of numerous experts on Babylonian, Sumerian, Assyrian, Canaanite, Greek, and Roman legal history, who all provide evidence for Gamoran’s contention that lending at interest outside Israel was not only “universal” but even “respectable” (ibid.). In direct opposition to this claim, Bruce Ballard, “On the Sin of Usury: A Biblical Economic Ethic,” *CSR* 24 (1994): 211 n. 1, claims that the “doctrine of usury” was “widely condemned in the ancient world.” However, although he mentions nine ancient authors who supposedly support his claim, he mentions no specific passages, he offers no Near Eastern sources contemporaneous with first-century Israel, he lists several works from the post-Christian era (including the Koran), and the only pre-Christian sources he offers are Greek or Roman (rather than Semitic). So, given

unlikely that a Gentile reader of Luke's Gospel, one who likely would have been ignorant of any kind of usury prohibitions, could have assumed Judaism's unique laws regarding usury were in play when reading this parable. Since Luke is likely to be writing for an audience that is significantly (if not entirely) Gentile (viz. Theophilus), it would be difficult to see how the normally careful Luke could have omitted information that was the *sine qua non* for properly understanding this parable.

Even if Luke assumed that the readers would have familiarity with Jewish interest laws, there is still no evidence from the parable itself that this is what is in view. If illegal usury were the focus, one would expect at least some allusion to it, if not a direct reference; however, the text here provides no shred of support for that focus. In fact, the parable never states whether any of the cast of players were Jews. Though one may assume that Jesus' characters would have been envisioned as Jews by the original (Jewish) audience, one cannot say with certainty what Luke's second- or third-generation (Gentile) audience would have envisioned. For not only is his audience explicitly unknown but also—even if their identities were known with certainty—there is no empirical evidence about what they did or did not think about the parable's characters. A Gentile reader, in an attempt to identify with the characters, could have envisioned some (or all) of the characters as Gentiles, and, as such, the Jewish usury laws would not necessarily have applied. But, even if he assumed all of them to be Jews, there is no

the two proposals, Gamoran's holds much more weight with respect to this study. Not only does Gamoran cite numerous specific passages (unlike Ballard), but his sources are more likely to have provided the cultural norms present during the time of Jesus and his listeners. Furthermore, at the risk of committing the "genetic fallacy," it should be noted that Ballard's thesis is heavily dependent on Marxist thought (he even mentions Aquinas and Marx in the same breath [*ibid.*, 213]); he deprecates all that rings of capitalism, especially loans that accrue interest. His primary objective is to show how the Christian ethic against usury is rooted in a universal common understanding that vindicates Marxist thought. Thus, it is to his thesis' advantage to make usury appear to be as universally condemned as possible. His attempt, however, is unconvincing.

evidence that this (admittedly hypothetical) Gentile reader would have known about Jewish usury prohibitions or would have assumed them to be in play here. Furthermore, if Luke's readers were familiar enough with Jewish usury regulations to know that it was the parable's point, then they presumably would also have known that the purpose of the usury laws was to protect the poor. Herein lies another obstacle to the usury view: the parable does not match well because the debtors appear to be quite affluent and in no real need of help. In sum, the Lukan audience was at least partly non-Jewish and could not have been expected to know the Jewish usury laws that were unparalleled in the ancient world, much less to assume them as the primary interpretive key to this parable. Even if they did know of the laws, though, they would have expected to see some hint that these laws were being assumed in the story. In sum, Comiskey is correct in stating that it seems unlikely that "a man writing for Gentiles and carefully researching his material would include a parable that is interpreted by Jewish usury laws."⁴⁵

Although Derrett had done better than anyone else before him provided evidence regarding interest based on Jewish customs, it still was not persuasive enough because of his lack of evidence from first-century Jewish practice. Instead of evidence contemporaneous with Luke, Derrett rather relies on tractates from the Mishnah that were not codified until nearly two hundred years after Jesus' lifetime.⁴⁶ Thus, his main flaw is the same as many before him: anachronism. Although rabbinic sources are closer to the mark (compared to Gibson's and Gächter's evidence), they are not a perfect match, and the ancient Indian, Egyptian, and Greek sources he provides are even farther from the

⁴⁵John P. Comiskey, "The Unjust Steward," *TBT* 52 (1971): 234.

⁴⁶Douglas M. Parrott, "The Dishonest Steward (Luke 16.1-8a) and Luke's Special Parable Collection," *NTS* 37 (1991): 503.

mark. Yet, even if one does admit all of the evidence from Derrett and followers into the discussion, it is still not determinative for interpreting the parable. For, just because interest on loans was practiced (even in Israel, and even in Jesus' day), there is a dearth of evidence indicating that the Jewish usury laws were universally (or even regularly) ignored. It is just as likely that the loans in the parable included no interest as not. Historical background, especially when much of the evidence is anachronistic, simply cannot answer this question.

Another weakness with the interest thesis comes from Derrett's own work, where he admits that an agent could not be prosecuted even for swindling because Jewish law was "peculiarly weak" on robbery and fraud.⁴⁷ The most a master could do in this case would be to dismiss the agent. If true, this statement actually provides support for the traditional view and would explain why the master would have dismissed the steward for dishonest behavior and why he would have merely declared "checkmate" at the end at the steward's trickery: he had no legal recourse either at the beginning or end of the story. Neither compliance with the usury law nor increased honor needs to be posited to explain the master's commendation of the steward. What is more, both the text and the early church interpretations lack even a hint of the interpretations offered by Derrett.⁴⁸ It is difficult to believe that the correct interpretation of the parable was lost for nearly two thousand years, until Derrett "found" it. Marshall, Firth, Ukpong, and many other interpreters after Derrett have used his claims to support their own arguments, and they are weakened for the same reasons.

⁴⁷J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Fresh Light on Lk XVI: I. The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *NTS* 7 (1960-61): 202.

⁴⁸Ibid.

Love of Money and the Pharisees

Some, most notably T. W. Manson,⁴⁹ have attempted to interpret the passage by calling into question Luke's characterization of the Pharisees. If Luke were inaccurate here, it would not only call into question the general accuracy of Luke's reporting (thus allowing for all kinds of speculative revisions of the text) but would also have direct consequences on how one should read the parable preceding it. The intention of the following discussion is not only to prove the arguments of Manson and similar others to be invalid but also to preclude future interpreters from making the same error. In order to evaluate the accuracy of Luke's claims, the historical background examination now turns to the first-century understanding of the love of money and the relationship of this characteristic to the Pharisees. This will be accomplished by focusing, first, on what Luke's "lovers of money" characterization implied and, next, whether it can accurately be applied to the Pharisees.

The Hellenistic world was not ignorant about the problems that the love of money caused. Sophocles' Creon bemoans, "Of evil current upon earth the worse is money. Money 'tis that sacks cities, and drives men forth from hearth and home; warps and seduces native innocence, and breeds a habit of dishonesty."⁵⁰ Plato makes a similar observation, "The love of wealth [έρωτος πλούτου] . . . wholly absorbs men, and never for a moment allows them to think of anything but their own private possessions . . . But from an insatiable love of gold and silver, every man will stoop to any art or contrivance, seemly or unseemly . . . holy or unholy, and utterly base [in the hope of becoming

⁴⁹T. W. Manson, "The Sayings of Jesus," in *Mission and Message of Jesus: An Exposition of the Gospels in the Light of Modern Research*, H. D. A. Major, T. W. Manson, and C. J. Wright, contributors (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1938).

rich].”⁵¹ In the ancient world, the love of money was a vice to be avoided, and those who love money are viewed negatively by a host of Greco-Roman writers.⁵²

Intertestamental and especially Diaspora Jewish literature is no less condemnatory about the love of money. For example, Sirach 8:2 states that “gold has ruined many, and has perverted the minds of kings.” In 2 Maccabees 10:20-22, those who are “money-hungry” ($\phi\imath\lambda\alpha\rho\gamma\rho\tau\epsilon\varsigma$) become traitors and face death at the hands of Judas Maccabeus for their treachery. Fourth Maccabees 1:26 identifies “covetousness” ($\phi\imath\lambda\alpha\rho\gamma\rho\iota\alpha$) as a “malevolent” quality characteristic of a vile person who seeks only pleasure. Coincidentally, 4 Maccabees 2:8 ties together themes of interest on loans, love of money, and the jubilee:⁵³ “Thus, as soon as one adopts a way of life in accordance with the law, even though a lover of money ($\phi\imath\lambda\alpha\rho\gamma\rho\varsigma$), one is forced to act contrary to natural ways and to lend without interest to the needy and to cancel the debt when the seventh year arrives.”

That the “love of money” ($\phi\imath\lambda\alpha\rho\gamma\rho\varsigma$) was also an undesirable characteristic in the first-century Christian community is amply attested. For example, 1 Timothy 3:3 explicitly states that a qualification for a Christian overseer (bishop) is that he be “free from the love of money.” Later in the same epistle (6:10), all believers are reminded of

⁵⁰Soph. *Ant.* 295-99 [LCL].

⁵¹Pl. *Leg.* 8.831.

⁵²Thomas E. Phillips, *Reading Issues of Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 48 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 155; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, SP, vol. 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 250; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 601. Collectively, these scholars mention Dio *Oration* 32.9; 35.1; 4.84; Philo *Praem.* 127; Lucian *Tim.* 56; Epict. *Discourses* 1.9.19-20; and Juv. *Sat.* 14.173-78.

⁵³The tying together of these three ideas should not be relied upon too heavily for interpreting the Unjust Steward; it would be difficult to demonstrate that Luke even knew of 4 Maccabees (most

the ills of avarice: “The love of money is the root of all sorts of evil.” In Hebrews 13:5 a similar appeal is issued: “Keep yourselves free from the love of money.” In 2 Timothy 3:2 one of the signs of godlessness in the last days is that men will be “lovers of money.” All of these NT passages use a cognate of (ἀ)φιλάργυρος, and numerous others that do not at least imply the same disdain for avariciousness.

Therefore, in Luke 16:14, when the evangelist calls the Pharisees φιλάργυροι, most readers would have recognized it clearly to be a stern criticism. The “lovers of money” description of the Pharisees has theological implication in the context of Luke, who portrays the pursuit of wealth and powers as antithetical to the pursuits of the kingdom.⁵⁴ The Pharisees’ love of money not only hindered them from properly preparing for the imminent kingdom but also saddled them with a stigma recognizable to all readers. Luke is writing in an environment where the love of money is regarded as a vice, whether one is a Jew, Greek, or Christian. Therefore, all possible parties involved from all three *Sitze im Leben*—Jesus, the Pharisees, the disciples, the early church, Luke, Theophilus, Jews, Gentiles, etc.—would have already been conditioned to know that those who are φιλάργυροι lack moral integrity. Whether Luke knew all of the aforementioned works advising against the love of money is beside the point. The quantity and geographical extent of the sources condemning the love of money (usually with some cognate φιλάργυρος) demonstrates that all the major cultures coalescing in the writing of his Gospel clearly looked askance at those who loved money; this was not a prejudice limited to first-century Israel. Most notably, the early Christian environment in

scholars date it around the time Luke was writing, perhaps a few years before), much less relied on it when forming chapter 16.

⁵⁴Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees*, 178.

which Luke wrote is one in which the love of money was unambiguously characteristic of those who were discontent, not fit for leadership, and prone to evil and stumbling.

That the Pharisees would be described as “lovers of money” might seem surprising to one who knows the Sadducees to be the aristocrats and the Pharisees to be closer to the “middle class.” Some commentators, like T. W. Manson, have been inclined to think that this “lovers of money” description fits so much better with the Sadducees that they have argued that Luke is mistaken in referring to the Pharisees here and instead means “Sadducees.”⁵⁵ The number of flaws with this suggestion is myriad. (1) For one thing, there is no evidence either contextually or in variant readings; it is mere speculation. (2) Another problem is that the next parable (the Rich Man and Lazarus), which clearly presupposes an afterlife, would not have been an apt example if the Sadducees had been the audience; it does, however, fit the theological beliefs of the Pharisees well.⁵⁶ (3) Moreover, the Pharisees are explicitly named in the audience (15:2), and there is not any indication that they have departed (only to be replaced [!] by the Sadducees). (4) Moreover, Luke does not state that these Pharisees are necessarily possessors of money but rather lovers of it. One need not have money to love it. On the other hand, there are indications in the NT that at least some of the Pharisees did in fact have wealth. Mark 12:40 and Matthew 23:14 (albeit textually questionable) state that

⁵⁵Manson, “The Sayings of Jesus,” 587. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961), 18, also argues that the “Sadducic priesthood” might have been one of the original audiences, but he also makes an argument that the Pharisees might have been part of the audience too. More recently, Lachs has argued against the Pharisaic identification here (Samuel Tobias Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* [Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Pub. House, 1987], 311-12).

they “devour widows’ houses.” The implication fits well with the aforementioned description of the upper-tier landowners encroaching on the property of the increasingly debt-ridden poor. (5) Moreover, that the Sadducees tended to be aristocratic does not preclude greed on the part of the Pharisees. The admonition against greed in all kinds of Greek, Jewish, and Christian literature implies that there is more than enough greed to go around. (6) Also, if one accepts the theory that the small “retainer class” included some (if not all) of the Pharisees,⁵⁷ then the Pharisees’ financially comfortable position would have placed them in a position financially superior to that of most of those in first-century Palestine.⁵⁸ Although most Pharisees might not have fit the description of “a certain rich man,” they were generally not classified with poor Lazarus either; some of them, like the steward, occupied the middle ground and probably had greater means of amassing wealth than a typical peasant. Although most Pharisees “occupied a socio-economic bracket closer to the ‘*am hā ’āres*,’”⁵⁹ some were at least in the middle class, if not better (especially the leaders). Therefore, exhortations for them not to amass wealth as something to rely on were not moot appeals. (7) Moreover, the description in 16:15 (i.e., that they justify themselves in the sight of others and do what is prized by humans) sounds very much like the other Synoptic descriptions of the Pharisees, who are generally

⁵⁶Craig A. Evans, *Luke*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 245. See F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 69-76, for a description of the traditional understanding of the theological differences between Sadducees and Pharisees.

⁵⁷So Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees*, 39-41, 48, who, based especially on Josephus’ portrayal, places the Pharisees in the five-percent “retainer” class, claims that “the Pharisees were not members of the common people,” and identifies “some Pharisees” as members of the governing and priestly classes (like the Sadducees).

⁵⁸Blomberg claims that “at least some of the Pharisaic leaders had a slightly higher standard of living than the majority of the people, or else aspired to one” (Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 123). It appears, however, that he bases this claim solely on Luke 16:14-15, the text in question here.

⁵⁹Ibid., 101.

characterized as fastidious in keeping the law and making sure that others knew about their scrupulousness.⁶⁰ (8) Moreover, in the following parable, Abraham is depicted as saying, “They have Moses *and the prophets*; they should listen to them” (16:29, italics added). It is debated whether the traditional understanding of the Sadducees as limiting authority to the Pentateuch is justified, and that debate is better addressed in other places.⁶¹ However, if one does concede that the Sadducees accepted only (or primarily) the law of Moses, then a parable appealing to the authority of the prophets, presumably as equal to Moses, would not have held much weight with the Sadducees. In sum, given the strong evidence contra Manson and the like, there is no reason to question Luke’s claim that the Pharisees in this passage were money lovers.

Despite their love of money and their excoriation by Jesus in Luke 11:37-54, the Pharisees are not completely lambasted in the Third Gospel.⁶² For example, in Luke 13:31, some of the Pharisees are apparently concerned enough about Jesus’ welfare to warn him of Herod’s plot to kill him. That all Pharisees were not worthy of condemnation is implied by Acts 15:5, where some of the “believers” are from the sect of the Pharisees. So “kind” is Luke to the Pharisees that I. Howard Marshall claims, “Luke

⁶⁰Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 421.

⁶¹See Günter Stemberger, *Jewish Contemporaries of Jesus: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes*, trans. Allan W. Mahnke (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 92, for a critical approach.

⁶²Though a few have argued that Luke is unyieldingly critical toward the Pharisees, most scholars of all stripes provide evidence to the contrary. For example, see Stemberger, *Jewish Contemporaries of Jesus*, 28-33; Steve Mason, “Pharisees,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); J. R. Porter, *Jesus Christ: The Jesus of History, the Christ of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34; and R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke,” in *Luke-John*, vol. 9 of *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck [NIB] (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 31.

presents the Pharisees as more friendly to Jesus and the church than do other writers.”⁶³

If Luke is able to present the Pharisees for both their good and bad qualities, it lends credence to his characterizations in both cases. It fortifies the claim for their historical authenticity because Luke does not present the Pharisees as one-dimensional characters wholly deserving of condemnation or completely worthy of admiration; Luke, instead, presents them in whatever fashion is correct for the context. In fact, compared to Mark and Matthew’s parallels, Luke inserts the hostile Pharisees at some points that they do not but removes them at others where they do.⁶⁴ A further comparison of parallel Synoptic accounts involving the Pharisees indicates that Luke often limits the extent of the Pharisees’ malice;⁶⁵ so the charge of Lukan bias or inaccuracy in chapter 16 is unfounded here. Luke does not have a clear axe to grind and demonstrates no motivation for skewing his descriptions of the Pharisees; he treats them fairly in each context. In Luke 16, love of money is their most salient characteristic, so that is how Luke describes it.

The parable of the unjust steward and its applications advise the use of money in accordance with the living out of the kingdom of God—a radical upheaval of the Pharisees’ worldview that provokes their mocking. Although the Pharisees are the only ones expressly mentioned here, “the chapter is not intended merely as an explicit

⁶³Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, 3rd ed., New Testament Profiles (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 232. This claim is even more true in Acts (5:34-39; 15:5; 22:3; 23:6-9), where Luke presents the Pharisees as rather benign defenders of Christians, especially with respect to their belief in resurrection. (Granted, the Pharisees may have defended the new Christian sect for self-interested reasons, but Luke never characterizes them pejoratively in Acts.)

⁶⁴Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees*, 174.

⁶⁵Stemberger, *Jewish Contemporaries of Jesus*, 28-31. For example, in 6:2, Luke refers merely to “some” of the Pharisees who watch Jesus to find an accusation against him (cf. 19:39); in 6:7, Luke states that the Pharisees met to see merely what they might “do” with Jesus; in 11:16, it is not the Pharisees who demand a sign; only in Luke (13:31) do some of the Pharisees warn Jesus of Herod’s plot against him;

criticism of the Pharisees, since the parable is addressed to disciples . . . It is also an exhortation to the disciples not to be like the Pharisees in the way they handle money (Luke 16:14) . . . This criticism links nicely to the critique of the Pharisees' attitude toward sinners and tax collectors in Luke 15.”⁶⁶

In sum, although some have argued that Luke's identification of the Pharisees as “lovers of money” is erroneous or prejudiced, there is no reason to question Luke's charge. In Luke, the Pharisees “function as rich and powerful patrons of the peasants within the village society and as brokers for the peasants in their relations with the outside world.”⁶⁷ At the very least, they have “an important social station in Galilee” and thus feel their position threatened when Jesus' competing influence increases in Galilee.⁶⁸ Hence their mocking of Jesus' values. Perhaps more than any other group of Jews, the Pharisees had the political, religious, and economic leverage in first-century Israel to make sure sinners were loved, to make sure possessions (especially alms) were distributed fairly, and to make sure divorce laws were properly followed. It is apparent, however, from the Synoptics' descriptions that many of them repudiated the first responsibility, callously ignored the second, and were derelict in the third.

This segment about the Pharisees thus accomplishes several things: (1) it vindicates Luke as careful and accurate of reporter, thus bolstering the claim that the material in Luke 16 provides a coherent progression of thought; (2) by describing the

only in Luke is Jesus invited to be the guest at a Pharisee's dinner table (7:36; 11:37; 14:1); and Luke does not explicitly name the Pharisees in the Passion narrative.

⁶⁶Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, 2 vols., BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994-96), 2:1323.

⁶⁷Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees*, 176.

⁶⁸Ibid., 178-79.

Pharisees with a characteristic consistently scorned throughout ancient world, the segment sustains Luke's continuing indictment of (some of) the Pharisees, especially vis-à-vis their perspective on money; (3) it indicates that the Unjust Steward, although not explicitly aimed toward the Pharisees, had direct implications for them; their scoffing indicates that the Pharisees perceived the preceding teaching to be an indictment of them; (4) it further demonstrates that the Unjust Steward had (at least) a monetary focus; otherwise, the Pharisees' love of money would have been irrelevant for Luke to mention; (5) it sets the condemnatory tone for the next parable, thereby providing a link between the Unjust Steward and Rich Man and Lazarus, a connection that otherwise might have been unclear. Next, Chapter 5 will discuss with more precision relationship of this segment to the rest of the literary context.

CHAPTER 5

LITERARY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE PARABLE

Whereas Chapter 4 made the argument that many scholars have overestimated various historical background features in interpreting the Unjust Steward, Chapter 5 makes the argument that various literary features have a much stronger claim for being interpretive keys. The nature of the parable genre, the literary context of the Unjust Steward, and various ancient literary devices all, in varying degrees, may be used to elucidate this parable's meaning. As such, this chapter is a drama in three acts. First, one must know what Luke understands a “parable” to be and what suggestions exist for how one should approach a parable to extract meaning from it. While it is impossible to cover either topic in much depth here—as that would digress from the more narrow focus on the text and its context—this study would be remiss if it did not at least acknowledge these issues and declare which one(s) will influence the method here and which ones are not worthy of emulation. For a more thorough discussion of these topics, there is plenty of recent literature catered more to these matters.¹ Next, the chapter will investigate the parable within its literary context, with special attention given to the parable's relation to the other units in the parable's immediate context, Luke 15 and 16. Finally, the chapter will discuss three literary conventions that some have alleged Luke used in this parable.

¹Nearly all books listed in the bibliography that discuss parables in general include a more extended treatment of these issues. For example, Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 7-76, before turning his

Each has a different worth for understanding the Unjust Steward, so the ensuing discussion will determine the interpretive value for each of the following: the open-ended parable, the interior monologue, and the praised slave/admired rascal motif.

The “Parable” and Its Interpretation

OT *Meshalim*, NT Parables, and Luke

The fact that the LXX translators chose the Greek word παραβολή as the translation of Hebrew מַשָּׁל in all but one case (Eccl 1:17) demonstrates that the OT *meshalim* are the primary model for what the Evangelists call “parables.”² The *mashal* resists easy definition because the Hebrew *meshalim* covered a wide range of materials, including parables proper, proverbs, taunts, riddles, allegories, figurative discourses, didactic poems, similes, irony, aphorisms, fables, prophetic oracles, apocalyptic revelation, symbols, pseudonyms, examples, themes, arguments, refutations, and other related forms of speech.³ Because of its very wide and fluid range of meaning, there is no single word in English that can convey the *mashal*’s nature completely, but suffice it to say that *meshalim* generally offer some kind of comparison between unlike objects and usually feature sapiential motifs intensified by parallelism.⁴ Curkpatrick explains that

attention to specific parables, covers the *mashal*, παραβολή, symbol, major parable themes, interpretation strategy, etc.

²Robert H. Stein, “The Genre of the Parables,” in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, ed. Richard Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 39.

³Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1972), 20, cites numerous examples of many of these categories from the NT and post-biblical Judaism. Cf. also Stephen Curkpatrick, “Between *Mashal* and Parable: ‘Likeness’ as a Metonymic Enigma,” *HBT* 24 (2002): 58; Stein, “Genre of the Parables,” 40; and Lawrence Boadt, “Understanding the *Mashal* and Its Value for the Jewish-Christian Dialogue in a Narrative Theology,” in *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 174.

⁴Curkpatrick, “Between *Mashal* and Parable,” 59-60. Similarly, Boadt, “Understanding the *Mashal*,” 172-74, surveys the work of a number of Hebrew scholars to conclude that the *mashal*, broadly defined, is some kind of brief comparison rooted in “popular wisdom” intended to teach a lesson often by

meshalim rise above “mere similes” because they are characterized by opacity and thematic tension, resulting in a “metonymic equivocation”; the *mashal* oscillates between the literal and non-literal, thereby clarifying some aspect of life while simultaneously creating “interpretive density.”⁵ Since their ambivalence raises them above mere “binary” metaphors, *meshalim* better reflect the richness of human life and “can disseminate meaning in several directions.”⁶ While the *mashal* evokes the familiar, it at the same time infuses it with paradox.⁷ This complex admixture of clarity and indeterminacy allows for the Hebrew *mashal* (and the parables of Jesus descended from them) to be, on the one hand, emotive and affective and, on the other hand, theological and polemical.⁸ Although the LXX translators chose παραβολή as the translation for משל, the *mashal* was clearly the more wide-reaching term.

In rabbinic Judaism, the *mashal* was often accompanied by another element. Rabbinic *meshalim* often included two parts: (1) the *mashal* proper featured a narrative plot intended to make a single point, and (2) the *nimshal*, which was often introduced with ו “(thus), offered practical application of the *mashal* and often made application outside the narrow parameters of meaning offered by the *mashal*.⁹ Thoma describes the rabbinic parable event in similar terms: some motivating situation leads to the narrator’s

means of parallelism and enigma. It is not so much a literary form as it is a “general concept that can be realized in a wide range of specific literary forms” (“Understanding the *Mashal*,” 176). An understanding of Jesus’ parables as a descendant of this form is warranted because it accounts for the variety represented by the parables and demonstrates the general range of application that one should expect from the parables.

⁵Curkpatrick, “Between *Mashal* and Parable,” 60-61.

⁶Ibid., 62.

⁷Ibid., 62, 70.

⁸Ibid., 62-63.

⁹Boadt, “Understanding the *Mashal*,” 167; Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 242.

expansion on a key word (*hiddush*), which is explained via a *mashal* (profane narrative or *Bildspendergeschichte*) and *nimshal* (sacred, normative application or *Bildempfängergeschichte*), which, in combination, are received by the addressees as a single appropriation of the *hiddush*.¹⁰ This *mashal-nimshal* tandem is strikingly similar to the form of the Unjust Steward combined with its subsequent applications; the similarity is best explained as more than mere coincidence. Consequently, Ukpong identifies the Unjust Steward as a *mashal* with *nimshalim* attached,¹¹ and his proposition does have its merits. The rabbis and Jesus shared the same general literary heritage, so it is no surprise that their “parables” are correspondingly similar. Moreover, if one accepts the structural similarity between Jesus’ parables and the rabbinic *meshalim*, it provides a strong argument for the originality of verses 8b-13; they likely derive from “Rabbi” Jesus himself.

Despite the differences between their meanings, the παραβολή and *mashal* share a significant overlap. “Lying at the core of the Old Testament *mashal* and the New Testament *parabolē* is a comparison of two unlike things,” whether brief or lengthy, implicit or explicit.¹² It is at this point of overlap where Luke uses the term “parable.” Like their *meshalim* precursors, Jesus’ parables are similarly broad, covering proverbs,

¹⁰Clemens Thoma, “Literary and Theological Aspects of the Rabbinic Parables,” in *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 28-31.

¹¹Justin S. Ukpong, “The Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-13): An Essay in Inculturation Biblical Hermeneutic,” *Semeia* 73 (1996): 198-99. He claims that “this is the common opinion of scholars” (ibid., 199) but does not provide any citations to support his claim. The present author has not found enough evidence from secondary literature to prove that this view is widespread among recent scholars. Whether scholars have recognized this connection, however, does not change the fact that the parable does seem to follow a very similar pattern.

¹²Stein, “Genre of the Parables,” 47.

similes and metaphors, riddles, taunts, similitudes, stories, examples, and allegories.¹³ In his definition of “parable,” Sider implicitly admits this wide range of examples constituting Jesus’ parables (stories, examples, similitudes, images, etc.).¹⁴ He identifies the essential characteristic of all, though, as the use of analogy in the language of simile or metaphor, which can be elaborated into “selectively . . . symbolic” allegory.¹⁵

Having defined the Gospels’ use of the term “parable,” it then is necessary to determine whether Luke’s is distinct from the other Synoptics. Curkpatrick claims that Luke’s use of the word “parable” is closer to Aristotle’s definition of a parable (a clear-cut comparison lacking the equivocation or interpretive density endemic to the *mashal*), while Mark’s use is closer to the Hebrew *mashal*, because his parables simultaneously reveal and conceal (cf. Mark 4:11).¹⁶ Rather than being a mystery or riddle, the parable in Luke seeks more clarity and is a less ambivalent form of comparison.¹⁷

While it may be true that Luke’s parables are presented as more transparent examples, it is clear that Luke’s use of the term “parable” is still quite close to the Hebrew *mashal*, at least insofar as it embraces a wide variety of literary forms. Luke uses a form of the word “parable” eighteen times in his Gospel. Like the *mashal*, Luke’s use of the term covers a wide range of material. For example, in 4:23, Luke calls the

¹³Ibid., 41-46; idem, *The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teachings*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 51.

¹⁴John W. Sider, *Interpreting the Parables: A Hermeneutical Guide to Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 259. Sider’s definition of the “parable” is more nuanced than most, as he wishes to segregate the aforementioned labels between “form” and “content.” Whatever the label, though, it is clear that Jesus’ parables encompass a wide range of literary instruments.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Curkpatrick, “Between *Mashal* and Parable,” 67.

¹⁷Ibid.

short proverb “Doctor, cure yourself!” a parable ($\tauὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην$). In both 5:33 and 6:39, the word refers to material that could be classified as a logical argument or negative example. In 8:4, 9, 10, 11 (all related to the Sower parable), it is used to refer to a brief allegory. In 14:7, it precedes advice for a hypothetical situation (i.e., not taking the seat of honor). In 21:29, it is an eschatological metaphor. Then, in other places (12:16; 13:6; 15:3; 18:1; etc.), it precedes a parable proper. Form critics of the past expended much energy attempting to segregate these types of parables into discrete categories, but the ultimate value of such categorization is doubtful. Dodd is entirely correct when he says that one cannot establish a definite boundary between the types of parables because “one class melts into another,”¹⁸ so such segregation is artificial and does not help the interpreter understand Luke’s use of the term. Jeremias is even more critical of the form critics’ parable classifications as “a fruitless labour in the end, since the Hebrew *mašal* and the Aramaic *mathla* embraced all these categories and many more without distinction.”¹⁹ Therefore, this dissertation will attempt no such form of classification.

There are several conclusions that one may draw from the preceding discussion. The Greek NT “parable” is heavily dependent on the Hebrew OT *mashal* category. When Luke uses the term, it has a meaning almost as flexible as the Hebrew OT *mashal*; therefore, when Luke calls a unit a “parable,” one may suppose it shares many of the same characteristics of the Hebrew *mashal*. Moreover, Luke’s parables often also feature these *mashal-nimshal* combinations common to rabbinic literature.

¹⁸C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961), 7.

¹⁹Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1972), 20.

This dual structure appears to be a close analogue to what one finds in the Luke 16:1-8a and 8b-13 segments. In Luke 15-16, only the story of the Lost Sheep is explicitly called a “parable” (15:3), but it is clear that this label extends to all five of the main parabolic units in the two chapters. Since the Unjust Steward should be considered a parable, it likewise should match the *mashal*-parable characteristics—and it does. This parable contains all of the defining elements of the *mashal*-parable: a comparison between unlike objects (agricultural debts and imminent kingdom), sapiential motifs (the φρονίμως in 16:8 speaks of literal wisdom, and the applications are full of sage admonitions and observations), parallelism (the two debtors and a chiastic structure), the mixture of the familiar (agrarian business affairs) and the paradoxical (praise for dishonest behavior), and both emotive (the steward’s intense crisis) and dogmatic (a simultaneous lesson on eschatology and monetary ethics) features.

If Curkpatrick’s description of the *mashal*—i.e., that it can “disseminate meaning in several directions”²⁰—is correct, then it stands to reason that its close kin, the NT parable, would behave similarly. Herein lies the hermeneutical debate that affects the Unjust Steward. For, the number of meanings a parable can produce varies from one interpreter to the next. Most scholars would generally agree with Blackman, who claims that the parable “is *sui generis* in potency, a bomb capable of more than one explosion . . . , a plant capable of flowering the new colours each spring.”²¹ However, at the heart of the debate is whether the new “colours” constitute new meanings never conceived of in previous generations, different meanings intended by the author, or simply new

²⁰Curkpatrick, “Between *Mashal* and Parable,” 62.

²¹E. C. Blackman, “New Methods of Parable Interpretation,” *CJT* 15 (1969): 10.

applications for the one meaning that that has long been established according to the author's intention. Among those who allow for multiple meanings, parables often produce different, often contradictory, points. Here, then, is the difficulty inherent in a polyvalent understanding of any parable, for mutually exclusive meanings cannot equally coexist. However, if one allows for multiple meanings, who is to say which one(s) is (are) right among the host of contradictory interpretations?

Realizing the risk of multiple competing meanings, many interpreters have been uncomfortable in allowing a cluster of messages to emanate from this parable—or any parable, for that matter. Their interpretations of the Unjust Steward have often either made the message to be so vague (large enough to grasp all of these apparent meanings) as to be useless or have forced the meaning to be reduced to a single point (e.g., only almsgiving or only eschatology). In the history of parable interpretation, the pendulum has been swinging from one end to the other for centuries: from unfettered allegory in Augustine's day to single-point reductionism in Jülicher's to today's reader response criticism, the most radical of which reverts back to the extreme of allowing for a seemingly infinite number of meanings. The reader-response critics, however, are not the only voices in the current debate. Some today maintain a single point with multiple "applications" possible, some still rely on allegory or allegorizing (whether they acknowledge it or not), some advocate a limited allegory or more nuanced polyvalence, and some merely draw conclusions without harnessing a particular methodology. The result is that today an exceptionally diverse range of competing methods of interpretation is on the table.

Given the bewildering array of understandings about the nature of Jesus' parables and methods for interpreting them, the interpreter is left at a stalemate if s/he cannot find a clear path to maneuver through the mass of material. In order to discover the best route, one must avoid the mistakes of previous interpreters, while retaining the best of their methods. As such, the next question to be answered is how the current field came to be populated with so many (often mutually exclusive) methods of parable interpretation and what mistakes and corrections they made. The following discussion briefly summarizes the five developments in the history of parable interpretation in order to exploit the strengths of each generation's method and apply this cumulative understanding to the Unjust Steward.

History of Parable Interpretation

Allegorizing from the early church to the Reformers. Allegorizing was a favorite method for interpreting important texts in ancient times. The Jewish philosopher Philo, some of the Hellenistic interpreters of Homer and Plato, and the *pesharim* of Qumran are some of the examples of ancient allegorizing in both Jewish and secular milieux.²² With the prevalence of allegorization in the ancient world, it comes as no surprise that many early Christian interpreters used this method of interpretation to understand the parables as well. Origen, Augustine, Gregory the Great, and the "Alexandrian school," which advocated a four-fold meaning of Scripture, adopted this

²²Klyne R. Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing: A History of the Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus," in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, ed. Richard Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 4. For a full history of ancient and medieval parable allegorization, see A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. in 1 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), 1:203-322.

method to interpret Jesus' parables.²³ This four-fold view of Scripture remained prevalent through the Middle Ages. One of the main problems of this allegorizing interpretation is that it focuses less on the original context in which Jesus was speaking and allows the interpreter to disguise his preconceived theological agenda in the cloak of the parable. The trend toward allegorization among early Christian interpreters, however, was not unanimous. Tertullian, John Chrysostom, and the "Antiochene school," for example, opposed allegorical exegesis, and their opposition was revived more than a millennium later by the Reformers.²⁴ Long before the modern era, Cyril of Alexandria presaged the Reformers reaction to fanciful allegorizing by advising against an allegorical interpretation of the Unjust Steward that seeks to find a meaning in every small detail.²⁵

Adolf Jülicher. The Reformers and their followers, preferring a grammatical-historical interpretation of Scripture, repudiated the fanciful, allegorizing tendency that characterized the centuries of interpretations before them. What the Reformers started in the sixteenth century was completed in the late nineteenth century by Adolf Jülicher with his groundbreaking two-volume work on Jesus' parables, *Gleichnisreden Jesu*. Jülicher's

²³Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing," 4-5.

²⁴Ibid., 5.

²⁵David A. DeSilva, "The Parable of the Prudent Steward in its Lucan Context," *CTR* 6 (1993), 255, following Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, trans. R. Payne Smith (Long Island, N.Y.: Studion, 1983), 439. Admittedly, the history of parable interpretation has not been a simple "pendulum" progression, with all of scholarship shifting from one end of the spectrum to the other in one accord. As the Antioch-Alexandria split demonstrates, all eras have been characterized by competing—even contradictory—voices. Today, in fact, the field is characterized more by its diversity of views than its homogeneity. This fact notwithstanding, the "pendulum" analogy is accurate to describe the general trend of parable interpretation from the early church to the present: late antiquity and the Middle Ages were predominated by allegorical interpretations, the Reformers (in varying degrees) began to take scholarship in the opposite direction, almost all major voice after Jülicher were emphatically anti-allegorical, and more recent voices have brought back both allegory and polyvalence.

first volume explains his theory of one-point, non-allegorical parable interpretation, and the second volume applies this interpretive method to the specific parables. Jülicher believed that Jesus' parables were completely lacking any kind of allegorizing but had only a single, self-evident point in their original forms; it was the early church or the Evangelists—not Jesus—who were responsible for the few traces of allegorization and interpretation that do appear in the Gospels.²⁶ Since a parable is simply an extended simile (by his Aristotelian definition), the parable makes only one point of comparison (*tertium comparationis*), and the extra details are there merely for color rather than as vehicles for further points of comparison.²⁷ Most parable interpreters after Jülicher have taken his work to be “axiomatic,” especially in its proposal of single-point interpretation.²⁸

In order to reach his single-point-parable conclusion, however, Jülicher was compelled to posit that the parables originally told by Jesus were far more simple than the expanded forms of the early church, which often appended multiple applications or allegorical interpretation(s) to a parable.²⁹ Even the evangelists themselves were laboring under a “misunderstanding” to apply any kind of allegorical interpretation to the parables,

²⁶Snodgrass, “From Allegorizing to Allegorizing,” 6-7; Stein, “Genre of the Parables,” 32.

²⁷Stein, “Genre of the Parables,” 31-32; idem, *Method and Message*, 50.

²⁸Blackman, “New Methods of Parable Interpretation,” 3. Even after Jülicher’s watershed work, some authors continued to apply allegory to the parable, e.g., Ronald G. Lunt, “Towards an Interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke xvi. 1-18),” *Exptim* 66 (1954-55), 336, an allegorical interpretation in which the master represents God; the squandered goods are “the spiritual life of the people”; the reduction of debts represents “relaxation of some of those ceremonial laws on which the Pharisees insisted”; and the main point is a bland admonition for “tolerance and charity and the things that are not eternal.” However, Lunt’s methodology was the minority after Jülicher.

²⁹David Stern, “Jesus’ Parables from the Perspective of Rabbinic Literature: The Example of the Wicked Husbandmen,” in *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 47.

which “in general do not admit of this method at all.”³⁰ Most contemporary scholars have rejected Jülicher’s neat division between parable and allegory.³¹ The fact that both many rabbinic parables and many of Jesus’ parables are followed by interpretations (even if one concedes that the interpretations were added later by the early church) implies that not all parable meanings are as self-evident as Jülicher claimed.³² In fact, if, as many contemporary NT scholars claim, the “appended” interpretations regularly miss the point and even alter the original message of Jesus’ parables, it implies that the meanings of many of Jesus’ parables are not only not self-evident but are so difficult to understand that they generated illegitimate explanations even by those very close to Jesus’ time and influence.

It appears that the excessive allegorization of the previous centuries caused Jülicher to overreact and end up at the other extreme by dismissing not only allegorization (the illegitimate interpretive method) but also allegory itself (the literary form often present in the parables as presented by the Evangelists).³³ The result was an understanding of the parables that reduced the main point of each to general pious maxims (indeed, “trifling matters”) devoid of much substance.³⁴ This “insipidization” of Jesus’ parables reflected the same trend occurring in the broader context of nineteenth-century liberal theology, in which every conceivable part of Jesus’ radical,

³⁰Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, 3, summarizing Jülicher’s view.

³¹Stein, “Genre of the Parables,” 32.

³²Ibid., 33.

³³Snodgrass, “From Allegorizing to Allegorizing,” 8, agreeing with Hans-Josef Klauck, *Allegorie und Allegorese in synoptischen Gleichnistexten* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1978).

³⁴Snodgrass, “From Allegorizing to Allegorizing,” 8, 14, 22, quoting from Jülicher’s articles on “Parables” in *Encyclopedia Biblica* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), 3:3566.

countercultural message was replaced with safe banalities.³⁵ For example, Jülicher found the single message of the Unjust Steward to be that one should use the present to ensure a “happy future.”³⁶ It had nothing to do with the use of money or eschatological preparation or even ethics, but rather the use of one’s present to secure the future.³⁷ What Jülicher failed to recognize, however, is that these ideas are not mutually exclusive. Even if one makes the content of the “using the present” and “happy future” more specific (i.e., the proper use of possession and eschatological kingdom), the two are still not contradictory; indeed the former is a necessary (but not sufficient) preparation for the latter.³⁸

C. H. Dodd. Dodd rescued the history in Jesus’ parables from Jülicher’s interpretive trash bin by asserting that one must consider the first-century *Sitz im Leben* in which Jesus told the parables.³⁹ For Dodd, the parable did not simply yield a static, timeless truth; instead, the parable was a living metaphorical device that “arrest[s] the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, . . . [thus] leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”⁴⁰ Dodd believed that Jesus’ main message was that the kingdom of God had already arrived and that Jesus’ parables

³⁵Stein, *Method and Message*, 51. See also C. Leslie Mitton, “The Unjust Steward,” *ExpTim* 64 (1953): 308, who posits a similarly vague message: that the Christian is to be resourceful in “seeking to further the things for which Jesus stood” and “Christian faith and service.”

³⁶Stein, *Method and Message*, 51, citing Jülicher, 2:511.

³⁷Jülicher, *Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2:511.

³⁸Note also Luke 18:18-30, where the ideas of possessions and eschatological kingdom are inextricably connected in Lukan theology (v. 22 “follow me” = kingdom; v. 25 “kingdom”; v. 29 “kingdom”; v. 30 “eternal”).

³⁹Stein, *Method and Message*, 52-53.

⁴⁰Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, 5.

reflect this “realized eschatology”; after Jesus’ death, however, the early church obscured this message of realized eschatology by applying to the parables interpretations reflecting a message of futuristic eschatology or ethics.⁴¹ Because of this perceived addition of secondary material, Dodd (like Jeremias later) followed Jülicher in his investigation of parables in their historical contexts in order to isolate them from the later allegorizing “accretions” of the Evangelists.⁴² Dodd claimed that there is “no doubt” that the applications following some parables were not part of the original tradition, but were supplied by the evangelist.⁴³ Dodd’s primary example of this point is the parable of the unjust steward, to which the evangelist supplied three completely different applications comparable to “notes for three separate sermons.”⁴⁴ In doing so, Dodd claimed that the evangelist had “no certain clue to the application of the parable,” so he re-applied it “in senses not originally intended [by Jesus].”⁴⁵ Dodd’s demotion of the three applications to the status of secondary, misguided appendages forced him to argue that the original application by Jesus is probably verse 8a, where Jesus himself is the κύριος.⁴⁶

Joachim Jeremias. Jeremias contended that Jülicher’s tame ethical interpretations of Jesus’ parables had abandoned the dynamic meanings that they were intending to convey.⁴⁷ Jeremias believed that Jülicher had “stopped half-way” by

⁴¹Snodgrass, “From Allegorizing to Allegorizing,” 9.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, 16.

⁴⁴Ibid., 16-17.

⁴⁵Ibid., 18.

⁴⁶Ibid., 17.

⁴⁷Blackman, “New Methods of Parable Interpretation,” 3.

clearing away the accreted allegorical interpretations but not recovering the parables' "original meaning."⁴⁸ In order to recover the original meaning of the parable of the Unjust Steward, for instance, Jeremias argued that one must "disregard the expansions (vv. 9-13)."⁴⁹ In doing this, Jeremias extended Dodd's agenda by providing more-detailed exposition and historical details while further stripping away from the parables the "later" allegorizations of the early church.⁵⁰ On the other hand, he departed from Dodd's program by seeing the conflict aspect of the parables, not the realized eschatology explained by Dodd, as their main point.⁵¹

Jülicher's overgeneralizing tendency, though discredited by Dodd and Jeremias, did not prevent some subsequent interpreters from offering equally tepid solutions. By allowing—even requiring—the parables to be stripped of their applications, Dodd and Jeremias actually perpetuated the trend to oversimplify the parables' point.⁵² The only difference is that instead of being vague ethical lessons (Jülicher), they were now simplified to eschatology lessons (Dodd), conflict lessons

⁴⁸Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 19. Here Jeremias specifically criticizes Jülicher's overly bland interpretation of the parable of the unjust steward.

⁴⁹Ibid., 182. See *Parables of Jesus*, 110-111, where Jeremias lists the "secondary" interpretations added to the original *logia* of fourteen different parables (half of which are in Luke). Here he uses the isolated *logia* of the Gospel of Thomas as support that these parables originally had no applications and that the applications were added later by the early church. This preference for abbreviated sayings stripped of supposed later additions by the early church led to the propensity of later scholars, like Perrin, Funk, Crossan, Scott, and the Jesus Seminar group, to prefer *The Gospel of Thomas* even over its canonical cousins.

⁵⁰Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing," 9; Blackman, "New Methods of Parable Interpretation," 4; and Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 13: "Already in the earliest period . . . the parables had undergone a certain amount of reinterpretation."

⁵¹Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 21; Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 17.

⁵²At the same time, Sider reproves, even Dodd and Jeremias, who vigorously denied the presence of allegory in Jesus' parables, inadvertently smuggled allegory back into their own interpretations (Sider, *Interpreting the Parables*, 13-14).

(Jeremias), or whatever single theme the interpreter wished to elevate to preeminence.

Much more recently, for example, B. B. Scott, like those discussed here, has stripped the parables of many of the features that he believes to be later additions of the evangelists and thereby ends up, like Jülicher, with parable meanings reduced to general, banal truths.⁵³ Similarly, Borsch suggested that the parable is about “resoluteness and single-mindedness in the face of what can upset life”⁵⁴—an entirely uninspiring moral.

Most exegetes would agree that the most significant hermeneutical tool one has to understand a text is its context. However, the result of Jülicher’s, Dodd’s, and even Jeremias’s methodologies is an atomized exegesis, which intentionally disregards context when convenient and allows the interpreter to draw myopic conclusions. Although Dodd and Jeremias correct Jülicher’s problem of overly general conclusions, they still dismiss the context of the parables as later accretions that do not reflect the original point of the parable. Luke apparently had no problem with the “appended” sayings; in fact, if these applications did not originate with Jesus himself, Luke presumably had full liberty to exclude or alter them as he saw fit. Yet, he made a conscious decision to include them immediately after the parable with little segue. Certainly, Blackman takes Luke’s prerogative more seriously when he says the problem with abbreviating parables merely by “lopping off conclusions” in reconstructing the original form is an overly confident methodology.⁵⁵ Such methodology runs the risk of missing the point by deleting part of

⁵³So argues Snodgrass, “From Allegorizing to Allegorizing,” 23. For example, for the Unjust Steward, Scott sees the point as a challenge to “the way justice operates in that world” (*Hear Then the Parable*, 266).

⁵⁴Frederick Houk Borsch, *Many Things in Parables: Extravagant Stories of New Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 22.

⁵⁵Blackman, “New Methods of Parable Interpretation,” 6.

the stated meaning; only if Luke has misstated the point is this an acceptable approach. Ironically, the practitioners of this methodology are exactly the ones who accuse Luke and the early church of “missing the point” by adding aberrant applications or *non sequiturs*. Yet, they are the ones that have missed the point by excluding much of what Luke claimed it to be. The conclusions about the parable of the Unjust Steward that each of these three scholars arrives at is less than satisfying and does not do full justice to the Evangelists’ message.

Later interpreters. Influenced by existential metaphysics, many biblical scholars of the mid- and late-twentieth century reacted to the Jülicher-esque line of single-meaning interpretation by dismissing the notion that a parable contained a static meaning that could be read and stated as a propositional truth; instead, for these interpreters, parables were viewed as “language events” that force the reader to participate in creating meaning by experiencing the inexpressible essence endemic to metaphors.⁵⁶ Under this methodology, in which new meaning is created with each new reader, the parables are now open to new meanings and are thus not confined to a single point of meaning.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Stein, “Genre of the Parables,” 35. This “language event” term, beginning with Ernst Fuchs, finds its way into the works of (early) Eta Linnemann (*Jesus of the Parables: Introduction and Exposition* [New York: Harper & Row, 1967]), and Dan Via (Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 18-21).

⁵⁷At the turn of the twentieth century, Albert Schweitzer (*Von Reimarus zu Wrede*) decried the numerous scholars who produced “Lives of Jesus” that simply mirrored their own theological agendas. In parable interpretation, too, one sees the same kind of phenomenon. This new interpretive model has opened a Pandora’s box that permits an unrestrained creation of as many meanings for a parables as there are interpreters. Each reader now has *carte blanche* to generate parable meanings, regardless of any fixed truths or authorial intent, that legitimize his or her own theology no matter how fantastical and no matter how diametrically contradictory to other “valid” interpretations they may be. This is an important critique to be made in this study because if each interpreter can create meaning willy-nilly, then this dissertation degenerates to an exercise in subjective artistry. However, if this study is constrained by the meaning that Luke intended, the importance of the text and its literary and historical context increases substantially.

One of the most influential representatives of this phenomenon is Dan O. Via, who views the parables as autonomous, unified, coherent works of art that depict the existential crisis of decision for the contemporary reader; as such, the parables' historical context and original meaning are less important because the meaning can be derived wholly outside of historical context or even the intention of the original speaker.⁵⁸ Via appreciates Dodd's and Jeremias's contributions but regards their "historical" interpretation as lacking significance for contemporary humanity in light of Bultmannian existentialism, which better brings the "timeless truth" meaning of the parable to the contemporary reader.⁵⁹ He believes that Jeremias's historical investigation of the parable is a good first step for interpretation, but the parable must next pass through "existential-theological interpretation" in order for the parable to evoke actions from the contemporary hearer.⁶⁰ Because of the parable's primarily subjective, existential force, it is (contra Jülicher) open to multiple points of meaning.⁶¹ The one-point interpretation begun with Jülicher is "artificially restrictive," according to Via, because it sidesteps the parable itself and rushes straight to the parable's meaning, thus misplacing the vehicle that brought the supposed meaning to light in the first place.⁶²

The number of scholars who have become again receptive to multiple meanings for each parable has been growing since Via. Most believe like Trudinger

⁵⁸Dan Otto Via, *In Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967). See discussion about Via in Snodgrass, "From Allegorizing to Allegorizing," 12, and Blackman, "New Methods of Parable Interpretation," 8.

⁵⁹Blackman, "New Methods of Parable Interpretation," 4.

⁶⁰Boadt, "Understanding the *Mashal*," 164, explaining Via's thesis.

⁶¹Via, *Parables*, 93.

⁶²Ibid., 3.

(who expressly credits Via), that although Jülicher's agenda has “a most salutary effect on parable interpretation” because of its eradicating effect on the most fanciful, ungrounded allegorizing readings, his only-one-point-ever interpretation “is no longer considered axiomatic.”⁶³ The genre of parable is to be regarded not so much of a single point as it is a “trajectory” that “lends itself to polyvalence.”⁶⁴ As an example of this newer rejection of single-point exegesis, Funk states that since the parables are extended metaphors that were addressed to diverse audiences, they hold the capacity for different ideas and new meanings.⁶⁵ Extending Via’s and Funk’s propensity toward reader-response criticism, Crossan views the parables as polyvalent paradoxes that may have multiple meanings because of the multiple contexts in which the reader responds to the text to produce a limitless number of meanings across many levels of reality.⁶⁶ Parables use metaphorical language because a “metaphor can articulate a referent so new and so alien to consciousness that it can only be grasped within the metaphor itself.”⁶⁷ As such, any interpreter would be in error in articulating a propositional truth for any parable. Also among those who view multiple meanings to the parables, Stern recognizes Dodd’s most important contribution to parable studies is their characterization as “language events.”⁶⁸ However, he goes well beyond Dodd in his assertion that the parables’ “virtual

⁶³Paul Trudinger, “Exposing the Depth of Oppression (Luke 16:1b-6a),” in *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today*, ed. V. George Shillington (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 124.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Snodgrass, “From Allegorizing to Allegorizing,” 14.

⁶⁶Ibid., 20.

⁶⁷John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 13.

⁶⁸Stern, “Jesus’ Parables from the Perspective of Rabbinic Literature,” 49.

experiences” make the spectator a participant via “unmediated epiphany” that is “hermeneutically inexhaustible” because of its “open-ended polysemy, a capacity for sustaining an endless number of interpretations.”⁶⁹

Not all of those admitting multiple meanings to the parables have come from the liberal side of biblical scholarship. Around the time of Via’s work, the more moderately critical Fitzmyer, in commenting on the Unjust Steward, criticized Jülicher, Cadoux, Dodd, Jeremias, and the like who, in reaction to the “hyperallegorization” of the past, restricted the meaning of a parable to a single point.⁷⁰ In the Unjust Steward, for example, Fitzmyer detects a “slight allegorization,” although he is scant on details about this purported allegory except that the parable allegorically represents a call to judgment and urgency.⁷¹ Recently, even some Evangelical scholars (most notably, Craig Blomberg) have reintroduced a multiple-point interpretation of the parables without disregarding the history (as Bultmann) or the authorial intent (as reader-response critics) behind the parables. Similarly, K. Snodgrass, John W. Sider, and Mary Ford all make arguments in favor of the allegory as a legitimate literary mode, and Snodgrass agrees with Blomberg that a parable may, therefore, have more than one point (according to the number of perspectives provided by the main characters).⁷²

⁶⁹Ibid., 49-50.

⁷⁰Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Story of the Dishonest Manager (Lk 16:1-13),” *TS* 25 (1964): 37, in agreement with A. Descamps, R. E. Brown, and P. Penoit.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Snodgrass, “From Allegorizing to Allegorizing,” 20. Sider, *Interpreting the Parables*, 21-22, although he agrees with Blomberg that a parable should not necessarily be limited to one point, thinks that Blomberg’s simple rule for parable interpretation (i.e., that each main character represents a separate point) “oversimplifies” the matter. To Sider’s objection, it might be added that Blomberg’s choice seems arbitrary. Why not one point for each “act” in the parable, rather than each character?

Blomberg's *Interpreting the Parables* strikes the *via media* between Jülicher's oversimplification on the one hand and Crossan's eisegesis on the other. Blomberg's approach has much to commend itself to the Unjust Steward because it allows for some measure of the polyvalence inherent in the *meshalim* and applies the same expectations to the parables. Blomberg sees one point for each primary character in a parable, for a total of three in the Unjust Steward. He proposes that verses 8a, 8b, and 9 correspond to the three primary characters: the master represents God's praise for his disciples; the steward represents the need for wisdom by the disciples; and the debtors represent disciples' heavenly reception.⁷³ In recent agreement with Blomberg, Mathewson has claimed that if one allows for a "limited allegory" in this parable, then verses 8b-13 may be seen as Jesus' own commentary on the parable; if so, then it strengthens the argument that the main point of the parable is wise use of material possessions.⁷⁴

Stein argues that this multi-point reading merely divides the single point of each parable into several subdivisions.⁷⁵ It is difficult, however, to articulate the difference between, say, a point with two applications and three different closely related points. An example of this difficulty is found in Rolston's claim that the *single* main point of the Unjust Steward is that one should use his/her limited time on earth to use possessions wisely because one's use of material possessions is an indicator of one's

⁷³Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 93, 245-46 (noted also by Dave L. Mathewson, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward [Luke 16:1-13]: A Reexamination of the Traditional View in Light of Recent Challenges," *JETS* 38 [1995], 34).

⁷⁴Mathewson, "Parable of the Unjust Steward," 35.

⁷⁵Stein, *Method and Message*, 161. At first this distinction seems like a matter of semantics; if the point divisions say very different things (not necessarily contradictory truth claims but in different "truth domains"), then it is difficult to say exactly when the two-, three-, or however-many-point truths actually coalesce into a single truth.

fitness to enter the kingdom.⁷⁶ However, even though Rolston expressly claims only one point for the parable, at least two ideas, albeit intertwined ones, appear to be contained within that single truth: the use of possessions and preparation for the kingdom.

If this debate is even solvable, it cannot be done satisfactorily in the few pages allowed here. Since this dissertation lacks the space to treat all sides comprehensively with fairness, no claim will be made that the following will solve this difficult dilemma. What is claimed is that some parables allow for a tight, interrelated, author-intended polyvalence. A complex parable may yield a cluster of interdependent themes that are all immediately and clearly derivable from the text. Given the broad range of sub-genres implied by the *mashal*-related word “parable,” it is not surprising that some parables may generate such thematic intricacy. Certainly, many units called “parables” in Luke are mere proverbs, simple metaphors, uncomplicated examples, or the like, but some, following the *mashal-nimshal* pattern, carry several related senses. Whether one considers the more complex parabolic examples to be multiple-point stories or stories with a single point and multiple related applications is of secondary importance for this chapter.

Part of the problem of identifying the number of points emitting from a parable arises from the concatenation of thoughts characteristic of Jesus’ rabbinic-style teaching. In this style, one theme overlaps another as the argument evolves, so it is inevitable that at places two (or even three) related ideas run together, with one truth reciprocally acting as the application for another—and vice versa. In the same way that it is difficult to delineate where one link of a physical chain begins and another ends—for the boundaries

⁷⁶Holmes Rolston, “Ministry to Need: The Teachings of Jesus concerning Stewardship of

of each link are intertwined—so too linked parables and sayings have a bit of an amorphous boundary that allows several meanings (or applications) to coexist in the same place.⁷⁷ This characteristic, of course, does not permit an unrestrained polyvalence with countless discrete meanings, but it does allow for several points to inhabit the same territory, with one of those points directly leading to the central theme of the next unit.

The Parable in its Literary Context

The General Link Between Chapters 15 and 16

A new literary unit is implied by the shift from teaching up to 14:35, to narrative seam in 15:1, to Pharisee complaint in 15:2, to parable introduction in 15:3. The infinitive *ἀκούειν* in 15:1 indicates the purpose for the large crowd's gathering and connotes that they were “favorably disposed to hear what Jesus” would say.⁷⁸ The pronoun *αὐτοῦ* emphasizes that the crowd had gathered specifically to hear Jesus and his words; their motives for gathering around Jesus were different from those of many of the scribes and Pharisees.⁷⁹ The crowd’s attention to Jesus provokes a reaction from the Pharisees in 15:2, where “the present tense of these two verbs suggests that what the Pharisees and scribes find deficient in Jesus is a habit, not just a one-time error on his

Possessions,” *Int* 8 (1954): 145.

⁷⁷Granted, the chain analogy breaks down insofar as a chain is a physical object—with limits that can be seen and measured, while a string of parables is a more dynamic entity. However, this weakness in the analogy just proves the point—where one point is introduced within the parameters of another, it infuses the next literary unit with life in advance, establishing a literary “home” for it before it is formally introduced as the focal point.

⁷⁸John J. Kilgallen, “Luke 15 and 16: A Connection,” *Bib* 78 (1997): 370.

⁷⁹Ibid.

part.”⁸⁰ Kilgallen concludes that both the sinner/tax-gatherer and Pharisee/scribe groups are being referred to by αὐτοὺς (v. 3), and both are thus the object of the three subsequent parables: the sinners because they have come to hear the message of salvation, the Pharisees because they have criticisms that need to be challenged.⁸¹ The next break in the parabolic discourse is 15:11, but no change in audience or setting is implied; rather, it emphasizes the continuity. Then, the audience appears to shift from Pharisees to disciples in 16:1. The shift in audience here, Bailey argues, is intentionally “ambiguous” because the message is equally directed at the disciples and Pharisees.⁸²

Nolland offers further evidence of the Luke 15-16 continuity by pointing out a “series of [connecting] links”: there is a continuity of scene; both chapters are composed almost entirely of like-themed parables; the final parable of each chapter has three main characters; and there is some significant shared vocabulary.⁸³ Nolland’s argument is strengthened if one views the entire complex of five parables in Luke 15-16 as a progression of thought—not merely a loosely connected collection of sayings or two distinct hemispheres of parables (“lost” and “possessions” parables) or a simple reiteration of the same theme. None of the parables has exactly the same purpose for Luke, but each parable plants the seed from which the next, related parable will germinate. Thus, although the purpose of each is different, it is nevertheless close (even inextricably complementary) to the next. As implied earlier in the chapter, the claim here

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid., 371.

⁸²Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 108. This argument does have weight, since the Pharisees from 15:2 are reintroduced in 16:14, more of a reminder of their presence than a shift, thus continuity.

⁸³John Nolland, *Luke*, WBC, vols. 35a-35c (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1989-93), 2:796; Michael R. Austin, “The Hypocritical Son,” *EvQ* 57 (1985): 307-15; and Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 109.

is that each unit is concatenated to the next by a key word or theme—words and themes that, in fact, were already anticipated by numerous hints in chapter 14. Table 1 (below) demonstrates the means by which Luke accomplishes this literary-thematic concatenation and how all of the main ideas were clearly anticipated by different portions of Luke 14.

In the top row is the traditional name of the thematic unit; in the second row is a brief identification of the main idea Luke's unit is conveying; in the third row is the word/theme that connects that unit to the next unit (akin to the rabbinic *hiddush*); and in the fourth row are the verses in Luke 14 that anticipate these ideas (some anticipating the ideas explicitly, some implicitly).

Table 1. The Concatenation of Parables in Luke 15 and 16

Lost Sheep and Coin	Prodigal Son	Unjust Steward	Sayings on Money	Rich Man and Lazarus
The kingdom requires finding the lost (initiated by God) . . .	God accepts the “lost” who have previously squandered—to the chagrin of those who do not perceive themselves to be lost, thus alienating themselves from the “lost” . . .	Both groups should now prepare for the kingdom . . .	Using money wisely and disavowing loyalty to it is a tangible indicator of this preparation . . .	Therefore, believers should use wealth in humility to aid the poor and lost who will populate the kingdom.
“lost”	“squandering”	Using money	Moses’ Law and Abraham’s children	N/A
vv. 2, 5, 13, 21-23	vv. 1, 3, 6, 16-20, 24	vv. 15, 28-32	vv. 26-27, 33	vv. 7-11, 13-14, 24, 34-35

Bowen also sees an overall unity among the chapter 15 and 16 units, although his main piece of evidence is weakened a bit on closer examination. He correctly sees the Unjust Steward as the fourth in a series of five parables, but he sees the unifying element as the fact that each centers on the word οἶκος when it reaches its climax.⁸⁴ A minor problem with Bowen's theory is that the second parable of the five, the parable of the lost coin (15:8-9), includes a form of οἰκία, not οἶκος, in verse 8, and even this word does not appear at the climax of the story. Granted, the woman who loses the coin presumably invites people to her "home" to rejoice, but Luke does not explicitly use this word in verse 9. A more serious challenge to Bowen's suggestion is that references to "home" are ubiquitous throughout the NT, especially in Luke. There are thirty-one instances of the noun οἶκος (and seventy-four forms of οἶκ-/ώκ-) in the Third Gospel alone, the large majority of which are found in the Central Section. One reason for such a high frequency of the word is that the idea of "going home" often simply represents the end of a story or the natural completion of some activity (e.g., Luke 1:56; 5:24-25; 8:39; 18:14; 23:48; 24:12; and Acts 21:6), so many instances need not represent more than this simple literary convention. If the five parables in chapters 15-16 are intended to be taken together primarily because of their use of οἶκος, then a number of other Lukan parables with the same word at the climax presumably should be included. For example, immediately before this set of parables, the undeserving and marginalized are invited into a home (Luke 14:12-14, 21). In fact, there are five words built on the οἶκ- root in Luke 14—and eleven total in the three chapters before that—but only three in Luke 15. If

⁸⁴C. Edward Bowen, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward: *Oikos* as the Interpretative Key," *ExpTim* 112 (2000-01): 314. Coutts, "Studies in Texts," 55, also sees this parable as the fourth in a series of five, all from Luke's special source.

Luke is intending to use cognates of *olk-* in the way Bowen suggests, it is difficult to see where the ending points for this supposedly intentional usage should be drawn; it appears chapter 14, if not more, should also be included. As such, it seems unwise to build too much of an argument on such a common concluding word because the word does not stand out as significantly salient. Nevertheless, although Bowen's hypothesis seems to stretch the evidence too far and to convey a message that was likely coincidental for Luke, it is an intriguing suggestion that brings forth some interesting data loosely relating Luke 15 and 16. In sum, even without Bowen's argument on the table, there is plenty of evidence that Luke intended chapters 15 and 16 to be understood as a unity and a logical progression. Then, if one wishes to count Bowen's argument for more than this dissertation does, it only serves to strengthen the argument for the Luke 15-16 coherence.

Another scholar seeing the coherence of the Luke 15-16 material is Osborn, who has received relatively little attention from recent interpreters. (Even Ireland's nearly exhaustive bibliography does not even mention Osborn's work.) Osborn claims that in chapters 15 and 16, Luke is using indirect exposition, which is a way of expounding one parable by telling another.⁸⁵ In other words, "the Lost Coin and Lost Son clarify the Lost Sheep by saying a similar thing. The Elder Brother clarifies by saying something different and the Unjust Steward clarifies the Elder Brother. Dives/Lazarus clarifies the Unjust Steward by saying the same thing."⁸⁶ Despite its occasionally vague language, Osborn's thesis is appealing because it appears to be supporting the "concatenation" thesis proposed above, just with slightly different

⁸⁵E. F. Osborn, "Parable and Exposition," *ABR* 22 (1974): 14.

⁸⁶Ibid.

terminology. Judging by his article, one may assume that Osborn would probably agree that each unit, while developing its own theme, simultaneously prepares the way for the next unit.

Given the clear unity of all the material in chapters 15 and 16, one is left wondering how this collection of material came to be arranged thus. Stein offers several possible reasons why the material in chapter 16 follows the parables in chapter 15: (1) They both are parts of similar parable collections and are kept together because of their similar literary form; (2) They were already juxtaposed in Luke's source, so Luke merely transmitted them without altering the order; (3) Luke wanted to keep the sayings about the Pharisees (16:14-15) and the parable about the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31), which is addressed to the Pharisees, together with the three parables in chapter 15, which are also addressed to the Pharisees; or (4) Luke wanted to keep the parable of the prodigal son together with parable of the unjust steward, because both feature a form of διασκορπίζειν ("to squander"), first in 15:13 and then in 16:1.⁸⁷ While elements of all these explanations may be true, the one that will be examined more closely next is the last one because there is substantial evidence that the Prodigal Son and Unjust Steward were deliberately juxtaposed, and the διασκορπίζειν link is just the "tip of the iceberg" connecting the two. If it can be established that the two parables are similar, then it stands to reason that a proper understanding of the Prodigal Son would help to interpret the Unjust Steward (and vice versa).

⁸⁷Stein, *Luke*, NAC, vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 411. Kilgallen, "Luke 15 and 16," 374, does not think that the word διασκορπίζειν was the impetus for Luke to place the two parables side by side. However, given that the only two NT uses of this word in the metaphorical sense are in each of these two parables seems something more than a mere coincidence. Although this might not have been the only (or even main) factor behind Luke's redactional choice, it is one of these several lexical and thematic features binding the two parables together.

The Strong Link between the Unjust Steward and the Prodigal Son

The three parables in chapter 15 have traditionally been viewed as a trio of “lost” stories intended to be read together;⁸⁸ however, the evidence is overwhelming that the Prodigal Son should be considered at least as closely aligned with the Unjust Steward as with the two “lost” parables preceding it. The first line of evidence comes in the language linking the two parables. As discussed in the previous section, the two parables assume the same general audience; although Luke explicitly states that the disciples are being addressed by this parable, the Pharisees (16:14) are clearly still within earshot (from 15:2) and are, therefore, co-recipients of the parable.⁸⁹ Generally, the καὶ (v. 1) can be taken as a connector of the upcoming parable with the previous one.⁹⁰ More specifically, the καὶ before πρὸς indicates that there is no change of scene between the parables in chapter 15 and this parable.⁹¹ Luke uses this construction in connecting parables only two other times in the Third Gospel, in 14:5 and 18:9 (cf. also Acts 11:20). In both other instances it is probable that the audience remains the same before and after each καὶ . . . πρὸς. Moreover, the ἐλεγεν . . . καὶ construction also indicates a “continuity

⁸⁸One of the most recent examples of this tendency is Frans Jozef van Beeck, “‘Lost and Found’ in Luke 15: Biblical Interpretation and Self-Involvement,” *ExpTim* 114 (2003): 399-404. He claims that Luke 15 “squarely places the culmination of the sequence on the third story” and that the continuity of the three is “enhanced” by the interruption in v. 11 (*ibid.*, 400). It seems better, however, to view the break at v. 11 more naturally as a sign of discontinuity, not continuity.

⁸⁹I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 617. John P. Comiskey, “The Unjust Steward,” *TBT* 52 (1971): 231, claims that the parable was originally addressed to non-disciples (hence the crisis theme) and that later tradition directed it to the disciples as the monetary applications were added.

⁹⁰Fritz Rienecker, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, trans. Cleon Rogers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 188.

⁹¹Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 417, following Zahn.

with the preceding (cf. 12.54; 14.12).⁹² In sum, Luke's language clearly implies a continuity between the two contiguous parables.

Since there is no audience change between chapters 15 and 16, it raises the question about how closely the respective themes relate. Fitzmyer sees a shift in theme with this parable such that he groups the three parables in chapter 15 together, separate from the Unjust Steward. He claims, "Whereas the theme in chap. 15 was joy over the finding of what was lost, in this chapter it has to do mainly with the proper attitude toward and use of material possessions."⁹³ While there is some truth to his claim, a closer examination demonstrates that the Prodigal Son is thematically just as close to the Unjust Steward as it is to the preceding "lost" parables. There are two lines of evidence to demonstrate that Luke intended the two parables to be associated, not to be mere boundary markers indicating thematic discontinuity.

The first half of the evidence comes from the strong links between the Prodigal Son and the Unjust Steward. Donahue offers one of the most exhaustive lists of the similarities (granted, some are stronger pieces of evidence than others): both begin with "a certain man," the master/father character determines the outcome and speaks in the last verse of each; both feature a "squandering" protagonist; in both narratives, the title character comes up with a plan within the narrative but then switches to discourse in the form of soliloquy; both characters have self-serving motives; both have changed fortunes when accepted into the "house" (see Bowen's thesis above); in both stories literary

⁹²Greg W. Forbes, *The God of Old: The Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke's Gospel*, JSNTSup198 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 153.

⁹³Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, AB, vols. 28 and 28a (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981-85), 2:1095.

devices increase tension (return of the son and negotiations of the steward); in both cases the master/father does not know the plan and transcends it with a surprisingly benign response of accepting back (or at least commanding) the offender; and both parables are open-ended (the older brother's fate and the steward's job situation are both left in doubt; more about open-ended parables below).⁹⁴ Bailey offers a similar list (including many of the same points) and adds a few more similarities not found in Donahue: neither story is introduced immediately by the term "parable"; both protagonists throw themselves on the mercy of the master/father; the δὲ καὶ (16:1) indicates continued theme; both protagonists betray a trust; and neither offers excuses for his bad behavior.⁹⁵ Yet another connecting feature between the Prodigal Son and Unjust Steward is that the son's motivation for returning home is a shrewd self-preservation, "a prudence which puts means and end together and saves his life."⁹⁶ The son's "motivation is ever the same, not exactly to 'be with his father again', but to have the bread of servants."⁹⁷ Similarly, the steward's motivation is clearly self-interested. Another possible connection between the two parables is the explicit mention of οἱ υἱοὶ and τοὺς υἱοὺς in 16:8b, which echoes the Prodigal Son, where forms of υἱος appear eight times. Indeed, the younger son is a "son of this age" in the calculating sense that 16:8b conveys. Another similarity is that the

⁹⁴John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 167-68.

⁹⁵Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 109. Coutts, "Studies in Texts," 56, makes some of the same observation, claiming that both characters are reinstated by the superior character. Of course, his claim is weakened by the fact that there is no explicit evidence of this in the Unjust Steward.

⁹⁶Kilgallen, "Luke 15 and 16," 373.

⁹⁷Ibid. Kilgallen continues, "What was implicit (though clear) in [c]hapter 15 is brought forward for explicit comment at the next possible juncture, here at [c]hapter 16. The shrewdness of the young son to choose means to save himself" (ibid., 374).

older brother serves as the jealous character who perceives himself to be righteous (15:29: “I have never disobeyed your command”); in this respect, he acts as a clear symbol for the Pharisees who mock Jesus (16:14) and justify themselves (16:15), especially as it concerns the proper observance of the law (16:16, 17). Lastly, the steward sees his only hope in being accepted into the homes ($\epsilon\iota\varsigma\tau\circ\upsilon\varsigma\circ\o\kappa\omega\varsigma$ [16:4]), and the Prodigal’s only hope is quite similar (15:17-19). In sum, given these clear and numerous parallels between the Prodigal Son and Unjust Steward, it is evident that Luke deliberately placed them side by side, and one should read each in light of the other.⁹⁸

The second half of the evidence comes from the many dissimilarities between the two “lost” parables and the Prodigal Son. For example, the Prodigal Son differs from the first two in chapter 15 in its treatment of the acceptance of the sinner; the second half of the story, featuring the older son, is a unique component that acts as a more caustic indictment of the Pharisee and scribe onlookers.⁹⁹ This idea is explicitly absent in the first two “lost” parables. The Prodigal Son also differs from the two “lost” parables in chapter 15 because of the type of “rejoicing” that occurs; while the “lost” parables use a form of $\sigma\gamma\chi\alpha\iota\rho\omega$ (vv. 6, 9), the Prodigal Son features four uses of $\epsilon\bar{\nu}\phi\varphi\alpha\iota\nu\omega$.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸One might argue that Luke’s account is simply a reflection of the order in which Jesus told the parables—back-to-back in the first *Sitz im Leben*. Even if this is true, the same question remains: why?

⁹⁹Kilgallen, “Luke 15 and 16,” 372.

¹⁰⁰The difference between the two words is slight; in fact, both are often rendered the same or nearly the same in most English translations (e.g., in the NRSV and NASB [1995], “rejoice” for the former, “celebrate” for the latter). The only difference is that, as the $\sigma\upsilon\nu$ - prefix implies, $\sigma\gamma\chi\alpha\iota\rho\omega$ generally indicates a celebration with someone (BDAG, s.v., “ $\sigma\gamma\chi\alpha\iota\rho\omega$ ”), while $\epsilon\bar{\nu}\phi\varphi\alpha\iota\nu\omega$ denotes more of a general joy about something. Although $\epsilon\bar{\nu}\phi\varphi\alpha\iota\nu\omega$ was beginning to be used in a “purely secular” sense around the first-century (TDNT, s.v., “ $\epsilon\bar{\nu}\phi\varphi\alpha\iota\nu\omega$ ”), an examination of a number of pre-Christian Greek uses of each indicates Luke likely understood there to be a substantial overlap between the two meanings. Therefore, one should not read too much theologically into the Evangelist’s different uses in Luke 15. The main point here is that Luke simply uses different words, and therefore does not bind the two “lost” parables as closely to the Prodigal Son as he could have by using the same word consistently throughout all three parables; the

Moreover, both of the “lost” parables are followed by a specific judgment from Jesus, (*οὗτως*) λέγω ὑμῖν (vv. 7, 10), thus indicating that the matter is settled, whereas the same deliverance of judgment does not appear at the end of the Prodigal Son (but does at the end of the Unjust Steward, 16:9).

Despite the numerous connections between the Prodigal Son and Unjust Steward, one still cannot deny the similarity of the Prodigal Son (especially its first half) to the two preceding parables: something/body is “lost,” the lost object is returned to its rightful place, and there is celebration because of the return. Furthermore, there are several dissimilarities between the Prodigal Son and Unjust Steward to suggest that the two cannot be tied too closely. For example, the prodigal son is not called “unrighteous” like the steward, the son leaves on his own volition rather than by termination, the steward is not clearly accepted back in good standing by the master, the Prodigal Son does not have a detailed commentary following it, the Unjust Steward does not have a “second half,” the “honor” idea (as shaky as it is) cannot be argued as easily from the Prodigal Son, and the Unjust Steward has a clearer connection to the Rich Man and Lazarus ideas (especially in light of the applications about money). Moreover, although Kilgallen might be right in suggesting that a self-serving motivation is what is driving both the son and the steward,¹⁰¹ the son’s repentance is implicit in 15:18, 22 (cf. Luke 17:4), while the steward—as far as the reader knows—is still as much of a scoundrel as ever after the story ends. One must conclude from these facts that there is some warrant to the traditional grouping of the three parables in chapter 15 together. On the other

context of each parable (viz., a group celebration in each case) and the semantic overlap between the two words suggest that Luke could have used either word for all three parables, but he chose not to.

¹⁰¹So Kilgallen, “Luke 15 and 16,” 372.

hand, the numerous similarities with the Unjust Steward that Austin and others have pointed out are also undeniable. The problem occurs when an interpreter attempts to tie the Prodigal Son too closely to either side—the “lost” parables or the Unjust Steward—because it shares too many similarities with both sides to be sharply divided either way.

The Prodigal Son, then, is a good example of the aforementioned concatenation, whereby a parable overlaps simultaneously with the thematic and literary characteristics of both the preceding and subsequent units. As such, the Prodigal Son parable should more properly be understood as a *sui generis* transition parable (not entirely like the two more simple, single-pointed preceding parables), because the second half of the Prodigal Son shifts to ideas that will be more prominently displayed in the subsequent parables (returnee is motivated at least partially by self-interest, this return garners the jealousy [or envy] of the older brother [understood Pharisees] who is chastised by the authority [father] for being wrongheaded, etc.). Because of this division of themes, the parable of the son(s) may be understood either as a two-point parable (albeit with interdependent points), with one point for each distinct half (which could even be considered two different parables that happen to share different parts of the same plot timeline), or it may be considered a single point that has two distinct, yet closely related, applications. The first point/application is stated more simply by the “lost” parables, and the second point/application is stated more simply by the “appended” sayings and subsequent parable.

If one accepts the close tie between the Prodigal Son and Unjust Steward, it increases the Unjust Steward’s importance for Luke’s purposes. For, as Bovon points out, Luke tends to create a climax as the center of his passages and books, and the

Prodigal Son appears “exactly at the midpoint” of Luke’s Gospel, in the same way that the climactic council at Jerusalem stands at the middle of the text of Acts.¹⁰² If Bovon’s contention (that Luke’s literary structure provides a “literary synopsis and hermeneutical key, something like the *mise en abîme* of recent French criticism” at exactly the middle point¹⁰³) is correct, then it makes the Unjust Steward—the Prodigal Son’s literary partner—also into something akin to a Lukian synopsis or hermeneutical key. As such, the two clear ideas of eschatological decision and proper ethics regarding money are both at the heart of the Lukian message. There is, indeed, ample evidence throughout the rest of Luke to support both cases.

Literary Relationship of the Parable to the Rest of Chapter 16

Relationship to 16:8b-13. The “application” unit has been evaluated in a variety of ways: according to its essential originality and unity with the parable proper, as a unified segment unrelated to the parable, or as one or more secondary, loosely related applications to the parable. In favor of unity, Ireland points out that those who prefer the traditional “monetary” view tend to view verses 1-13 as a coherent unit, while those who see only the eschatological element in the parable tend to separate the parable proper (up

¹⁰²François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 3.

¹⁰³Ibid. Bovon does not explain more specifically in what sense the parable is the “midpoint,” but one may assume that he is using the term in at least two senses. The parable is very near (if not right at) the physical middle of the text as well as the thematic core. Whether one counts words, verses (admittedly anachronistic relative to the first-century composition), or pericopae, the Prodigal Son is somewhere very near the center. While the statement lacks mathematical precision, most could agree that the parable is around the halfway point of the Gospel. Moreover, in the Prodigal Son, the reader finds a coalescence of numerous themes and motifs prominent in Luke (some more explicit than others): God’s search for and gracious acceptance of the “lost” and sinful, the jealousy of the Jewish leaders (viz., Pharisees and scribes), the use of money, discipleship, the Great Reversal, etc.

to verse 7 or 8) from the secondary additions.¹⁰⁴ But even those outside the traditional fold have argued for the unity of verses 1-13. For example, Derrett, certainly no defender of the traditional position, claims that “Jesus’ speech does not end until the end of 13” and that this does not represent a comment by Luke.¹⁰⁵ Others are willing to admit that verses 8b-13 (or a substantial part of it) constitute a unity but cannot see the close connection to the preceding parable. For example, Craddock claims that each of the sayings in verses 10-13 “states a proverbial truth which in no way depends on the parable for its meaning.”¹⁰⁶

The majority opinion among scholars, however, is that verses 8b-13 constitute secondary applications created or compiled by either the early church or Luke in an attempt to make sense of the parable. Moreover, “the vast majority of commentators agree that the sayings from verses 9-13 are comments on the parable, whether or not they are apt for the purpose.”¹⁰⁷ The group of scholars who take the “secondary application” position covers a wide range—from Evangelical to extremely critical. Generally, the more critical the scholar the more likely the person is to see the secondary additions as an inept attempt at interpretation that misses the parable’s original point. On the more conservative end of the spectrum, Stein states about verses 9-18, “Quite likely Luke

¹⁰⁴Dennis J. Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: An Historical, Exegetical, and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1-13*, NovTSup 70 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), 12, 15, 18, 20-21.

¹⁰⁵J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Fresh Light on Lk XVI: II. Dives and Lazarus and the Preceding Sayings,” *NTS* 7 (1960-61): 365.

¹⁰⁶Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 191. So also John S. Kloppenborg, “The Dishonoured Master (Luke 16, 1-8a),” *Bib* 70 (1989): 475, and Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 110, who sees all of vv. 9-13 as a unity that is separate in meaning from the parable.

¹⁰⁷Hans J. B. Combrink, “Social-Scientific Perspective on the Parable of the ‘Unjust’ Steward (Lk 16:1-8a),” *Neot* 30 (1996): 291.

brought together various sayings of Jesus in this section that stood isolated in the tradition to help his readers understand what it means to act ‘shrewdly’ in light of the final judgment.”¹⁰⁸ This perspective is relatively conservative because it at least acknowledges that the material derives from Jesus himself; what is secondary is the primitive church’s arrangement and placing of the material after the parable. Slightly more critical, L. T. Johnson believes that the three sayings in verses 10-12 will never be entirely clear,”¹⁰⁹ although there is enough clarity for Johnson to claim that here are “two morals directly attached to the parable”: (1) children of light are to be discerning in anticipation of Christ’s return, and, (2) a specific way of being discerning is to demonstrate wisdom in use of possessions by giving alms as a means of storing up treasures in heaven (cf. 12:33).¹¹⁰ Even more critical, Coutts believes that the parable originally had no moral and that either Luke or the early church added the later sayings, “all of them more or less unsuitably, and all of them more suitable to other occasions.”¹¹¹ On the most critical extreme are scholars like Trudinger, who explains that verses 8b-13 are “windows through which we can view the work of early interpreters.”¹¹² Trudinger goes so far as to say that interpretations of the parable proper (vv. 1-8a) that rely on the “moralistic pronouncements” in 8b-13 are in error because these appendages would never have

¹⁰⁸Stein, *Luke*, 416.

¹⁰⁹Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, SP, vol. 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 248.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Coutts, “Studies in Texts,” 59.

¹¹²Trudinger, “Exposing the Depth of Oppression,” 123. Note that the plural “windows” implies that there are multiple, unrelated ideas here, each of which misses the point.

occurred to Jesus' hearers.¹¹³ Those who simply find one point in shrewdness (worldly shrewdness symbolizing Christian shrewdness) or almsgiving are "presumptuous," "simplistic," and "throw[n] into serious question."¹¹⁴

Although this dissertation does not presume to investigate the first or second *Sitz im Leben*, and thus does not attempt to reconstruct the exact words of Jesus or explain the primitive church's oral transmission, it appears safe to assume that the material in verses 8b-13 largely, if not entirely, derives from Jesus himself. What follows the parable appears to be something akin to a Mishna-like interpretation/application of the point presented in the parable. As demonstrated earlier, this coupling of story and application is to be expected from a *mashal*-influenced parable of Jesus. The relationship between the parable and the applications is not one of bifurcation but one of interdependent truths that cannot be disassociated without doing injustice to both. Whether any of these sayings originally followed the parable or not, it is probable that the parable already contained the monetary idea—whether explicitly or by tradition—by the time Luke had received it. Luke, knowing the parable to have a monetary point, included the most appropriate application from Jesus' words available to him. Therefore, at most, Luke made explicit what the parable already implied by attaching other material from Jesus explicitly articulating the theme. He did not misinterpret the parable, add a second, foreign meaning, or uncritically transmit discursive accretions from the primitive church.

It seems clear that the parable and the applications do have a different styles and probably derive from different sources; this, however, does not imply their

¹¹³Ibid., 125. Apparently, the appendages could occur to Luke (or someone even before him).

¹¹⁴Ibid., 126-27.

incompatibility. The present author might go so far as to say that verses 8b-13 were connected to the parable by Jesus himself (i.e., in the first *Sitz im Leben*) if it were not for some compelling statistics from Kim Paffenroth that imply that the two units (parable and application) derived from different sources. Paffenroth demonstrates that the material in verses 8b-13 originally did not belong to the same source(s) from which the rest of chapters 15 and 16 derived. He accomplishes this by examining the characteristically pre-Lukan vocabulary in twenty-three L pericopae and finds that the Unjust Steward (16:1b-8a) contains an unusually high twelve non-Lukan words (it only takes two non-Lukan words to be considered “significant”).¹¹⁵ Coincidentally, the only pericope with a larger number of non-Lukan words is its neighbor, the Prodigal Son, which contains fourteen non-Lukan words (but spans twenty-one verses—nearly three times more than the Unjust Steward). As such, based on vocabulary alone, the Unjust Steward is the most “non-Lukan” L pericope in the entire Third Gospel. If Paffenroth’s calculation that there is a “one in three chance that any occurrence of one of these [characteristically non-Lukan] words is in fact due to Luke himself”,¹¹⁶ is correct, then the likelihood that this parable is non-Lukan is 99.99981 percent.¹¹⁷

Paffenroth also examines six stylistic elements that are considered non-Lukan (abundant use of καὶ, ἵνα, παρά + accusative for comparison, dative after a verb of speaking, the position of a numeral before a noun, and historical present) and examines

¹¹⁵Kim Paffenroth, *The Story of Jesus according to L*, JSNTSup 147 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 74-85.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 85.

¹¹⁷In other words, the odds that this segment is from Luke himself is 0.333¹²—less than one in a half million. If Luke did not create this unit, then it must have been transmitted by him relatively unchanged, thus increasing the likelihood that these are the words of Jesus himself—perhaps even the *ipsissima verba*, given Luke’s resistance to change the wording.

thirty-two pericopae with respect to these elements.¹¹⁸ Paffenroth considers an occurrence of two or more of these elements in a pericope “especially significant.”¹¹⁹ The Lost Sheep/Coin (15:4-9) has five; the Prodigal Son (15:11-32), four; the Unjust Steward (16:1b-8a), four; the “applications” to the Unjust Steward (16:8b-12), only one; and the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31), five.¹²⁰ Therefore, in the full context of chapters 15 and 16, the clear aberration, in fact the only one of its class, is the application unit. In other words, all of the major sections of Luke 15-16 have a homogeneously high number of non-Lukan stylistic elements—with the one exception of the 16:8b-13 unit.

This evidence might be used to support a number of different theories about the material’s origin or transmission. One risks assigning too much weight to this evidence if it is not used with prudence, especially given that five and a half verses constitutes a relatively small sample portion, and given that it is somewhat of an argument from silence to claim that the lack of some stylistic elements demonstrates anything positively. However, used with cautious restraint, what the evidence at least does suggest is that the Unjust Steward and its applications are from two different sources, which either Luke or his source consolidated. If the “concatenation” hypothesis holds true, then the motivation is clear: the seed for a legitimate monetary reading was already inherent in the parable. Capitalizing on this thematic seed, and perhaps based on an already-existing explicitly-stated application, someone (e.g., Luke) linked the parable with the Pharisaic reaction (further evidence that the parable from the beginning had a

¹¹⁸Paffenroth, *Story of Jesus according to L*, 92-93.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 93.

¹²⁰Ibid., 92-93.

monetary meaning) by this other set of Jesus sayings. Moreover, despite the different sources, too much should not be made out of their differences; in fact, they are complementary. Bigo correctly sees a clear parallel between verses 4 and 9.¹²¹ Both feature the use of possessions with some larger, future goal in mind; the first is a response to a career crisis, the second is a response to the crisis of the already-not yet kingdom ushered in by Christ. So, here, one sees the interrelated themes of kingdom preparation and proper use of possessions, two ideas that are inextricably joined here. One cannot prepare for a kingdom without practical instructions for doing so, and fallen humans, with their propensity towards selfishness and squandering (e.g., the steward) need a motivation for using possessions with a higher purpose in mind.

Relationship to 16:14-15. Here the Pharisees return explicitly to the focus of Luke's narrative. A number of interpreters have made a strong case that verses 14-15 form the real heart of chapter 16 or at least serve as the link that connects the two halves. For example, Bovon claims that chapter 16 forms “une construction équilibrée,” with the parable of the unjust steward balanced by the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, where the reference to the Pharisees (vv. 14-15) simultaneously acts as the conclusion to the first parable and the beginning to the second parable.¹²² Similarly, Hendrickx argues that 16:14 is the “real introduction” to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus; thus, chapter 15 comprises a unity with verse 14 and its criticism of the love of money as the bond that

¹²¹P. Bigo, “La richesse comme intendance, dans l’Evangile. A propos de Luc 16, 1-9,” *NRT* 87 (1965): 267.

¹²²François Bovon, *L’Évangile selon Saint Luc (15, 1-19, 27)*, Commentaire du Nouveau Testament, vol. 3c (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2001), 66.

ties the two parables on either side together.¹²³ Along similar lines, Moore believes that the Pharisees in verse 14, which serves as the link between the two parables in chapter 16, function as an example of those who do not follow these two examples.¹²⁴ Kilgallen makes a similar point: verse 14 concerns avariciousness, “a subject to which both the preceding story of the manager . . . and the subsequent story of the rich man contribute.”¹²⁵ In sum, there is sufficient evidence that verses 14-15, which share features of the material on either side, provide a further concatenation of ideas, linking the positive example of eschatological preparedness and monetary wisdom with the negative example.

Although Luke does not consistently or universally present the Pharisees in a critical light,¹²⁶ in this part of the Third Gospel, Luke does not soften the case against them. The language of this small unit leaves no doubt that the Pharisees in this portion of Luke are clearly to be understood as contemptuous. By this point in the Gospel, Luke has already established that mocking and murmuring are the characteristic activities of the

¹²³Herman Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed., Studies in the Synoptic Gospels (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 171-72.

¹²⁴Francis John Moore, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” *ATR* 47 (1965): 105.

¹²⁵John J. Kilgallen, “The Purpose of Luke’s Divorce Text (16,18),” *Bib* 76 (1995): 234.

¹²⁶In fact, Luke not only often softens the Pharisees’ antagonism toward Jesus (compared to Synoptic parallels) but even portrays them as benign or even helpful (especially in Acts) on a few occasions. For example, in Luke 7:36-50, Jesus accepts a dinner invitation from a Pharisee named Simon. Simon refers to Jesus as “teacher” (v. 40), and he is described by Jesus to have “judged correctly” Jesus’ hypothetical question (v. 43). In 13:31, some of the Pharisees with no apparent guile or ulterior motives warn Jesus of Herod’s plot against him. Even in the midst of Luke’s depiction of Jesus’ most vitriolic condemnation of the Pharisees (i.e., the “Woes” passage directed at the Pharisees [and lawyers], in Luke 11:37-54), Jesus is described as the guest of a Pharisee, who invited Jesus to dine with him at his own house. In Acts, Luke’s characterization of the Pharisees is even more friendly. Luke even mentions that some of the Pharisees were Christians (Acts 15:5; perhaps in 21:20 also), albeit the legalistic Christians who forced the convention of the Jerusalem Council. In sum, Luke’s portrayal of the Pharisees was not unilaterally condemnatory; the balance that Luke demonstrates lends credibility to his more indicting material (as in Luke 15-16).

Pharisees in the presence of Jesus (5:30; 15:2).¹²⁷ Here, though, a new and more indicting term is introduced to explain their activity: ἔξεμυκτήριζον. The only other form of ἔξεμυκτήριζον in the NT is also found in Luke (23:35) to describe the leaders' taunting of Jesus during the crucifixion.¹²⁸ Although it is unclear that Luke was making a deliberate connection between these two groups, it appears to be no small coincidence that the Pharisees would be described with the same term (a term that is otherwise unknown in the NT). At least lexically, for Luke, the Pharisees' mocking behavior in chapters 15 and 16 was similar to that of those responsible who delighted in Jesus' crucifixion. In the same way that Jesus' murderers had rejected their own messiah, these Pharisees' attitude demonstrates that they are demonstrating the same kind of contempt for their messiah. Luke's understanding of them is plain: unless they repent, prepare for the kingdom, and demonstrate it by their use of money (at least), they face dire consequences, as the next parable implies. Luke's criticism was not for a single instance of mocking, but for their entire character. For the Pharisees' depiction as those who "justify" themselves before men is the same characterization Luke uses for it is similar to the Pharisees' description in 18:9 (so also the lawyer in 10:29); they simply never learn.¹²⁹

Their attitude is nothing short of idolatry before the God whose law they claim to guard. The problem is that the Pharisees ironically have the greatest external zeal for

¹²⁷David B. Gowler, "A Socio-narratological Character Analysis of the Pharisees in Luke-Acts" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989), 261.

¹²⁸Ibid., 262.

¹²⁹Johnson, *Gospel of Luke*, 250. This same character is implied also in 7:39 and numerous other places throughout the Gospels.

God's law but are also the ones most in defiance of it; thus, the condemned rich man of the following parable, the φιλάργυροι, and the Pharisees are all synonymous types.¹³⁰ Gowler explains that the Pharisees' love of money is a natural corollary to their desire for public recognition,¹³¹ which is simply a matter of pride. For this reason, their pride is condemned as βδέλυγμα, which is the word that the LXX used to represent something "utterly reprehensible," "unclean," and "idolatrous."¹³² Moreover, this word echoes Deuteronomy 24:4, where it is used in reference to divorce and remarriage,¹³³ the theme that is introduced just a few sentence later in Jesus' condemnation of them.

This self-justification is, indeed, a very real type of idolatry because they have placed themselves in the position reserved for God; not only do they have another God (thus breaking the first commandment, the epitome of the law for which they were the self-appointed sentinels), they have arrogated the honor to themselves (cf. 11:43; 12:1;

¹³⁰ Gowler, "Socio-narratological Character Analysis of the Pharisees in Luke-Acts," 263. See Luke 11:39, where Jesus in the same breath condemns both their feigned compliance with the law and their greed (also implied in 11:42).

¹³¹ Ibid., 261.

¹³² Johnson, *Gospel of Luke*, 250. Cf. Gen 43:32; Exod 8:26; Lev 5:2; 7:21; 11:10-42; Deut 17:1; 7:25; 12:31; 18:12; 27:15; 29:17; 32:16; Isa 2:8, 20; 17:8; 41:24; 44:19; Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11. It is ironic that the Pharisees, the self-styled experts on what was "clean" and "godly," were the ones who mock Jesus for his equating of mammon-serving and idolatry. It is especially noteworthy in the context of the Unjust Steward and its applications that the term βδέλυγμα is used in the LXX specifically in reference to dishonest business practices (Deut 25:13-16), the remarrying of a divorced wife (Deut 24:4), and worship that is merely superficial (Isa 1:13 and 66:3) (Johnson, *Gospel of Luke*, 255). The same grouping of the three kinds of "abomination" is found in CD 4:14-5:10, which refers to the "three nets of Satan": fornication by unlawful divorce and remarriage, love of riches, and profanation of the temple by not observing sexual purity regulations (*ibid.*). This parallel does not necessarily mean that Luke was grouping Jesus-sayings based on this Qumran precedent (as Johnson suggests as a possibility), or vice versa, but the grouping does at least demonstrate that the collection of sayings is not an inexplicable string of meandering *non sequiturs* that some commentators have made it out to be. At least one group of Jews in Jesus' time thought these ideas fit together perfectly well. Moreover, if one sees the sayings as organically related, not contrived, then it helps explain how all relate well to the parables before and after. (See also Derrett, "Fresh Light II," 378-80, who finds rabbinic sources that link the ideas of divorce and usury. Israel's usurious practices jeopardize its covenant with God, who threatens [at least temporarily] to "reject" Israel—language similar to a divorce. Of course, if one sees no usury in the preceding parable, even a clear rabbinic connection between usury and divorce is not germane.)

14:3, 7). The following parable mocks the values of the very ones who in the name of Yahweh would mock the Christ—in his ministry and on the cross. In an ironic twist, the very purity rules that they constructed are what made them unclean before God because “any person or thing that is abhorrent in the sight of God . . . is unclean.”¹³⁴

Bovon claims that verses 14 and 15 are redactional materials, 14-15a being Lukan and 15b being his received tradition (since βδέλυγμα “is not typical of the Third Gospel”).¹³⁵ This suggestion, however, is nothing more than speculation. The theme of these verses coheres well with the overall Lukan message because this section contains a mixture of upbraiding and a call to repentance, both common Lukan themes associated with the Pharisees.¹³⁶ Therefore, it is more productive to view the verses as a unity that work together to introduce the next material. Ellis offers a suggestion for how precisely these verses relate by explaining that there is a thematic-literary parallel between the two halves of verses 14-18 and the next parable. From his perspective, verses 14-15 anticipate verses 19-26 (both focus on the distinction between divine and human values), while verses 16-18 anticipate verses 27-31 (both focus on obeying Moses and the permanence of the law).¹³⁷

¹³³ Craig A. Evans, *Luke*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 246.

¹³⁴ Gowler, "Socio-narratological Character Analysis of the Pharisees in Luke-Acts," 266.

¹³⁵ Bovon, *Saint Luc*, 3:67 (present author's translation). (To be fair, it should be noted that βδέλυγμα is not really “typical” of any NT writer. It is used once in each of the Synoptics and three times in Revelation. Therefore, to draw any conclusions about whether 15b is received tradition is too bold; there is not enough evidence to argue either way. All three uses in the Synoptics are purportedly from the mouth of Jesus; however, since the Matthew and Mark references are parallels, there are only two unique uses.)

¹³⁶ Gowler, "A Socio-narratological Character Analysis of the Pharisees in Luke-Acts," 259-60. (Gowler offers substantially the same content in his discussion of Luke 16:14-31 in idem, *Host, Guest, Enemy, and Friend: Portraits of the Pharisees in Luke and Acts*, Emory Studies in Early Christianity 2 [New York: P. Lang, 1991], 257-63.)

¹³⁷ E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 201.

Relationship to 16:16-18. In this chapter, with only the exception of verse 13, verses 16-18 contain the only material paralleled in other Gospels; all of these verses have parallels in Matthew so are part of the Q material.¹³⁸ It is perhaps their very different contexts and placement in Matthew that has fueled speculation that these verses are misplaced by Luke. As with verses 8b-13, many interpreters have had difficulty understanding verses 16-18, so they often assume that the verses must be a misguided insertion of foreign material. For example, Fitzmyer sees verses 16-18 as an inexplicable intrusion of unrelated material and that the “two sayings distract from the theme” with the result that “one wonders why he [Luke] inserted here [these] sayings.”¹³⁹ Bailey too is skeptical of their appropriateness for this context, “Verse 17 seems to have been added by Jewish Christians close to Matthew who were nervous about the statement on the Law in verse 16. Verse 18 on divorce seems to have nothing to do with the context.”¹⁴⁰ Marshall also believes that Jesus’ teaching on divorce (16:18) “appears oddly in a section devoted primarily to teaching about wealth.”¹⁴¹ Despite these reservations from erudite biblical scholars, there is reason to believe that these verses are well suited in this bridge between parables.

The meaning and literary significance of verse 16 is much debated, and Hans Conzelmann’s *Die Mitte der Zeit*, which claimed 16:16 as the theological centerpiece of the entire Third Gospel, only fueled the argument. Byrne is probably closer to the mark

¹³⁸Luke 16:16 // Matt 11:12-13; Luke 16:17 // Matt 5:18; and Luke 16:18 // Matt 5:32.

¹³⁹Fitzmyer, *Gospel of Luke*, 1095.

¹⁴⁰Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 117.

¹⁴¹Marhsall, *Gospel of Luke*, 614.

when he makes a more modest claim for the literary unity of chapter 16 in which the two parables are tied together by verse 16.¹⁴² On the other end, there are others (mentioned above) who not only do not see 16:16 as a central verse but see it as an extraneous *non sequitur*. As is the case when there are two extremes, the middle ground often is to be favored. The middle ground here is that 16:16 is neither the central driving verse of Luke nor a curious deviation from the context. Verse 16, instead, is a congruous part of chapter 16 that continues the concatenation of thoughts by linking the two halves of the chapter together, emphasizing the importance of preparing correctly for the kingdom, and warning detractors (especially the Pharisees) of the grave consequences of their caviling.

The first question for understanding 16:16 is why Luke would introduce John the Baptist again at this point in the narrative; the mention of him at first seems out of place, and the reference to divorce law is contextually even less congruous. It is clear, though, that John's name here would have brought several connotations to the original readers of Luke. Bovon is certainly correct in stating that "John is a figure on the threshold of two eras with one foot in prophecy (as the last prophet), and the other foot in its fulfillment (as the first preacher of the good news)."¹⁴³ Therefore, one reason that John is introduced here is that he is the herald of the eschatological kingdom who bridges the OT prophets and Jesus; thus, he is an appropriate character to be mentioned immediately after a parable whose message is about preparation for that kingdom (a

¹⁴²B. Byrne, "Forceful Stewardship and Neglected Wealth: A Contemporary Reading of Luke 16," *Pacifica* 1 (1988): 1.

¹⁴³Bovon, *Luke 1*, Hermeneia, 2. Many commentators note that the terms μέχρι and ἕπεται τότε are ambiguous enough that they could either include John the Baptist or exclude him, so all attempts to divide salvation history into a certain number of time units (e.g., three by Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982], 16) based on this verse do so on a

message not unlike that of John himself). Secondly, if another point (or application) of the preceding parable is about money, then a reference to John is poignant. After hearing a message about the proper use of wealth, one would see the stark contrast between the lavish lifestyle and love of money characteristic of the aforementioned Pharisees and the ascetic lifestyle characteristic of John and his followers (5:33). Thirdly, it is no surprise to see a mention of John immediately after the condemnation of the Pharisees, for they were the very ones who had been called “vipers” by John.¹⁴⁴ The “wrath to come” that John warned about is the kingdom that Jesus refers to both in 16:16 and more directly in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, where the rich man’s lack of munificence is a direct indictment of the Pharisees’ attitude.¹⁴⁵

The next question is how the word βιάζεται is to be understood, for it may be taken as either a true middle or a passive, and it may be understood positively or negatively. The traditional interpretation of this use of βιάζεται from the time of the

shaky foundation (so argues Johnson, *Gospel of Luke*, 250). It is more reasonable to conclude that John has his place in both eras—before and during Christ’s ministry, a harbinger of the messiah until his execution.

¹⁴⁴Granted, in Luke 3:7, John directs the epithet “vipers” toward undefined onlookers, while it is Matthew who makes it clear that at least some of these offenders were Pharisees (3:7; 12:24-34; 23:33).

¹⁴⁵Perhaps the Pharisees even felt threatened by the competition from the disciples of John who fasted just like they did (5:33; 18:12); it is without question that they rejected John and his baptism (7:30) for some reason, and this is certainly a possible reason. If so, Jesus’ mention of John here in the presence of the Pharisees is yet another jab at their self-righteousness.

There is one piece of evidence that seems to show that verse 16 not only fits remarkably well at the center of chapter 16 but also ties the entire contents of the chapter with Luke’s introduction of John the Baptist. Surprisingly, it appears that this angle seems never to have been exploited systematically by any previous Lukan scholar. The evidence stems from several striking parallels between John’s entrance into the Lukan narrative (Luke 3) and chapter 16, where John is mentioned posthumously: the ideas of repentance and forgiveness are emphasized (v. 3); the epithet “brood of vipers” in reference to the Pharisees (v. 7); the boast that “we have Abraham” (v. 8) used ironically because they are illegitimate heirs of Abraham (cf. 16:24-26); the warning that “the axe is at the root . . . thrown into the fire” (v. 9) is not only eschatological but a metaphorical representation of the rich man in Hell (because he was rejected by Abraham; cf. 13:28); when asked how to prepare for the kingdom, John gives two answers—share a tunic and food (v. 11, i.e., give alms), in the same way that the prodigal son’s father gave him a coat and a feast; and the command to “collect no more than what you have been ordered” (v. 13), which is parallel not only to the steward’s cut (perhaps, depending on what the debt remission represented) but also Zaccheus’ own profits.

Patristics was *in bonam partem*; Danker, however, is correct in contending that the word is “almost always employed *in malam partem*.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, the Matthean parallel (11:12) supports this sense.¹⁴⁷ However, Danker’s explanation for this use here (i.e., since few are able to enter the kingdom [13:23-24],¹⁴⁸ the kingdom is the “victim” of a violent forced entrance¹⁴⁹) is not convincing. Bock summarizes well the four possible understandings of this word in the 16:16 context: a violent opposition to the kingdom, a negative forcible entry into the kingdom (as the Zealots), a positive forcible entry into the kingdom (i.e., the overwhelming response to Jesus’ message), and the insistent urging into the kingdom in face of opposition.¹⁵⁰ The third option is too positive (especially given the Pharisees’ mocking in 16:14-15), so one of the other options is preferable. Given the previous parable’s call to respond to imminent crisis (and the clearly implicit similar message in the next parable), the idea of urgent insisting is the best understanding. Therefore, Cortés and Gatti’s understanding of βιάζεται as a passive translated as “everyone is earnestly invited or urged to enter the kingdom”¹⁵¹ fits the context best. Bailey, taking his cue from a medieval Arabic translation, also understands it to be

¹⁴⁶ Frederick W. Danker, “Luke 16:16—An Opposition Logion,” *JBL* 77 (1958): 234. Also reflecting Danker’s perspective, see BDAG, s.v. “βιάζω,” which explains that this word “is most often used in the unfavorable sense of attack.” See examples in the discussion below.

¹⁴⁷ Here there is a clearly violent understanding of the word (“the violent take it by force” NRSV).

¹⁴⁸ Danker, “Luke 16:16—An Opposition Logion,” 235.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 236.

¹⁵⁰ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, 2 vols., BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994-96), 2:1352-53.

¹⁵¹ Juan B. Cortés and Florence M. Gatti, “On the Meaning of Luke 16:16,” *JBL* 106 (1987): 257. Cf. similar uses in the LXX that all denote an insistent urging: Gen 33:11; Judg 19:7; 2 Sam 13:25, 27; 4 Macc 11:25. Cf. Xen. *Oec.* 8.20 (“bent on attaining”) and especially Arist. *Pol.* 1281a (where the tyrant’s insistent “use of force” is lauded because it is based on a superior strength).

passive (with causative εἰς), “and everybody because of it is under pressure.”¹⁵²

However, given the imminence (indeed, arrival) of the kingdom in Christ and the Pharisaic opposition immediately before this verse, the “insistent urging” translation brings forth the sense more clearly than Bailey’s translation. In fact, even the English word “insistent” may be too weak for this context.

All forms and cognates of βια- in the NT (except for this example and its Matthean parallel) are found in Acts (2:2; 5:26; 21:35; 27:41), and in every case there is a clear meaning of violence by humans or natural forces.¹⁵³ Given all of the other instances in the NT, it is probable that the Lukan use of the word should also be understood with a vehement connotation. In the face of fervid opposition from many (namely, the Pharisees), Jesus is even more fervidly exhorting preparation for the kingdom. A reading of 16:16 that understands the word to include some kind of intensity or extreme force matches well the parables that preceded, in which the steward is suddenly, forcefully thrown into a crisis situation and must immediately give a reckoning and prepare to deal with the imminent consequences. So too those who knew the centuries-old messianic message of the prophets (again, namely, the Pharisees) now had to respond immediately to the similar, more pressing message of the messiah’s harbinger, John, and his referent, Jesus, the one who brings the imminent kingdom. In this section, the reader is bombarded with numerous allusions to, and even direct references to, the Law and the

¹⁵²Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 116.

¹⁵³See LXX examples where violence is assumed: Deut 22:25, 28 (both addressing rape); Esth 7:8 (“assault”); 2 Macc 14:41 (where troops are “forcing” down a door); 4 Macc 2:8 (“forced,” where, coincidentally, the love of money is being addressed); and 8:24. Cf. also similar examples from ancient literature using the same form of βιάζεται: Hom. *Iliad* 11.589 (“is oppressed [with missles”]); *Odyssey* 9.410 (“does violence”); Philo *Mos.* 1.108 (“[the gnat] forces its way through [the nostrils”]); *Leg.* 3.147 (“[an ascetic] is forced [to take food”]); *Her.* 310.2 (“compels”); Jos. *A.J.* 7.170 (“forced,” or “violated” [LCL],

Prophets. The Pharisees and Sadducees were continually battling over who was keeping the Law more precisely; so too, the corresponding Hillel-Shammai debate within the Pharisees indicates varying degrees of legalism even within these camps. Yet, Jesus here implies the ultimate weakness of both groups, both of whom by varying degrees had mitigated the Pentateuch's teachings on divorce, by claiming that none of the Law—not even a fraction of a letter—would fall away (v. 17). His specific example of the continuing validity of the law is the matter of divorce and remarriage (v. 18).

If Jesus were depicted here as introducing a teaching about marriage and divorce for its own sake, it would be contextually aberrant. That is not, however, what is going on here. The divorce-remarriage law is used as an example for making another point. Thus, Kilgallen is certainly correct in claiming that Luke “is not here teaching about divorce. Rather, he is speaking about a lesson to be learned from the irrevocability of marriage.”¹⁵⁴ Whether or not divorce was accepted in Jewish society (and to what extent it was accepted) is irrelevant for this discussion; what is clear from this verse is that Jesus presumed the indissolubility of marriage.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, the formulaic statement suggests a “maturity of expression, as though it had reached the point in tradition where it could be abstracted from its normal context and used as a self-contained *quasi* proverb.”¹⁵⁶ It is a “well-fashioned, free-floating saying. As such it is usable in both the literal and figurative senses. . . . [I]t is a succinct summary of much of the teaching of

speaking of Amnon’s rape of Tamar); Soph. *Ant.* 663 (“[one who] overbears [laws]”); Eur. *Orest.* 1623 (“defiance [of the state]”).

¹⁵⁴Kilgallen, “The Purpose of Luke’s Divorce Text (16,18),” 230.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 231. See also Matt 5:31-32; 19:9; Mark 10:11; and 1 Cor 7:10-11.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., 233.

Jesus about marriage/divorce.”¹⁵⁷ The language of this summary teaching makes the point clear. The enduring validity of the divorce law in 16:18 is demonstrated in part by the verb μοιχεύει, which is a gnomic present (as signaled by the πᾶς ὁ + participle); therefore, it presents a “general timeless fact” and is distinct from the stative present in that it is atemporal.¹⁵⁸ In other words, Jesus is claiming that the law’s teaching is immutable, though the Pharisees’ own teaching attempted to make it mutable. Although the Pharisees perceived themselves to be strict adherents of the law, Jesus proves that—at least with respect to divorce and remarriage—they are not. Ironically, it was the Pharisees and scribes, those who had laid “burdens hard to bare” (11:46) on the people, who were now responsible for the opposite transgressions.¹⁵⁹ Verse 18 is an implicit critique of their too-easy divorce regulations.¹⁶⁰ They were guilty of simultaneously lifting the burden God had placed on his people, while increasing the burden where God had been silent.

In sum, this unit (vv. 16-18) is making the point that although the “present is different from the past,” the Law and Prophets are still in effect (v. 17), as demonstrated by the continuing validity of the divorce regulations (v. 18).¹⁶¹ In 16:18, Jesus is merely reminding the Pharisees of the content of the law. On hearing the words, which

¹⁵⁷Ibid., 236.

¹⁵⁸Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 523.

¹⁵⁹Although the criticism in Luke 11:46 is expressly aimed at the “lawyers” (τοῖς νομικοῖς), it falls immediately on the heels of Jesus’ similar criticism of the Pharisees; it seems clear that the two groups and the two sets of criticisms should be understood as virtually interchangeable. The Matthean parallel helps prove this point; here it is clear that this particular criticism is directed at both “the scribes and the Pharisees [who] sit on Moses’ seat” (23:2-4).

¹⁶⁰Danker, “Luke 16:16—An Opposition Logion,” 233.

¹⁶¹Kilgallen, “The Purpose of Luke’s Divorce Text (16,18),” 238.

accurately reflect the rigidity of the Law (Lev 21:7, 14; Deut 24:1-4) and the Prophets (Jer 3:1; Mal 2:16) with respect to divorce, and comparing those clear words with their own teaching of easy divorce, they were indicted. Their legal machinations had not obviated the law. Although they had justified themselves via the law (16:15), it was this very law that condemned them. Jesus' clear reiteration of the law of divorce and remarriage was proof enough that they had been abolishing, or at least dampening, the law with their own human traditions. By virtue of their idolatrous self-justification, the Pharisees had set aside the law with respect to money. To prove that they were capable of setting aside the law in other matters, Jesus points to the matter of divorce. It is like Jesus is saying, "Look, you have set aside the law in the matter of divorce, so is it not possible that you are setting aside the law with respect to money too?" Finally, in order to put a fine point on it, Jesus then tells a parable to them to show what happens to a man who lays aside the law with respect to money, thus proving that he was not prepared for the kingdom. The unmistakable thematic parallel between verses 17 and 29 demonstrates that the parable is pointed directly at the Pharisees; therefore, verses 16-18 serve as the introduction to this parable.

Relationship to 16:19-31. The fact that 16:1 and 16:19 both begin with "Ανθρωπος (δέ) τις ἦν πλούσιος ("There was a certain rich man") implies that the two parables are to be understood together, and, indeed, this has been the opinion of most scholars. Like Bovon, Hendrickx, Killgallen, and others, Nolland believes that the two parables in Luke 16 are aptly placed together. He believes Luke probably inherited the two parables in chapter 16 together; he then has bound them together by the middle section, which thematically binds the two by placing the focus on wealth, demonstrating

the demand of the law concomitantly with the preaching of the kingdom of God.¹⁶² Similarly, Ball believes that the two parables in chapter 16 should be interpreted in parallel as a positive and negative example of verse 9; the steward makes use of wealth to gain friends, while the rich man does not.¹⁶³ Bock implies as much when he states that the main point of chapter 16 is that “one serves a master no matter what, so make sure that it is God. Serving God means that the disciple will be filled with generosity and faithfulness.”¹⁶⁴

Thus, there is a large scholarly consensus that the two parables in chapter 16 work well together, with the manager and the rich man serving as inverse examples. The manager shrewdly divests himself of worldly possession, thereby gaining favor with “friends,” garnering the approval of his master, and improving his status relative to the impending crisis. On the other hand, the rich man took his wealth to the grave with him, was forcibly divested of the wealth only by death, and ends condemned by Abraham (with implicit condemnation to his entire family as well). There is also a parallel between the debtors and Lazarus; both begin the parable in unenviable positions, and both end up with reward—partial canceling of debt and eternal life, respectively. Thus, all parties involved play a part in Luke’s “Great Reversal” theme. Lazarus, who has done nothing in the parable deserving of exaltation (especially in the Pharisees’ opinion), is saved, while the rich man, who would have been deemed as “deserving” (mainly by the Pharisees), is condemned.

¹⁶²Nolland, *Luke*, 2:796.

¹⁶³Michael Ball, “The Parables of the Unjust Steward and the Rich Man and Lazarus.” *ExpTim* 106 (1995): 329.

¹⁶⁴Bock, *Luke*, 2:1324.

It is impossible to miss the two themes of “money” and “eschatology” in Lazarus and the Rich Man. Therefore, if one is supposed to understand the two parables in chapter 16 together, then it makes sense that the Unjust Steward would reveal the same themes. As this dissertation had contended from the beginning, these are exactly the two points that it does yield. Bock links the ideas together well, “Association with the eschaton has ethical, worldview, and lifestyle implications—even down to the use of personal resources.”¹⁶⁵ Also seeing the proper place of both themes, Kilgallen argues that although the “plain point” of this final parable is on the proper use of money, the overarching theme over all of Luke 15 and 16 is “an encouragement to a prudence to use the proper means to the goal of salvation.”¹⁶⁶ Thus, money, preparation for the kingdom, and salvation are all inextricably tied together throughout all of Luke 15-16, and the Unjust Steward should be seen as no exception.

Literary Relationship of the Parable to the Lukan Central Section

Different explanations for the purpose of the Central Section abound: Jesus’ last journey to Jerusalem with perhaps one or two other journeys, an account of two journeys to Jerusalem, Jesus’ ministry in Peraea, Jesus’ ministry in Samaria, a fragment of an independent Gospel, a Christian Deuteronomy, a collection of independent units gathered around a travel motif, etc.¹⁶⁷ There are even more explanations for the starting

¹⁶⁵Ibid., 2:1322.

¹⁶⁶Kilgallen, “Luke 15 and 16,” 376.

¹⁶⁷G. Ogg, “The Central Section of the Gospel according to St. Luke,” *NTS* 18 (1971-72): 39-40. Ogg’s premise in this article is that Luke was attempting to place units chronologically while conflating two streams of tradition (*ibid.*, 40, 49). However, evidence of this aim in Luke is lacking, and it requires four or more separate redactional periods of the material in the Central Section, all of which are conjecture (*ibid.*, 53).

and (especially) ending points of the section—almost as many suggestions as there are interpreters.¹⁶⁸ The purpose, arrangement, and endpoints of Luke's Central Section will not be discussed in full here because all three issues are open to intense debate and have been dealt with in fine detail elsewhere.¹⁶⁹ The objective here is modest: to demonstrate that many of the commonly recognized themes of the Central Section cohere perfectly with the interpretation of the Unjust Steward presented to this point.

Although much about the Central Section is up for debate, what is not debatable is that the Central Section is one of the most didactic and parable-rich of the Gospels; the focus is teaching rather than miracles. Of Luke's twenty-four parables, seventeen are found in Luke's Central Section, which Kilgallen calls a segment of “intense teaching.”¹⁷⁰ Although the section is commonly called the “Travel Narrative,” it does not purport to give a chronological or geographical account of Jesus' last trek to

¹⁶⁸ Fitzmyer, “Story of the Dishonest Manager,” 24, places endpoints as 9:51 and 19:27. Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 146, places the endpoints at 9:51 and 19:28.

¹⁶⁹ For works dealing with the Central section, see Craig L. Blomberg, “Midrash, Chiasmus, and the Outline of Luke's Central Section,” in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies in Midrash and Historiography*, vol. 3, ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983), 217-61; Hobert K. Farrell, “The Structure and Theology of Luke's Central Section,” *Trinity Journal*, n.s., 7 (1986), 33-54; James L. Resseguie, “Interpretation of Luke's Central Section (9:51-19:44) since 1856,” *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 5, no. 2 (1975): 3-36; and Frank Stagg, “The Journey toward Jerusalem in Luke's Gospel. Luke 9:51-19:27,” *RevExp* 64 (1967): 499-512. See also James L. Resseguie, “Point of View in the Central Section of Luke (9:51-19:44),” *JETS* 25 (1982): 41, who identifies ten different analyses about the main thrust of the central section: christological, didactic, instruction for the disciples, a Christian Deuteronomy, etc. One of the most recent analyses of the Central Section is Thomas P. Osborne, “Deux grandes structures concentriques centrales et un nouvelle approche du plan global de l'évangile de Luc (second partie),” *RB* 110 (2003): 552-81. Osborne identifies two large chiastic structures within the Central Section, and in the second (13:10-19:10), the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is the “texte central” (*ibid.*, 553). However, other than this and a few other passing references, Osborne gives no attention to chapters 15 or 16 in the entire article. A better explanation of the relations of the Unjust Steward to the Central Section is Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 139-56, who summarizes well all of the major possibilities for explaining the Central Section, including proposals that offer mainly chronological, literary, theological, and practical explanations.

¹⁷⁰ John J. Kilgallen, “Parables in the Gospel of Luke,” *Chicago Studies* 38 (1999): 273.

Jerusalem but rather contains “various journey motives” (e.g., 9:51; 13:22; 17:11).¹⁷¹ So, rather than focusing on the geographical or chronological features of the Central Section, it appears more productive here to identify Jesus’ main teaching themes and see how they relate to the Unjust Steward. The intimately interrelated themes of discipleship (especially the believer’s use of money), eschatological preparation, and Pharisee indictment are three of the most salient of the Central Section, and all impinge on the Unjust Steward directly.

Regardless of the Central Section’s endpoints, most can agree that the Unjust Steward is located at the physical core of the Central Section. Topel identifies this parable as part of the 14:25-17:11 travel unit, which begins with discussions about the cost of discipleship and the disregard one should have for the world’s concerns; the section in general also speaks of love of neighbor typified by generosity and forgiveness.¹⁷² It would be a gross oversimplification to say that that the Lukan idea of discipleship is simply monetary generosity; however, for Luke, one’s use of money is certainly one of the most obvious indicators of one’s discipleship. In fact, Luke’s Jesus metaphorically represents the cost of discipleship at the beginning of this unit with the monetary “cost” ($\tauὴν δαπάνην$, a NT hapax [14:28]) of building a tower. Therefore, it is in line with the Central Section context to view the Unjust Steward, as du Plessis does, as an exhortation about the correct use of money for the true disciple.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹I. J. du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?—Another Look at the Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13),” *Neot* 24 (1990): 2.

¹⁷²L. John Topel, “On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward: Lk 16:1-13,” *CBQ* 37 (1975): 221-22.

¹⁷³Du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm,” 3-4.

The claim that the Unjust Steward is (at least partially) exhorting financial generosity is strengthened by comparing the Unjust Steward with a similar Central Section pericope. That almsgiving is at least partially in mind in 16:9 especially is implied by the clear parallels between 12:33 and 16:9.¹⁷⁴ Hiers best exploits the parallels between the two verses: both refer to τὰ ὑπάρχοντα (the only two accusative uses of this word in Luke); both use ἔαυτοῖς ποιήσατε (or ποιήσατε ἔαυτοῖς) in reference to the use of these possessions (the only two juxtapositions of these two words in the NT; in fact, besides Luke 3:8, the word ποιήσατε itself is never used elsewhere in all of Luke-Acts); and one finds only five occurrences of any form of (ἀν)εκλειπ- in the NT, two of which are in these two verses, both referring to the ephemeral nature of worldly wealth.¹⁷⁵ The main difference between 12:33 and 16:9 is that the former explicitly mentions the giving of “alms” (ἐλεημοσύνην), while 16:9 does not; however, given the close verbal parallels between the two verses, it seems reasonable to assume that the idea of “alms” should be interpolated into 16:9, especially since 12:33 had already set the precedent for the reader shortly before the 16:9 material is introduced.

Limiting the meaning of the Unjust Steward to a purely monetary interpretation, however, misses the parable’s relationship to another Central Section motif: eschatological preparation. Like previous interpreters, Shellard also identifies the “true focus” of the Central Section as discipleship, explaining that this discipleship manifests itself in several recurring themes: mission, repentance, prayer, proper use of

¹⁷⁴Richard H. Hiers, “Friends by Unrighteous Mammon: The Eschatological Proletariat (Luke 16:9),” *JAAR* 38 (1970): 33-34.

¹⁷⁵Ibid.

possessions, the kingdom of God, and the proper behavior to prepare for the kingdom.¹⁷⁶

The last three of these themes most clearly coalesce in the Unjust Steward. Jesus' aforementioned metaphor of building a tower is like the Unjust Steward because, although both feature a monetary illustration, both are using that illustration to make a point about preparation for the kingdom. This message is made clear when one considers the fact that following the tower-building illustration is a metaphor about preparing for war (Luke 14:28-32), a crisis scenario not unlike the impending kingdom crisis.

Moreover, immediately after this section (v. 33), there is an exhortation by Jesus to leave all of one's own possessions in order to follow him. In other words, both Luke 14 and 16 closely tie true discipleship via proper use of possessions with eschatological preparedness.

Moreover, the fact that Luke places the Unjust Steward in the middle of this Central Section is significant. As the ministry of Jesus was drawing to its end, and as the theme of his teaching turned to preparation for the end, one may assume this parable is pointed toward that goal too. Although Jesus' parables often mention or imply the coming kingdom of God, that emphasis is more pronounced in Luke's central section.¹⁷⁷

The first step toward this kingdom preparedness is repentance and acceptance of the kingdom's arrival. That repentance is a key theme in the Central Section cannot be missed, for there are as many cognate uses of the verb μετανοέω in Luke 13:3-17:4 as

¹⁷⁶Barbara Shellard, *New Light on Luke: Its Purpose, Sources, and Literary Context*, JSNTSup 215 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 118.

¹⁷⁷Du Plessis, "Philanthropy or Sarcasm," 3.

there are in all of the other three gospels combined.¹⁷⁸ Since chapters 13 and 14 clearly deal with repentance, there is also a link between these chapters and chapter 15 and 16, for, as Kilgallen explains, “The prudence [cf. Unjust Steward] which leads to happiness involves repentance.”¹⁷⁹

The last major theme pervading the Central Section is the censure of the Pharisees. Ressegueie astutely notices that in the Central Section, there is a “rhythmic oscillation between the audiences—the disciples or crowd on the one hand and the Pharisees and the scribes on the other.”¹⁸⁰ This appears to be an intentional literary maneuver on Luke’s part to provide a repeated contrast between those who truly seek discipleship and those who shun it in favor of their own self-righteousness, those who anticipate the kingdom’s arrival and those who should dread it. Ressegueie further explains that psychological observations within the Central Section narrative are often “highly evaluative,” revealing motivations of the characters, especially as their motivations differ from Jesus’.¹⁸¹ It is at these points of psychological evaluation where Luke paints the most depraved portraits of the Pharisees. He characterizes the motivations of the Pharisees with harsher terms here in the Central Section than in the

¹⁷⁸ Matt 3:2; 4:17; 11:20, 21; 12:41; Mark 1:15; 6:12; Luke 10:13; 11:32; 13:3, 5; 15:7, 10; 16:30; 17:3, 4.

¹⁷⁹ Kilgallen, “Luke 15 and 16,” 376. See the exhortation, undoubtedly well known in the first generations after Jesus, in Matt 4:17: “Repent [chapters 13-14], for the kingdom has come near [chapters 15-16].”

¹⁸⁰ Ressegueie, “Point of View in the Central Section of Luke (9:51-19:44),” 43. Ressegueie cites twenty-three shifts in audience in Luke’s Central Section, almost every one representing this kind of shift mentioned in his quotation, in order to demonstrate an intentional dichotomy between the two conflicting points of view. Ressegueie, in fact, claims that the entire purpose of the central section “is to show forth two ideological points of view [i.e., the “exaltation-oriented” and “humiliation-oriented” points of view] in conflict with each other” (*ibid.*, 44). In many of the parables, those representing the opposing points of view experience a role reversal, emphasizing that “only one point of view is acceptable . . . one is correct and the other is wrong” (*ibid.*, 46-47).

rest of the gospel: they are “astonished” at Jesus’ defiance of their purity regulations (11:38), are constantly “watching” Jesus to find fault (11:53; 14:1), “murmured” because Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners (15:1), and are “lovers of money” (16:14).¹⁸² In light of the Lukan depiction of the Pharisees in the Central Section, Lunt can be counted as correct when he identifies this parable as the “penultimate member in a series of parables mainly critical of the Pharisees,”¹⁸³ even though the Unjust Steward is explicitly directed toward the disciples (16:1). Bovon notices several themes at play in the middle portion of the Central Section: “God’s magnanimity toward the lost,” “greed as an obstacle to the acceptance of salvation,” and “jealousy on the part of the chosen people.”¹⁸⁴ Clearly, all of these themes indict mainly, if not exclusively, the Pharisees, who lack magnanimity, harbor greed, reject the offer of salvation, and are jealous of their unworthy, wastrel “younger brothers” (15:28-30) who are now accepted warmly into the kingdom.

Du Plessis is correct in stating that an important theme in this section is the surprise elicited by the unexpected forgiveness of one who has not merited it.¹⁸⁵ No one is more surprised—indeed, appalled—by such unwarranted forgiveness than the Pharisees. Not only are they unwilling to share their inheritance to the kingdom with these libertine *hoi polloi*, but they also are unwilling to share their material inheritance

¹⁸¹Ibid., 42-43.

¹⁸²Ibid., 43.

¹⁸³Ronald G. Lunt, “Expounding the Parables: III. The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-15),” *ExpTim* 77 (1965-66): 132.

¹⁸⁴Bovon, *Luke 1*, Hermeneia, 2-3. Bovon also sees this subdivision as “the mid-point of the Gospel,” although his endpoints for the middle division of the Central Section are 13:22 and 17:10.

¹⁸⁵Du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm,” 4.

with ones so undeserving. For this reason, the Unjust Steward and its applications provoke their ridicule; they are not preparing for the kingdom, do not realize the crisis, and are not using their possessions properly in response. Their derision is a sign that they, in fact, are not the inheritors of the kingdom that they perceive themselves to be. As the concluding parable (16:19-31) implies, in the final day a great reversal will demonstrate that their putative inheritance from Abraham, Moses, and the prophets (16:29) is illusory, and the likes of wretched Lazarus will replace them in the seats of honor (11:43; 14:7; 20:46; cf. Matt 23:2, 6).

Possible Literary Conventions

Open-ended Parables

For someone interested in the story for the story's sake, the Unjust Steward seems to be lacking a satisfying ending. What happened to the manager? Did the master accept him back because of his shrewdness? Did he still release him only to have the manager accepted for hire by one of the debtors? Did the master, despite his praise for the manager's shrewdness, nevertheless decide to litigate or exact some kind of revenge? One is reminded of the conclusion (or lack thereof) in the previous parable, where the reader is left with no information about what happened with the querulous older brother. Was he convinced or touched by the father's explanation? Did he still resent the younger brother's reception? Did he too accept the younger brother? Both of these are open-ended parables lacking the kind of clear finality that characterizes the two, less complex parables that begin Luke 15.

Open-ended parables are unique to the Third Gospel (e.g. fig tree, banquet, prodigal son, good Samaritan).¹⁸⁶ Even the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus has a measure of uncertainty at the end (16:31), at least insofar as the salvation of the rich man's brothers is concerned. There are some clues why Luke would choose to leave stories without a decisive ending. One explanation for these open endings is that the parables are not primarily intended to entertain but to teach a truth. Having established the truth, there is no need to finish the story for entertainment value. Note especially the ending of the book of Acts. Assuming Luke knew what happened to Paul after his Roman imprisonment, it is at first surprising that he would not have informed the reader. However, if one recognizes that he has accomplished his purpose with Paul in prison, there is no need for him to say more. In the same way that Luke felt at liberty to abandon the story of Peter in Acts 12 (except for a brief reference in 15:7), he also abandons the story of Paul when his purpose is completed. Luke is the only recorder of Paul's end—or lack thereof—and is the only recorder of the Unjust Steward, so it is possible that he treated both with the same attitude.

Another reason for the open-ended parables is that Luke's Jesus often prefers to end a parable at the point where the "shock value" is at its highest. To have a swindled master praise the subordinate swindler for his wisdom is the most shocking ending possible. If this is simply where Jesus ended the parable, then Luke cannot be faulted for transmitting it unaltered. Jesus too did not tell stories simply for their entertainment value; the parables had a theological and practical point. Following Funk's comments about the often shocking and ambiguous characters and endings in Jesus' parables,

¹⁸⁶Ball, "Parables of the Unjust Steward and the Rich Man and Lazarus," 330.

Wierzbicka claims that Jesus “deliberately compelled his addressees to work out for themselves what a given story really meant.”¹⁸⁷ Her suggestion is not without merit; indeed, the hundreds of scholars who have struggled with this passage throughout the centuries prove that if this was Jesus’ strategy, he was wholly successful. Her contention that “Jesus seems to avoid thoroughly positive characters as models altogether”¹⁸⁸ might be a bit overstated, but it is reflective of the true nature of Jesus’ parables, which forced the often startled hearer to ruminate on and act upon the truth about which he spoke. Perhaps another related reason for the unconcluded ending is that an unconcluded story brings the events up to the present; to end with the proverbial “and they all lived happily ever after” leaves the story in the past as a completed event. If the story is left in the present, it more effectively challenges the hearer, who is forced to “do something” with the received message.

Interior Monologue

Some of Jesus’ parables feature a soliloquy in which the lead character reasons to himself and reveals his motivation for action. Although this literary device is “rarely if ever employed” in the Gospels (or, for that matter, any other ancient literature besides Greek drama and epic poetry), Luke uses the device with relative frequency.¹⁸⁹ The steward’s question τί ποιήσω is a “common idiom” found frequently in Luke (3:10, 12,

¹⁸⁷Anna Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 417.

¹⁸⁸Ibid., 418.

¹⁸⁹Philip Sellew, “Interior Monologue as a Narrative Device in the Parables of Luke,” *JBL* 111 (1992): 239. The six instances of interior monologue in Lukian parables are found in the stories of the rich, foolish farmer (12:17-19), the unfaithful slave (12:45), the prodigal son (15:17-19), the unjust steward (16:3-4), the unjust judge (18:4-5), and the vineyard owner (20:13). Cf. M. Niehoff, “Do Biblical

14; 10:25; 12:17; 18:18; 20:13).¹⁹⁰ The dative form ἐαυτῷ is used seven times in Luke (7:39; 9:47; 12:17, 21; 16:3; 8:4; 19:12). Five of those times are clear instances of interior monologue (four involving a character in a parable and one involving a Pharisee). Coincidentally, one of the two dative occurrences of ἐαυτῷ that does not involve internal monologue (9:47) mentions that Jesus knew the “inner thoughts” (NRSV) of humans, and the other instance (7:39) at least implies Jesus’ knowledge of Simon the Pharisee’s inner thoughts. Compared to Luke, the other Synoptics are less willing to use interior monologue. The dative ἐαυτῷ is used only once in each of the other two Synoptic Gospels (Matt 13:21; Mark 5:30), and neither involves internal dialogue. Moreover, a similar form, εἰς ἐαυτὸν, is found in Luke 15:17 (in another instance of internal dialogue) but nowhere else in the Synoptics. Since Luke much more frequently uses internal dialogue to reveal a person’s thoughts (see also Acts 10:17 and 12:11), and since those thoughts are often key to understanding the person’s subsequent behavior, one should give special weight to the steward’s internal dialogue as a key to understanding the purpose of his action.

Whereas ancient Greek literature would sometimes give access to the deepest emotions of the characters, narratives in the OT with interior monologue are typically “more hesitant to provide direct access to its characters’ thoughts.”¹⁹¹ Matthew and Mark

Characters Talk to Themselves? Narrative Modes of Representing Inner Speech in Early Biblical Fiction,” *JBL* 111 (1992): 577-95.

¹⁹⁰ Shellard, *New Light on Luke*, 120. Cf. Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 234, who claims that “soliloquy is not unusual in rabbinic parables.”

¹⁹¹ Sellew, “Interior Monologue,” 240-41. Sellew provides heroic and poignant Greco-Roman examples from Homer, Apollonius, Vergil, Ovid, Xenophon, Longus and contrasts those examples with King Saul’s unheroic, treacherous interior monologue in 1 Sam 18:17b (absent from LXX) and 21a: “Then Saul said to David, ‘Here is my elder daughter Merab; I will give her to you as a wife; only be valiant for me and fight the LORD’s battles.’ For Saul thought, ‘I will not raise a hand against him; let the Philistines

are more characteristic of this OT pattern, but Luke leans more closely toward the more emotionally intimate Greek stories. Luke's dependence on (or even similarity to) the Greek literature, however, should not be overstated. Although Luke's use of interior monologue is relatively unparalleled by Matthew and Mark, he does not copy the Greek form either. Luke limits such interior conversations to brief (usually one- or two-sentence) statements when a character is at a point of crisis, unlike the more lengthy, sympathetic interior monologues found in Greco-Roman literature.¹⁹² Thus, Luke does not deploy interior monologue for exactly the same sympathizing purpose as his Greek predecessors. DeSilva argues that Luke's use of internal monologue "serves to make the audience further identify itself with the steward. Taken together with the other parables [that employ internal monologue in Luke], this inward reflection suggests the greater significance of the moment of crisis and decision."¹⁹³ Although DeSilva is correct in pointing to the "crisis" focus of Lukan interior monologues, it seems more sensible to consider the use of this device as less a matter of "identification" (which connotes the readers' sympathy or empathy) and more a matter of motivation. Luke is not primarily attempting to help the reader identify closely with the deliberating characters; he simply wants to reveal why they do what they do.

The reason for shying away from the word "identification" in favor of motivation is that the characters depicted by Luke with interior monologue tend to be

deal with him.' David said to Saul, 'Who am I and who are my kinsfolk, my father's family in Israel, that I should be son-in-law to the king?' But at the time when Saul's daughter Merab should have been given to David, she was given to Adriel the Meholathite as a wife. Now Saul's daughter Michal loved David. Saul was told, and the thing pleased him. Saul thought, 'Let me give her to him that she may be a snare for him and that the hand of the Philistines may be against him.' Therefore Saul said to David a second time, 'You shall now be my son-in-law'" (NRSV).

¹⁹²Sellew, "Interior Monologue," 241.

¹⁹³DeSilva, "Parable of the Prudent Steward," 260.

self-interested—and even immoral—characters who use reason to escape punishment, avoid consequences for their actions, or improve their conditions in some other way (usually, monetarily).¹⁹⁴ Therefore, Luke’s purpose in using the interior monologue is not so that the reader can sympathize with the character’s plight or imitate his action; the point is to reveal the character’s motivation.

The one apparent exception to the self-interestedness of the character depicted with an interior monologue is the vineyard owner in Luke 20:9-16. However, for several reasons one may partition off this example as the exception that proves the rule. For one thing, the parallel passage in Mark 12:6 shows that the parable existed in this form (including the master’s rationalization) prior to Luke’s reception of it (cf. also *Gos. Thom.* 65); the addition of “What shall I do?” (similar to the farmer’s question in 12:17) in Luke makes it seem slightly more like an interior monologue, but the recipient of his address is left unstated (i.e., it is not explicitly stated “to himself,” for example).¹⁹⁵ If Luke felt constrained to keep the parable somewhat close to its received form, then he would have been limited in his ability to change this feature of the passage. Secondly, many interpreters see the master’s role to be parallel to God.¹⁹⁶ If this perspective is correct, the kind of self-interest is different (i.e., not worldly or humanly self-seeking). To claim that God is self-interested is different from claiming a human to be self-interested; God’s self-interest is a matter of glory, while a human’s self-interest is a matter of pride and idolatry. In this parable, the “self-interested” action culminated in the

¹⁹⁴Sellew, “Interior Monologue,” 243. E.g., Luke 12:17-19; 12:45; 15:17-19; 18:4-5.

¹⁹⁵Ibid., 248.

¹⁹⁶The Greek version of this story in *Gos. Thom.* 65 even refers to the owner as χρηστός.

sacrificial commission of his own son to be slaughtered. Another reason that the Wicked Tenants parable should be considered separate from Luke's other interior monologues is that this is the least obvious example of interior monologue among the six alleged parabolic interior monologues; in this parable, the owner does not reason "to himself" but merely asks what he is to do. In sum, while the interior monologue of the Wicked Tenants does reveal the protagonist's motivation, this motivation is qualitatively different from the self-seeking, even conniving, planning that characterizes all of the other Lukian interior monologues

The preceding examination has demonstrated, then, that in the Unjust Steward, the purpose of the interior monologue is to help the reader understand the intensity of the crisis and to demonstrate the self-interested motivation leading to the steward's quick shrewdness, the very matter for which he is later praised by the master.

Praised Slave/Admired Rascal Theme

One idea that has received much attention in recent scholarship is the similarity of this parable to other "praised rascal" or "tricky slave" stories in antiquity. Although the parallels have often been exaggerated, the similar stories from the Greco-Roman world do at least establish the existence of ancient stories, often intended to teach a moral, in which the hero is less than admirable but equal to the main point the storyteller is attempting to convey. The relative commonness of these stories can be of limited help for explaining the Unjust Steward as long as the evidence is not pressed too far. Unfortunately, demanding too much from the evidence is exactly what many recent interpreters have done.

Much of the credit (or blame) for this recent development belongs to Mary Ann Beavis, whose eighteen-page study of the Unjust Steward in *JBL* (1992) has been cited by almost all subsequent exegetes. It is important to discuss this study at length because it has not only been quite influential but also because it is so full of problems and false parallels that future interpreters need to be forewarned of the pitfalls with Beavis's interpretation. Following Via, Beavis draws evidence from other ancient literature, like *Life of Aesop* and comedies of Plautus, to demonstrate that in Greco-Roman society stories about successful and admired trickster-slaves were common.¹⁹⁷ Beavis provides evidence that the motif of the picaresque character, represented by the unjust steward, is "found throughout world literature."¹⁹⁸ She bases her assumption that the steward in the parable is a "servant" (which usually meant "slave" in the NT) on Crossan's identification of it as one of the nine "servant parables" in Luke.¹⁹⁹

Slaves, Beavis explains, made up between seventeen and twenty-five percent of the population of the Roman Empire (including Palestine) and held jobs as varied as mine workers and imperial courtiers; regardless of their status, however, all slaves were viewed as servile commodities and were treated humanely only insofar as it would

¹⁹⁷Beavis cites *Phaderus*, 3.2, 5, 14, 19; 4.5, 18 as evidence. However, the present writer is unconvinced that these Latin stories share much at all in common with the Unjust Steward; even the "tricky slave" motif is less than clear in most of these units. The only unit remotely close in theme to the Unjust Steward is 4.5, which speaks of wisdom (*saepe*) in the preface to a story about women obtaining money left to them in a man's will. This connection to the Unjust Steward, however, is plainly tenuous.

¹⁹⁸Mary Ann Beavis, "Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8)," *JBL* 111 (1992): 44. Via, *In Parables*, 159, defines the picaresque genre as one that "tells the story of a successful rogue who makes conventional society look foolish but without establishing any positive alternative."

¹⁹⁹Ibid., 37. Paffenroth, *Story of Jesus according to L*, 127, also classifies this parable as one of six L parables on servants and also states that it is one of three that "all explicitly mention honor and shame" (in this case, "ashamed" [16:3]). Via, *In Parables*, 155, classifies it as one of the "comic parables."

increase their utility.²⁰⁰ Therefore, she concludes, “The Greco-Roman reader would probably assume the οἰκονόμος of the parable was a slave.”²⁰¹ B. B. Scott notes that hostility between master and servant is a common folkloric motif, and Beavis believes this motif is what one finds in the Unjust Steward.²⁰² Moreover, Beavis explains, in Greco-Roman literature “the venality of slaves is often presupposed,” and audiences found it “hilarious” for the guilty slaves to face even the most brutal tortures.²⁰³ The three slave stories from the *Life of Aesop* that Beavis cites have the same general plot structure and parallel the parable of the unjust steward: (1) the picaresque slave-hero is in trouble with the master; (2) the hero takes action to remedy the problem; (3) the hero gets the better of the master.²⁰⁴

Greene is correct when he claims that Beavis’s evidence for stories of clever rascal-slaves is interesting, but “her arguments demonstrate little of relevance to the Unjust Steward parable.”²⁰⁵ The problem is that Beavis’s argument that the slave stories she cites are parallel to the Unjust Steward fails on several other grounds: she must assume the steward is a slave (otherwise, her thesis is significantly undermined), she assumes the master’s accusations were false, the stories in ancient literature that she

²⁰⁰ Beavis, “Ancient Slavery,” 38-39.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 45.

²⁰² Bernard Brandon Scott, “A Master’s Praise (Luke 16, 1-8a),” *Bib* 64 (1983), 79-80. So also Beavis, “Ancient Slavery,” 48, who notes similar master-slave adversity in Aesopic and Plautine material, where the master is often “quick to punish . . . for real or imagined faults. As such, “the sympathy of many ancient hearers (especially those from the lower classes) would have been with the steward” (*ibid.*, 49).

²⁰³ Beavis, “Ancient Slavery,” 41, 43.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 46-47.

²⁰⁵ M. Dwaine Greene, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward as Question and Challenge,” *ExpTim* 112 (2000-01): 85.

mentions are not parallel to this parable in a number of ways, and she assumes the manager fired the steward because he was out for revenge.²⁰⁶

Beavis's explanation of the social function of the slave parables is very weak relative to its connection to the NT servant parables, especially the Unjust Steward. The most glaring weakness is that the parable never refers to the steward as a slave, nor does it imply it. Beavis must have missed the evidence that Bailey supplied from Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, and Arabic versions of the parable that nearly all translations understood the οἰονός to be a hired estate-manager rather than a head slave.²⁰⁷

Another weakness is that Beavis speculates that the steward's interior monologue represents his two options as a slave: being dismissed without home or employment, hence the begging, or being sent off to hard labor in the quarries, hence the digging.²⁰⁸ The problem with this reconstruction is that a steward who ingratiates himself with the debtors, ostensibly to find room and board after dismissal, would have been wasting his time if he expects to be demoted to the quarries while still under the ownership of the master. Would he have been able to say to his owner, "I won't be going to the quarries, as you have commanded, because I have found someone who will let me stay at his place. Although you own me, I have found a better option for making a living"? On the contrary, the fact that the manager had to find a new occupation and leave the estate upon his dismissal indicates that he was an employee rather than a

²⁰⁶Ibid., 82-87. Cf. also Young, *Parables*, 236, who argues that the steward was not a falsely accused slave; instead, the steward's high position as a financial manager assumes that he was "a high-ranking steward rather than a slave who was wronged by an evil master."

²⁰⁷Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 92.

²⁰⁸Beavis, "Ancient Slavery," 49. Epict. *Diatr. [Diss.]* 4.1.35-37 describes the miserable life of an emancipated slave, who often would be reduced to prostitution and would long for the secure days of slavery under his former patron (*ibid.*, 49-50).

slave.²⁰⁹ Also, it is difficult to see how a dishonored, banished slave could be “too proud” to do anything to survive; it is more believable, on the other hand, if the steward is falling from a much higher socio-economic status, one unaccustomed to difficult menial labor.

Yet another weakness of Beavis’s proposal is that, unlike this parable, the Greco-Roman examples she points to presuppose the master to be evil and victimizing, while the rascal’s actions demonstrate the inhumanity of ancient slavery.²¹⁰ By contrast, the servant parables (and rabbinic literature) depict a beneficent and noble master, and none of these parables directly addresses the injustice of slavery.²¹¹ In fact, in the unjust steward parable there is no hint of the shocking physical punishment that Beavis claims as routine in ancient slavery (see Matt 24:45-51 // Luke 12:41-48, however).

Another weakness with Beavis’s thesis appears when she claims that these Greco-Roman slave stories to which she appeals “dignify the role of the slaves and . . . suggest that the slave owner identify with his/her human property.”²¹² Even if one grants that the steward is a slave, there is absolutely no evidence supporting Beavis’s assertion that the parable of the Unjust Steward (or any of the so-called servant parables) is supposed to make this point. Beavis does not attempt to provide any corroborating evidence for this hypothesis, so her claim must be dismissed as impotent. Moreover, even if this plot convention is common in Greco-Roman stories, it does not necessarily

²⁰⁹Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 149.

²¹⁰Young, *Parables*, 237.

²¹¹Ibid.

²¹²Beavis, “Ancient Slavery,” 54.

apply to the Unjust Steward. Although Beavis is rich in Greco-Roman examples, she is deficient in Jewish examples; in fact, she does not even mention the Dead Sea Scrolls argument that Flusser put forth.²¹³

Despite the weaknesses of Beavis's argument, however, her study is useful if for only one important reason: it demonstrates a precedent in ancient literature of a rascal who is admired, and even commended, by the superior who is object of his trickery.

Beavis proves that the admired-rascal motif is common enough in Mediterranean literature that Jesus would not have been completely out of order in telling a story in which a trickster is commended. Moreover, if Luke is merely transmitting the story unchanged, he is wise to include such a story if a significant component of his readership (especially Theophilus) was probably Gentile and at least somewhat familiar with Greco-Roman literary conventions. Granted, Jesus was under no obligation to draw from ancient Greco-Roman (or any other) literary genres. In fact, Jesus' stories routinely defy the expectations of the original hearers and often cause shock and confusion—an effect that would not have been true if his stories followed common plot structures.

Nevertheless, the parallels do not hurt the case for the steward's being immoral despite his commendation. At the very least, these parallels demonstrate that an argument assuming the steward underhanded (despite the praise) is not outside the realm of possibility.

Indeed, if one assumes the manager to be dishonest in his reducing of the debts, and if one also assumes that the master is being sincere in his commendation, then one must also assume that the manager has been clever despite his dishonesty and that the

²¹³So argues Young, *Parables*, 236.

master is able to see past the dishonesty (at least until the end of the parable, which leaves the ultimate fate of the manager undetermined). If this assumption is accepted, it helps to have evidence from other examples in antiquity to demonstrate that a superior can recognize the cleverness of an inferior in spite of the inferior's motives or behavior. Beavis has provided some examples, and there are others. For example, Barth finds evidence even from the life of Jesus; he claims that Jesus himself appreciated being "outwitted" (insofar as one can outwit the messiah) in his reaction to the Syro-Phonecian woman (Mark 7:28), and it appears that his own mother "beat him to the punch" by involuntarily thrusting him to the center of attention at the marriage at Cana (John 2:3-5).²¹⁴ Moreover, Hultgren points to a story recorded by Herodotus (*Hist.* 2.121), and the Egyptian legend of King Rhampsinitus (purported to be Ramses III), that shows praise of a rascal.²¹⁵ Thus, there is ample precedence for Jesus' plot if the manager is viewed as a rogue.

However, to claim that the parable therefore matches a pre-established Greco-Roman genre presses the evidence too far. Thus, Crossan's assertion that the parable of the unjust steward is a "trickster-dupe" story is not convincing because the parable does

²¹⁴Markus Barth, "The Dishonest Steward and His Lord: Reflections on Luke 16:1-13," in *From Faith to Faith. Essays in Honor of Donald G. Miller*, ed. D.Y. Hadidian, Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series 31 (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1979), 72. Admittedly, these examples are not found in Luke, but the general point is established that Jesus was no stranger to people demonstrating clever behavior, which they often used for the purpose of helping themselves.

²¹⁵Hultgren, *Parables of Jesus*, 147. The plot of the story is this: The builder of the king's treasury, which housed unparalleled riches in silver, designed for the treasury a secret removable stone that could be moved by only one or two men. On his deathbed, the builder told his two sons of the secret entrance. The two sons regularly broke into the treasury at night and stole from it. One night, after they had removed the stone, one of the brothers killed and beheaded his co-conspirator brother, stole from the treasury, tricked the guards by getting them drunk, stole back the body of his brother, dismembered the corpse of another man, and deceived the king's daughter. The king, astonished at the man's "sagacity and boldness," offered him his daughter as a wife. Compared to the fratricidal, thieving, deceitful, inhumane character in this story, the unjust steward is a saint. If such a vile character could be praised and rewarded

not match the genre in all respects: the manager's trickery is only a small component of the story, it would require the story to end with verse 7, and the master is aware of the trickster's plans in verse 8a.²¹⁶ Moreover, Crossan's trickster-dupe genre includes five plot elements, two of which are absent in this parable. Even if one admits the legitimacy of the trickster-dupe genre (a tenuous claim from the onset), and even if the parable matched said genre in all other respects (an even more tenuous claim), the identification of the Unjust Steward as a trickster-dupe specimen is greatly jeopardized by the lack of forty percent of its supposed elements. As such, Beavis's central premise is undermined.

Summary

The preceding examination has demonstrated that the Lukan use of "parable" is strongly indebted to the Hebrew *mashal*, including its elastic range of meanings and propensity toward interpretive density. After the whimsical allegorizing of the previous centuries, Jülicher, Dodd, and Jeremias provided a necessary corrective in reducing the number of meanings a parable can convey. Despite their corrective influence, these same scholars also took the field down a reductionist path. In response to this reductionism, the field began shifting to the opposite extreme of reader-response criticism with its irresponsible, unbridled generation of new, often contradictory, meanings for parables. A more responsible middle ground, which allows for the Lukan parable's inherent concatenative character is preferable. This understanding recognizes that some parables simultaneously convey author-intended interdependent meanings that occasionally overlap and link one unit to the next. Thus, in Lukan context 16:1-13 may be seen as a

by the king whom he had defrauded, then it is not impossible to think that Luke could have transmitted a parable in which a comparatively less vile character could be praised simply for his sly foresight.

²¹⁶Du Plessis, "Philanthropy or Sarcasm," 12.

relative unity making points about both eschatological preparedness and the proper use of material possessions. This pair of salient themes is found in abundance in the surrounding material, which not only reinforces these two main ideas from different angles but also generates other meanings that link to their own surrounding materials.

Based on literary and thematic evidence, there is a strong argument for seeing Luke 15 and 16 as a coherent unity, with an even more intimate unity between the Prodigal Son and Unjust Steward. Based on lexical and stylistic differences between the Unjust Steward (vv. 1-8a) and its applications, one may safely surmise that the application segment (vv. 8b-13) probably did not originally follow the parable but was added by someone (possibly Luke) who appended mainly (if not wholly) authentic sayings from Jesus that appropriately exploited the parable's more latent monetary theme, which otherwise might have been missed by the reader. Verses 14-18, rather than being a series of discursive units haphazardly patched together, are instead a coherent continuation of the previous unit, serving to bind the two halves of the chapter together by offering a forceful indictment of the Pharisees' rejection of the kingdom (and concomitant ethics) and presenting a warning, culminating in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which warns about the consequences of continuing this attitude. All of the overlapping ideas found in Luke 15 and 16, especially those in the Unjust Steward, closely agree with the other major themes throughout the Lukian Central Section.

The Unjust Steward is an open-ended parable that forces the reader to think more closely about the meaning it conveys and brings the action right up to the present time; the questions it raises can only be answered by those who make a legitimate attempt to understand and apply it. The parable also features an interior monologue, which

mainly serves as a window into the steward's motivation for action—a quick, shrewd response to his immediate crisis, not unlike the crisis that the present and coming kingdom forces upon the reader. This crisis too demands a wise response, one that is not just visceral but ethical. Although some recently have tried to read a praised rascal-slave theme into the parable as its main interpretive key, these claims do not match the evidence, are unnecessary, and even lead some to misunderstand several of the parable's most important elements.

CHAPTER 6

EXEGETICAL SYNTHESIS

Having discussed the history of interpretation, language, historical background, and literary considerations regarding the Unjust Steward, the time now comes to synthesize these observations together in order to answer the primary questions that still remain. The nine most pressing exegetical questions will be addressed here. Since some of the questions rely on interrelated data (e.g., where the parable ends is inextricably linked to the identity of the κύριος in v. 8a) and draw upon the conclusions established in the previous chapters, a bit of redundancy is inevitable; repetition, however, will be kept to a minimum as much as possible.

Was the Manager Accused Fairly or Slandered?

The two words that weigh most heavily in determining the steward's initial guilt are the "charge" and the "squandering." Chapter 3 argued that the word διεβλήθη more frequently than not involves the idea of a hostile, or even calumnious, accusation (one that perhaps also persists repeatedly over time). All things being equal, and without further evidence, one should be more disposed to assume the connotation of slander when an author uses the word unless the context weighs against this reading. In this parable, however, there are enough contextual clues that detract from the *prima facie* reading to imply the steward truly is culpable. Assuming the pervasive honor-shame background to be true, Young would be correct in stating, "When he loses his position, he will lose

prestige and honor, the most highly prized possession he will ever enjoy.”¹ However, one does not have to rely too heavily on the honor-shame background argument to suppose that the steward’s reticence to defend his honor immediately and vociferously is implicit validation of the charge. The first-century reader might expect that if the steward was not inclined to protest on behalf of his honor, then at least for his job. Given the clear crisis that this dismissal causes for him, one would assume that the steward would have at least made an attempt to deny the charge even if he had no exculpating evidence. But evidence he had. For, if the manager had kept a written account ($\tauὸν λόγον$), then that very same account would have vindicated him if the accusations had been false. In fact, if the innocent steward had kept an accurate “accounting of [his] management” (16:2), it would prove that he had been faithful with the master’s money and would have thereby elevated his reputation with the master even beyond where it was before the accusation. On the other hand, if he could not supply such a record, it—at the very least—would have been proof of managerial dereliction if not a clue that he was trying to hide something. Since he supplied no such exonerating record and not even a defense of his integrity, one must presume the accusations were genuine.

Instead of protesting for his honor, the steward concocts a plan. Although it is an argument from silence, it is a strong one, that the steward’s unwillingness to protest is a tacit ceding of his guilt. Moreover, it is unlikely that the original first-century reader would have assumed that the steward had been maligned. On the one hand, if the peasant class was as large and downtrodden as many have claimed (see Chapter 4), and if the

¹Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 239. While it may be true that one’s honor was of high value in first-century Middle Eastern culture, it appears that the steward’s crisis was not one of honor, but financial security.

bourgeois retainers were looked on with suspicion by these peasants, then the typical peasant would not have had much reason to sympathize with the parable's steward. Quite the contrary: they would have been naturally inclined to view him as an anti-hero. On the other hand, if one assumes a good number of Luke's readers were wealthy (viz. Theophilus), these elites would naturally have sympathized more with the wronged master—one of their own—than with the accused underling. In sum, given all sides of the argument, Porter is probably correct in claiming that there is no implication in the parable that the charges are hostile, and “that the charges are true seems indubitable.”²

Having established that the charges were probably true, one must then determine what this “squandering” activity (16:1) represents. Chapter 3 demonstrated that although διασκορπίζω has a range of meanings, from benign inattention to something more wanton, Luke intends the meaning in this passage to be one of deliberate, reckless wasting of the master’s wealth. Then, Chapter 5 demonstrated that the Unjust Steward should be read in light of the Prodigal Son because they share numerous thematic and verbal parallels. The combination of these two lines of evidence supports the claim that the steward’s “wastefulness” should be read in the most pejorative sense. It is unimaginable that the careful writer Luke would have juxtaposed the only two passages in the NT featuring the word διασκορπίζω if there were not some connection intended. One might argue that it was mere word association that led Luke to place the two side by side; however, the thematic parallel (see especially the strong link between the two provided in Chapter 5) provides evidence that something more is at play. The prodigal

²Stanley E. Porter, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16.1-13): Irony is the Key,” in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*, ed. David J. A. Cline, S. E. Fowl, and S. E. Porter (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 140.

son was clearly immoral (vv. 13, 15 [perhaps implicitly], 18, 21 [he admits as much], 30 [if the older brother is correct; there is no reason to believe he is not]) and wasteful (vv. 13, 30), so a similarly-described steward introduced immediately after that should be considered to be cut from the same cloth. Moreover, the fact that the prodigal's departure was deliberate and calculated (and even offensive to his still-living father, 15:12-13) implies that any parallel with the parable of the unjust steward would indicate that the manager's unfaithfulness was not merely an untrue rumor or unfounded hearsay. He had reached his crisis point also by deliberate wrongdoing.

However, even if the “squandering” is given a less culpable interpretation, it would only serve to intensify the crisis. If the steward’s debt reductions are to be considered dishonest, then it makes the steward’s fall all the more tragic: having been unjustly accused and summarily fired, he responds to the crisis situation by resorting to treachery. So, either way the “squandering” is interpreted, he cannot escape blame in his subsequent action. Since the focal point of the parable—the main plot action and even middle of the apparent chiasm—is the debt reduction, it is of comparatively small importance whether the charges are true, and, if true, whether it implies immorality, laziness, or unprofitability. Since it makes the most sense to view the steward as consistently corrupt, the most coherent understanding is to view the initial charge as legitimate and morally indicting.

The precise nature of the squandering is not expressed, presumably because it is not essential to the parable’s main point. Moreover, if the manager’s “squandering” was a matter of wasteful living that did not prepare for the future (which this parable strongly suggests), then presumably he would not have had the foresight to have a

savings account to soften the blow of his dismissal.³ The steward, because of his lack of financial foresight, was facing the possibility of immediate destitution. Hence the intense crisis and the immediate contemplation of manual labor or even begging (v. 3) to survive—not a far cry from the prodigal son’s dining with the hogs that he was hired to feed (15:15-16).

Whose Commodities Was He Forgiving— His Own or Those of His Master?

The three main possibilities about the debt reduction are that the steward is reducing the bills by the interest, by his own commission amount, or by part of the principal (or other portion) that was due directly to the master. None of the three possibilities forces an honest or dishonest perception of the steward, for scholars on both sides, “honest steward” and “dishonest steward,” have used all three possibilities in support of their arguments. However, the interest and commission options tend to be the argument of choice for those contending an “honest steward,” while the other option is the frequent choice for the “dishonest steward” proponents. Scholars like Derrett contend that both Jewish and Greek readers would understand the lowering of the bill to be an elimination of the original interest and that the interest rate on food commodities in Egypt was fifty percent and is thus in line with the rate in this parable,⁴ while scholars like Young investigate exactly the same Jewish milieu and come to the conclusion that “it is impossible to know whether the original audience would have considered the issue of

³John Nolland, *Luke*, WBC, vols. 35a-35c (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1989-93), 2:797.

⁴J. Duncan M. Derrett, “‘Take Thy Bond . . . and Write Fifty’ (Luke XVI. 6): The Nature of the Bond,” *JTS*, n.s., 23 (1972): 438-40; so also C. B. Firth, “The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward (Luke xvi. 1-9),” *Exptim* 63 (1951-52): 93-95, and I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 614-16.

usury.”⁵ Some, like Fitzmyer, hold to the commission theory.⁶ Marshall follows Fitzmyer’s lead in claiming that the manager was canceling his own commission, which coheres better with 16:9, since he is using his own money.⁷ Others, like Kanagaraj, play it safe by leaving the nature of the reduction undefined.⁸

The main problem with the interest theory is that it lacks evidence from first-century Judea, so scholars in support of this argument must provide corroborating evidence from other cultures and other centuries (and often both). For example, twentieth-century scholar Firth claims that in India, where he lived at the time, a statement of debt would include interest, which would have been “not less than one-fourth of the quantity borrowed.”⁹ However, to infer that debts in first-century Israel were handled similarly to those in twentieth-century India is unwarranted; as explained in Chapter 2, Derrett’s arguments fall prey to the same kind of anachronism. Therefore, Parrott is correct when he claims that “the issue of usury . . . is simply not in view in the parable.”¹⁰ The evidence for the commission theory is no stronger because it too lacks contemporaneous evidence or explicit cues from the text. Stein explains that if there

⁵Young, *Parables*, 240.

⁶Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, AB, vols. 28 and 28a (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981-85), 28a:1097-1101. Cf. also Margaret D. Gibson, “On the Parable of the Unjust Steward,” *ExpTim* 14 (1902-03): 334; Paul Gächter, “The Parable of the Dishonest Steward after Oriental Conception,” *CBQ* 12 (1950): 121-31; E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 200-01; Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke’s Gospel*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 140; and A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 104.

⁷Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 615.

⁸Jey J. Kanagaraj, “A Lukan Portrayal of Human Rights,” *BangTF* 33 (June 2001): 32.

⁹Firth, “Parable of the Unrighteous Steward,” 94.

¹⁰Douglas M. Parrott, “The Dishonest Steward (Luke 16.1-8a) and Luke’s Special Parable Collection.” *NTS* 37 (1991),” 504.

were any commission due to the manager, it would not have appeared in the bill.¹¹ Thus, Kloppenborg offers the most likely contention: the parable would have needed to mention a “commission” or “usury” if this element of the story had been essential because there was no single method of compensating managers in Jesus’ day.¹² Thus, Luke would have known that neither an implied commission nor an implied interest would have been universally recognized if not explicitly stated.

Although the interest and commission theories lack textual support, there is evidence from the text that the reduced debt should be considered property of the master. For example, if verses 11-12 are considered closely aligned with the parable, then the steward would be using “that which is another’s,” thus implying that debts reduced were not due to him, but to his master. Even better evidence comes within the parable itself, where the steward refers to “my master” (vv. 5-7) as the lender, implying that the debt was owed singly to the master. Moreover, if the debtors are large-scale tenant farmers (the most probable scenario, which will be discussed later in this chapter), then Mitton is probably correct (although he assumes it without adequate explanation) that the debt is “annual rental,”¹³ which presumably would have been owed to the master.

Given all the evidence, the most plausible explanation is that the debts that the steward reduced were due directly to the master; therefore, he had no legal right to reduce the debts. However, even if adequate evidence could be provided that the debt was

¹¹ Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 109.

¹² John S. Kloppenborg, “The Dishonoured Master (Luke 16, 1-8a),” *Bib* 70 (1989): 481-82, 486.

¹³ C. Leslie Mitton, “The Unjust Steward,” *ExpTim* 64 (1953): 308.

interest or steward's commission, Young provides an explanation how the steward still would not be vindicated in this debt reduction: "There is no evidence suggesting that the steward would enjoy a residual income from negotiated contracts after he had been dismissed. The loss of revenue would directly impact the wealthy *master*, regardless of whether it was the agent's commission or not."¹⁴ Therefore, whether the loan amount in the parable included interest or a commission for the steward is ultimately irrelevant. Once the steward received word of his termination from his position, any commission he might have received was moot. Any commission he might have expected existed only because of the master's wealth to begin with. So, whether the master lost principal, interest, or nothing at all (except the manager's commission), the legal authority of the manager does not change; the master was the ultimate source of any authority or any monetary security that the manager had. The scenario most generous toward the manager is that he was reducing the debts by his own commission only.¹⁵ However, even if he was eliminating his own commission, he was reducing the commission gained through a transaction that existed only because of the master's wealth with which he was capitalizing—a wealth that he no longer had the right to capitalize upon. As such, even in the most benign appraisal of the steward, he is still guilty of dishonesty (i.e., presenting himself to the debtors as one with the authority of agency) if not illegal behavior.

¹⁴Young, *Parables*, 240. Italics added.

¹⁵The commission theory fails on several major counts: (1) Assuming the money forgiven to be the manager's commission, his having the money would have been more helpful than having the gratitude of the debtors and master; (2) verse 5 states that the money is owed to the master and not the steward; while the manager is characterized by guile, one need not assume it for this question; (3) the manager is called "dishonest" only after he reduces the debt. Luke would have needed to explain further, in order to mitigate these objections, if he wanted the reader to infer that a commission not only existed but was the main assumption needed to interpret the parable clearly (Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, NAC, vol. 24 [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992], 417).

As Chapters 3 and 5 demonstrate, the language and context of the parable suggest that although the parable was directed to the disciples, the Pharisees are within earshot. From the Pharisees' perspective, the charging of interest would have been clearly a departure from the Mosaic law (even if they practiced it themselves). So, no matter whose interest was being eliminated (that of the master or his manager), their estimation of the manager would have risen at the point in the story when he cancels the debt. If the interest was his own prerogative, then he is falling in line with the law by disavowing it, and, if it is the master's, then he is "helping" his manager follow the Law, thereby increasing not only his honor but also his honorableness vis-à-vis the Law. However, the Pharisee's turning their noses up at the parable indicate that they, in fact, were not impressed by the steward's action, thus implying that the steward was not doing anything worthy of admiration by these legalists who presumably would have lauded at least a superficial compliance with Mosaic law. On the other hand, if the steward was doing something illegal, it explains well why they would have looked askance at Jesus and his story.

Whom Was the Manager Attempting to Benefit?

With the end of his career as a manager imminent, the manager contemplates the worst possible scenarios—digging and begging. It is important for one to understand how undesirable these choices were in order to understand the poignancy of the manager's crisis. If one understands the seriousness of his precipitous career descent, then it makes more sense why he would have taken immediate action, regardless of the rashness, immorality, or even illegality of the actions; any punishment from such actions

could not have been much worse than his inevitable fate. The best plan that he could devise on such short notice was an unauthorized, illegal debt reduction.

The steward did not reduce the debts for no reason. He was attempting to benefit someone—either the master, the debtors, or himself. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, the primarily honor-shame explanations for this parable assign too much significance to a subordinate, even questionable, feature in the socio-historical background. The steward’s main concern was not increasing his master’s reputation, for that idea is absent from the text. What is not absent is the motivation that the manager explicitly embraces: self-preservation. In the parable, the steward clearly assumes that his termination is irrevocable, so improving the status of one to whom he was no longer employed would have been useless. Moreover, although the debtors were the literal beneficiaries of the steward’s debt reduction, they too are not the main concern. Caemmerer is surely correct in his explanation that the manager could expect a *quid pro quo* favor from the debtors.¹⁶ As with all *quid pro quo* propositions, both parties—by definition—benefit, but it is usually the initiating party that more earnestly seeks the benefit, hence the initiation of the bargain. In this parable, the steward, driven by immediate crisis, is the initiator because he seeks immediate recompense in the form of support after his termination. The

¹⁶Richard R. Caemmerer, “Investment for Eternity. A Study of Luke 16:1-13,” *CTM* 34 (1963): 71. Caemmerer correctly points to Matt 5:46 as an example of the *quid pro quo* manner with which the world operates; the same expectations of the world are assumed for this parable too. The reader can assume that there is a *quid pro quo* expectation on the steward’s part for several related reasons: (1) the steward’s interior monologue implies that his actions (16:4), which are clearly beneficial to the debtors, will also result in a benefit to him; (2) the patron-client relationship, although it can be overstated, is probably not completely absent here, for the steward’s actions establish the debtors as something like patrons for him; (3) the immediate application in 16:9 exhorts one to “make friends” with possessions, so one may assume that, if this message is consistent with the parable’s plot, the steward has done this—he has made “friends,” who presumably will act amicably toward him when his managerial position is gone; (4) there would have been no other good reason why the steward would have taken the time to reduce the debts. His actions would be a waste of time and energy—anything but “clever” (16:8a)—if some kind of outcome in his favor were not produced by his quick action.

steward is clearly interested in benefiting himself foremost. Any benefit that the debtors garnered was of secondary concern, and any benefit that the master would have received was merely coincidental. Barth attempts to combine all possibilities by explaining that there is a triple accomplishment in the manager's otherwise dishonest deed: he brings honor to the master, he shows beneficence to the debtors, and he makes provision for his own future.¹⁷ While all of these may be true, it is the last benefit that is the key motivator of the manager and the only one that really counts for the central message of the parable. His expressed goal was to save himself from a harsh fate, and he did so by ingratiating himself mainly to the debtors and secondarily (and more ambiguously) to the master.

In case the content of the parable proper is not conclusive enough, one may refer to the applications for evidence of this thesis. Verses 10-13 claim that it is impossible to serve two masters simultaneously, especially when the two are a genuine master and money (v. 13).¹⁸ Since both verses 3 (along with 5 and 8) and 13 use the word κύριος ("master"), it is clear that the reader is in some way supposed to associate the two (i.e., the master of the parable and the master that competes for loyalty against money). If the steward is interpreted as "betraying" his master by reducing what is due

¹⁷ Markus Barth, "The Dishonest Steward and His Lord: Reflections on Luke 16:1-13," in *From Faith to Faith: Essays in Honor of Donald G. Miller*, ed. D.Y. Hadidian, Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series 31 (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1979), 70. Here Barth also implies that the manager's questioning of the owed amount was intentional; he knew the correct amount but had the debtors articulate it so that he could then increase the fortuitous surprise when he lowered the bill. This interpretation psychologizes too much when it assesses the steward's latent motivation; it is more likely that Luke includes this debt questioning simply because it helps the listener understand plot, a necessary part of telling the story.

¹⁸ According to Donald R. Fletcher, "The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?" *JBL* 82 (1963): 22, vv. 10-13 do not match the theme of the parable and therefore must be erroneous applications added by a later editor. Fletcher is by no means unique in this contention.

him, then it proves this point because he is “serving” the money (or what it can do for him) and “hating” the master. In the parable proper, if the steward were attempting mainly to benefit the master, then this application would be inharmonious (even more so than supposed by scholars who view verses 10-13 as a later accretion that misses the parable’s point). Both 16:10b and 12 use examples of those who are “dishonest” and “not trustworthy” with money; the close thematic continuity supports the assertion that the steward in the previous parable was dishonest, thus not loyal to his master (and certainly not intending to benefit the master in any way). If one cannot serve two masters (the real master and money), then Luke would be inconsistent to have portrayed the unjust steward as being motivated to increase the master’s honor when his explicit intent was to gain favor with the debtors (v. 4).

If one is still persuaded by the interest or commission interpretation, there is more to add. Since neither is explicitly mentioned in the parable, the strongest statement that one could make is that the reduction in the loan amounts by the manager *could* represent a reduction solely in interest or solely in commission. However, even if an interest or commission assumption is conceded, it does not necessitate a reading that supposes the manager was eliminating the interest because of his beneficence toward the debtors.¹⁹ He could still eliminate commission—money he knew he would never see

¹⁹ And even if one concedes some beneficence, it does not necessarily justify John H. Yoder’s contention (*The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994]) that the parable should be read as an exhortation to re-institute the Jubilee observance. To arrive at Yoder’s assumption, one must make several unwarranted assumptions, each of which attenuates the thesis further. A more recent study similar to Yoder’s in several respects is Thomas Hoeren, “Das Gleichnis vom ungerechten Verwalter (Lukas 16,1-8a)—zugleich ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Restschuldbefreiung,” *NTS* 41 (1995): 620-29, which argues that the debt reduction should be understood in light of the Jewish practice of sabbatical debt remission (624-26), that the debtors are the master’s land leasers (627-28), and that the original audience would have assumed the *prosbul* (the Hillel-era circumvention of the sabbatical debt remission rules) is being critiqued by this parable (626, 629). Hoeren concludes, then, that the debt release in the parable symbolizes the priority of religious law over worldly law (629).

anyway—in a self-serving maneuver to curry favor with the debtors, and he could still eliminate illegal usury if he knew the master would not have a legal recourse (or temerity) to add it back onto the IOUs. The most plausible explanation under all possible scenarios—commission, interest, and principle—is that the steward was looking out for himself exclusively. All other derivative benefit was simply “icing on the cake.”

Were the Debtors Impoverished Farmers or Wealthy Businessmen?

Ireland claims “the exact identity of the debtors makes absolutely no difference in the interpretation of the parable,”²⁰ but this appraisal is premature. If the steward’s expressed goal is to secure a place to live and perhaps a place to work after his termination, then the expedience of this plan (and the legitimacy of his soliloquy) is directly proportionate to the opulence of the debtors with whom he was attempting to curry favor. Poor tenant farmers would not have made able patrons for the manager, so it is unlikely that he would have sought to ingratiate those who could help him little, as that would go against his stated purpose in lowering the debt (v. 4). Those who see almsgiving or Christology as the main point of the parable often assume the debtors to be poor, but there is no evidence in the parable that they were poor.²¹ It is too easy of a solution which says that the steward relaxed the debts of the poor, so too should the hearers of the parable. Fletcher is correct in his observation that “the very quantities of the debts . . . certainly would not covey a picture of poor sharecroppers; nor would one

²⁰Dennis J. Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: An Historical, Exegetical, and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1-13*, NovTSup 70 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 54.

²¹Richard Dormandy, “Unjust Steward or Converted Master?” *RB* 109 (2002): 521.

suppose that the elegant steward, who shrinks from digging and from begging, would make it his hope to be received into the huts of peons.”²²

Chapter 3 explained that the debts reduced (and the debts remaining afterwards) were sizeable. In fact, the debts described in this parable were “large enough that they may be the tax debts of an entire village.”²³ Given the very large amounts of the debts, the debtors were probably not poor tenant farmers who needed to borrow seed grain in order to sustain a livelihood but rather large-scale business associates who borrowed for business purposes.²⁴ Marshall speculates that the debtors were probably merchants who either had received goods on credit in exchange for a promissory note or had received money, which was charged to their accounts in terms of agricultural products in order to bypass usury prohibitions in Jewish law.²⁵ Young goes so far to say that the steward is “the middle man who acts as a broker for the super rich.”²⁶ Although “super rich” is, of course, a relative term, it seems a safe assumption that the first-century hearers of the parables would have perceived the debtors as quite rich and not necessarily worthy of any special debt reduction. If there was a suspicion among the peasants toward

²²Fletcher, “Riddle of the Unjust Steward,” 23.

²³Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 375. They cite only “recent investigations” (no specific authors or works) to support this claim. The exceedingly large amounts make their claim, however, quite probable.

²⁴Nolland, *Luke*, 2:799, 803; Thomas E. Phillips, *Reading Issues of Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 48 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 151. So also Kloppenborg, “The Dishonoured Master,” 482, who states “the sums in question are relatively high [N.B., not fantastically high, which might indicate hyperbole] and militate against both loans for seed grain for smallholders and rent from small rental tracts This parable does not give the appearance of the hyperbole seen, for example, in the stated yields of the Sower.”

²⁵Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 618.

²⁶Young, *Parables*, 238.

the rich in ancient Israel and in Luke's narrative, then a peasant would have seen the master, steward, and debtors all as "rich," with very little practical difference among the groups. Also, the debtors' ability to write down a bill (16:6, 7) implies that they were not illiterate; although it is likely that some peasants could read and write, the evidence is meager that this literacy was widespread.²⁷

Given the large amounts of the debts, the only way to maintain that the debtors were impoverished peasants in grave need of debt reduction is to claim, as some do, that Jesus was using overstatement or even hyperbole, as he is apt to do. True, the Synoptics' Jesus often does use hyperbolic language, but that does not mean that every large amount of money, grain, or anything else should automatically be considered hyperbole, especially when another plausible explanation exists. When Jesus uses hyperbolic language, the purpose of this language is usually evident from the context of the saying or parable. Here, if hyperbole is supposed, it is easy to miss—in fact, a bit too easy to miss

²⁷ Wright, "Parables on Poverty and Riches," 225. The proportion of men in first-century Israel who could read is debatable. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, ABRL, 3 vols. to date (New York: Doubleday, 1991-), 1:271-78, presents arguments about Jewish education and literacy at the time. He explains that some scholars, like Safrai claim that "everyone possessed" the ability to read, and, though less common, many also possessed the ability to write. The problem with Safrai's historical reconstruction is that the educational availability he assumes is based on what the Mishna (e.g., *m. 'Abot* 5.21; *m. Šabb.* 1.3) and Talmud say to have been the case in Jesus' time; however, the earliest of those descriptions were written two centuries after Jesus' boyhood. Scholars like E. Schürer, George Foot Moore, and Shaye Cohen, on the other hand, contend that this later Jewish literature depicting widespread public education and literacy does not reflect the reality of Jesus' time. Public education was, at best, nascent and non-institutionalized. However, even the most skeptical of these scholars, Cohen, admits that the commercial necessity of continuing a father's business may have produced enough literacy "sufficient for writing up bills and signing agreements" (Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1:273). Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 7, claim that in agrarian societies only two to four percent of the people could read; however, they list no hard evidence for this assertion. Robert H. Stein, "Is Our Reading the Bible the Same as the Original Audience's Hearing It? A Case Study in the Gospel of Mark," *JETS* 46 (2003): 71, mentions several scholars on ancient literacy who offer a range between five and twenty percent in the Greco-Roman world in general and three to ten percent for first-century Christians. Stein himself sees the lower estimates more likely. In sum, although there is a range of opinions about ancient literacy, the majority of scholars favor fairly low numbers—nothing even close to universal literacy. Consequently, the parable's depiction of debtors who could presumably read and write offers some evidence that Luke understood them to be relatively educated, skilled businessmen, or both—not subsistence peasants.

if it is supposed to play an important role in the parable's meaning. It is difficult to see how the point is better made by using hyperbole in this particular incident. The function of hyperbole is much more clear in a parable, for example, where a slave is fully forgiven of an enormous sum (ten thousand talents!) but will not forgive a paltry sum immediately after that (Matt 18:23-34). In a case like the Unjust Steward, though, where all of the debt is not cancelled—just a fraction, half at the most—it is less clear how hyperbole would be an effective explanation. Indeed, the debtors were still left with quite sizeable sums even after the debt reduction, so here is where the hyperbole thesis is at its weakest. Moreover, although Luke's Jesus is no stranger to hyperbolic language, one is much more likely to find exaggerated story elements in Matthew.²⁸ Thus, the most plausible explanation is that these businessmen are wealthy merchants or farmers with very large business debts who would have had the financial wherewithal to support the steward should they feel indebted by gratitude to him. That is exactly what motivates the steward to execute his plan with them as the targets of his feigned beneficence.

Where Does the Parable End?

Fitzmyer offers one of the best summaries concerning the four main suggestions about location of the parable's ending:²⁹

1. Verses 1-7 constituted the parable proper, and verses 8-9 are its application. This reading, which sees κύριος as Jesus, was preferred by Fletcher, Gächter, Knabenbaur, Lagrange, Rückert, but “has been largely abandoned today” according to Fitzmyer.³⁰

²⁸For example, Matt 5:48; 6:2-4; 7:3-5; 18:8-9; 18:24; 23:23-24 (and perhaps 22:13; 24:51; and 25:30).

²⁹Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1096-97.

³⁰Bigo, Caemmerer, Fletcher, Gibson, Gächter, Hiers, Hooley and Mason, Krämer, Lagrange, Manson, Merkelback, Paul, Plummer, Rückert, Wansey, and Williams are just some who end the parable at v. 9. As Steinhäuser points out, this belief “is no longer seriously held” (M. G. Steinhäuser, “Noah in His Generation: An Allusion in Luke 16:8b, εἰς τὴν γενέαν τὴν ἑαυτῶν,” *ZNW* 79 (1988): 152; nevertheless, as

2. Verses 1-7 are the parable proper (from Jesus), and all the rest is secondary addition (from a later source, perhaps Luke). Fitzmyer rejects this option, chosen by Bultmann, Grundmann, Drexler, Leaney, Preisker, and Michaelis, because it leaves no satisfying ending.³¹

3. Verses 1-8 are the parable; the rest is application. Creed, Descamps, Ellis, Klostermann, Plummer, Rengstorf, and Schmid opt for this reading.³²

4. Verses 1-8a form the parable; the rest is application. This option, chosen by Weiss, Tillmann, Smith, Oesterley, Friedel, Volckaert, Samain, and Schneider, see the κύριος in 8a as the master.³³

Fitzmyer identifies the verse 9 ending as the choice for most of the “older Catholic commentators” because of the accepted liturgical abridgement that ended the parable with verse 9.³⁴ Even by Fitzmyer’s time, this view had been languishing because it had “so many problems.”³⁵ G. Paul typifies the convoluted reasoning that one has to use in order to group verse 9 with the rest of the parable. He explains that Luke was embarrassed that he “tried to record [the parable] faithfully but . . . did not understand” the meaning of verse 9.³⁶ Luke mistakenly thought verse 9 dealt with right use of money,

recently as 1998, Gagnon also has located the ending point as v. 9 (Robert A. J. Gagnon, “A Second Look at Two Lukan Parables: Reflections on the Unjust Steward and the Good Samaritan,” *HBT* 20 [1998]: 3).

³¹Bultmann, Crossan, Ellis, Jesus Seminar (ed. Funk), Grundmann, Jeremias, Krämer, Leaney Perrin, Preisker, and others choose this ending.

³²Advocates of v. 8b are Bailey, Creed, Descamps, Jülicher, Lee, Lunt, Manson, Marshall, Meynet, Oesterley, Schweizer, and Rengstorf. Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 148, explains that it would be difficult for the parable to have circulated as an isolated unit without an application, which one finds in 8b.

³³Those who choose 8a include Binder, Bovon, Combrink, Coutts, Degenhardt, DeSilva, Donahue, Du Plessis, Evans, Fitzmyer, Fuchs, Funk, Geldenhuys, Hendrickx, Herzog, Hoeren, Kilgallen, Kloppenborg, Landry and May, Liefeld, Loader, Moore, Parrott, B. B. Scott, Tillmann, Topel, Trudinger, Via, Weiss, and scores of others.

³⁴Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Story of the Dishonest Manager (Lk 16:1-13),” *TS* 25 (1964): 27.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Geoffrey Paul, “The Unjust Steward and the Interpretation of Luke 16:9,” *Theology* 61 (1958): 192.

so he appended verses 10-12 to teach that one's use of money is a reflection of one's spiritual state.³⁷ Since verse 13 is the only other saying of Jesus dealing with "mammon," Luke then appended it at the end, despite the fact that verse 13 directly contradicts verse 9 if both are about the proper use of money.³⁸ Hiers provides better arguments for verse 9's originality: extensive verbal and thematic parallels between verses 4 and 9, the synonymous terms for "goods" in verses 1 ($\tauὰ ὑπάρχοντα$) and 9 ($οἱ μαμωνᾶς$), the uses of $\piοιεῖν$ in verses 8 and 9, and the connection between $τοὺς υἱοὺς τοῦ φωτὸς$ (v. 8) and $ὑμῖν$ (v. 9).³⁹ Thus verse 9 is not merely a later addition "tacked onto the parable" because it provides Jesus' commentary on the steward's actions and is integral to the flow of the section.⁴⁰

Those who argue for verse 7 as the end of the parable do so because they find it difficult to accept that the master would have praised his manager for acting deceitfully.⁴¹ However, ending the parable at verse 7 leads the reader to even more difficulties; not only does the parable lack any kind of resolutions but Jesus himself is now perceived as the one who does the praising—an even more surprising assumption. Du Plessis is correct in saying, "The course of the parable actually creates an expectancy within the reader that the parable will only be completed when the master reacts to the

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Richard H. Hiers, "Friends by Unrighteous Mammon: The Eschatological Proletariat (Luke 16:9)," *JAAR* 38 (1970): 32.

⁴⁰Ibid., 33, 36.

⁴¹Steinhauser, "Noah in His Generation," 152.

manager's bribery. The fact that such an act occurs in verse 8a makes 8a the logical conclusion of the story.”⁴²

Crossan is one who ends the parable at verse 7 but still views the steward as dishonest. He sees this parable as a trickster-dupe story that must end with verse 7, explaining that there are three scenes each with an internal diptych (vv. 1-2, 3-4, and 5-7) in the parable, so everything beyond verse 7 falls out of the chiastic structure of the trickster-dupe mini-drama.⁴³ As explained in Chapter 5, assigning the parable to this genre is dubious. However, even if the genre is a legitimate match and if one is going to rely on a chiastic structure to delimit the parable, one could just as easily point to the entrance and re-entrance of the master in verses 1-2 and 8a as endpoints of a chiasm. Indeed, Scott is correct for criticizing Crossan’s ending because the main plot does not find resolution until 8a.⁴⁴ For the same reason Porter too criticizes those, especially Jeremias, who resort to a “surgical separation” of verses 1-7 from 8a.⁴⁵

Few scholars choose 8b as the original ending of the parable. For those who do, there is a host of rebuttals that they must answer. For one thing, the “sons of . . .” language beginning in 8b does not fit the narrative structure of the parable, thus indicating the beginning of the commentary on the parable.⁴⁶ Nolland considers 8b to be

⁴²I. J. Du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?—Another Look at the Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13),” *Neot* 24 (1990): 2.

⁴³Crossan, *In Parables*, 32.

⁴⁴Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: a Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 260.

⁴⁵Porter, “Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 129.

⁴⁶Hans J. B. Combrink, “Social-Scientific Perspective on the Parable of the ‘Unjust’ Steward (Lk 16:1-8a),” *Neot* 30 (1996): 292.

a Lukian editorialization intended to show how the parable would apply to the believer.⁴⁷ Indeed, if the parable ended at 8a (either in Luke's tradition or by Jesus himself), then it would be a nebulous meaning for the ending and application; therefore, Luke felt compelled to dispel any ambiguity by making the application to the believer explicit. A more critical Bovon offers another rebuttal to the 8b ending. He states that, as is the case in 8b, it is common in the Synoptic tradition to find the original logion of Jesus appended by an early Christian interpretation; therefore, claims Bovon, 8b is clearly not original because the two ὅτι clauses in verse 8 are “maladroit[ly]” used in different senses.⁴⁸

Most of the scholars who find an ending somewhere besides 8a do so because they find it inconceivable to accept that the tricked master would praise a rogue steward.⁴⁹ However, only by convoluted arguments can one assign the “dishonest” label in something other than a straightforward way. The designation of the steward as “dishonest” appears only at the end of the story, thus implying that his initial actions of “squandering” were not *necessarily* dishonest, while his subsequent actions after the accusations were unambiguously dishonest.⁵⁰ Assuming verse 8a to be part of the original parable, it is unclear why Luke would have chosen to retain the designation “dishonest” if it had been either superfluous or ambiguous or a non sequitur. On the other hand, if verse 8a is Luke’s creation, it is even less explainable why Luke would

⁴⁷Nolland, *Luke*, 2:801.

⁴⁸François Bovon, *L'Évangile selon Saint Luc (15,1-19,27)*, Commentaire du Nouveau Testament, vol. 3c (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2001), 67.

⁴⁹DeSilva, “Parable of the Prudent Steward,” 256.

⁵⁰Stein, *Introduction to the Parables*, 109. Firth, “Parable of the Unrighteous Steward,” 95, takes the opposite approach. He claims that the designation “unrighteous” is pointing back to the steward’s initial squandering; however, not only is this a more contrived reading but it also undermines Firth’s own

have introduced such a problematic statement after the parable he received. If he had intended to “wrap up” the story, there are dozens of other ways that he could have stated it more clearly. Given Luke’s careful writing style, in fact, it is unexplainable for Luke to have done such a thing. This difficulty is an argument for verse 8a being part of the original parable; otherwise, its addition is inexplicable. It is true that an ending at 8a offers the reader a surprise. Indeed, DeSilva is correct in pointing out that many of Jesus’ parables have an unexpected ending that creates a stumbling block for the hearer (e.g., Laborers in the Vineyard [Matt 20:1-16], Great Supper [Luke 14:16-24], Prodigal Son [Luke 15:11-32], Minas [Luke 19:12-27]). The cognitive dissonance creates an “affront to the norms which everything is expected to follow,” forcing the hearer to look outside the parable for “a new set of norms which violate the old ones but lead the Kingdom.”⁵¹ In conclusion, although identifying verse 8a as the ending of the parable does not eliminate all the problems, the other solutions are far less satisfying. Verse 8a is the ending of the parable proper, while verses 8b-13 are the applications.

As Chapter 3 discussed, the ὅτι introduces the ground for the master’s praise, this time in the judgment of Jesus himself. The steward is praised for his clever resourcefulness, namely his marshalling of “borrowed” wealth for his own future benefit. This wealth-as-a-tool (not a master) example serves as the entrée for the specific applications and exhortations to follow. In Luke, after a parable or saying, Jesus

claim that that squandering might be referring to the steward’s excessive generosity in lending out the master’s resources. Excessive generosity is hardly grounds for calling someone “unrighteous.”

⁵¹DeSilva, “Parable of the Prudent Steward,” 257, agreeing with the arguments of Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1098. “The strangeness of seeing a man who has just been duped praise the trickster is not too different from the strangeness of the behavior of the landowner who pays all his hirees the same wage or the extravagant father’s unreserved [undeserved?] welcome of the wastrel son. No attempt to rationalize the strangeness . . . fits the focus of the parable, . . . [the steward’s] single-minded attention to the demands of the hour” (DeSilva, “Parable of the Prudent Steward,” 263-64).

frequently shifts from story to application or specific judgment about a matter with ὅτι (often preceded by λέγω ὑμῖν).⁵² This case is similar, demonstrating that the story is completed and also demonstrating to the reader that Jesus is now the one speaking directly (not mediated through the words of a parable character).

Who Praised the Manager?

The ending point of the story and the identity of the praising person are inextricably linked because an interpretation that views the κύριος as Jesus must end the parable at verse 7, while those who feature the master doing the praising tend to end the parable at verse 8a. Dodd presents both possibilities but offers no firm conclusion,⁵³ while some, like Comiskey, try to have it both ways by claiming that Luke may have received the story where κύριος was the master although that was not the original reading.⁵⁴ Unfortunately, translations of this verse from Old Syriac, Peshitta, Harclean, and various Arabic versions are split between the two possibilities,⁵⁵ and are thus inconclusive. However, one need not resort to various translations of the Greek to adjudicate the matter when the Greek text itself offers some convincing clues.

⁵²Cf. Lukan examples where ὅτι indicates something like a shift from *mashal* to *nimshal*: Luke 10:12; 12:44; 14:11; 18:8; 18:14; 21:3-4; (where the “story” is the poor widow’s own action); 21:32 (where a real fig tree serves as the “story”). Cf. also 14:24 and 19:26, where in each a parable’s character uses the same kind of wording to deliver a judgment.

⁵³C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961), 17-18.

⁵⁴John P. Comiskey, “The Unjust Steward,” *TBT* 52 (1971): 231.

⁵⁵Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, combined ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), *Poet and Peasant*, 104.

The vast majority of scholars, including recent interpreters from all parts of the interpretive spectrum, have favored the steward's master as the κύριος in 8a.⁵⁶ Most who take this view recognize that if one translates the κύριος as Jesus, it makes a “horribly abrupt change,” creates a “forced reading,” and leaves 8b with an “awkward lack of logical or grammatical standing.”⁵⁷ Or, consider Pickar’s similar understanding: “Some exegetes wrongly imagine that Christ is ‘the Lord’ in this verse. But this is entirely foreign to the context; and verse nine distinguishes very clearly between the comment of the rich man and that of our Lord.”⁵⁸

Some have not been persuaded by this logic. Jeremias has been the most notable (and most quoted) proponent of Jesus as the one who praises the steward. He claims that the structure here should be read the same as 18:6, where the absolute use of κύριος (exactly as one finds in 16:8a) clearly refers to Jesus.⁵⁹ This hypothesis is speculative and does not provide better explanatory power than the majority view. The argument in favor of the master is stronger now than ever because most interpreters after Jeremias have correctly criticized his position as inaccurate; the absolute use of κύριος in 16:8a need not refer to Jesus because the alleged parallel to 18:6, which Jeremias uses as

⁵⁶Bailey, Bock, Bultmann, Caemmerer, Combrink, Derrett, Fitzmyer, Fletcher, Geldenhuys, Hiers, Ireland, L. T. Johnson, Kim, Lagrange, Loader, Lunt, Marshall, Nolland, Phillips, and Porter are just a few opting for 8a.

⁵⁷Ronald G. Lunt, “Expounding the Parables. III. The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-15),” *ExpTim* 77 (1965-66): 132.

⁵⁸Charles H. Pickar, “The Unjust Steward (Lk. 16:1-9),” *CBQ* 1 (1939): 251.

⁵⁹Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1972), 45-46, 182. This option is also favored by Cadoux, Creed, Ellis, Grundmann, Hunter, Klostermann, Manson, Perrin, and Rengstorf.

evidence, is illusory.⁶⁰ The shift from indirect speech in verse 8 to direct speech in verse 9 strongly militates against Jeremias' claim that this use of κύριος is similar to the use in Luke 18:6.⁶¹ Moreover, a careful study of the usage of this term in Lukan parables slightly favors the claim that ὁ κύριος refers to the master. Nolland explains, “[W]hile in a parables [sic] context the absolute ὁ κύριος is used twice of Jesus (12:42 before a parable; 18:6 after a parable), more often it is used of a figure in the parable (12:37; 12:42b; 14:23).”⁶² In sum, most scholars since Jeremias have agreed that his arguments that the parable ends with verse 7 and that the κύριος in verse 8a refers to Jesus (like 18:6) are “forced and strained.”⁶³

The only thing that Jeremias' explanation had going for it was that it provided an interpretation in which the dishonest deeds of the steward are no longer praised by the master. But Jeremias' main argument is simply that “it is hard to believe” that κύριος refers to the master of the parable.⁶⁴ This kind of proof is, in fact, no proof at all because the same kind of “it is hard to believe . . .” argument can be applied in the opposite direction. For example, using the same kind of argument, but ending up with the opposite conclusion, Bovon takes κύριος to be the steward's master because “je n'imagine pas la parabole sans cette conclusion.”⁶⁵ Making Jesus the one who praises the

⁶⁰Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 103.

⁶¹I. Howard Marshall, “Luke xvi. 8—Who Commended the Unjust Steward?” *JTS*, n.s., 19 (1968): 618.

⁶²Nolland, *Luke*, 2:800. So also Bailey, Bultmann, Easton, Marshall, Fitzmyer, and Stein.

⁶³Scott, “A Master's Praise,” 175.

⁶⁴Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 45.

⁶⁵Bovon, *L'Évangile selon Saint Luc*, 3:67.

dishonest steward is no more satisfying; in fact, it is more contrary to sense. While neither “it is hard to believe . . .” argument constitutes proof, Bovon’s observation simply makes more sense, as demonstrated by the majority of commentators who now side with him. It would be surprising if Jesus concluded the parable at verse 7, because the master’s reaction would be absent and the story would be left without a conclusion.

Moreover, the parable itself demonstrates that the steward’s master is the κύριος of verse 8a. A form of the word is used in verses 3 and 5 to refer to the master (cf. also 16:13), so one should expect subsequent reference to refer to the master as well, unless there is a clear reason to shift the reference to Jesus.⁶⁶ However, there is no clear reason. In fact, the evidence is to the contrary: in verse 9, Jesus is the first-person speaker, thus leaving a curious shift in person if he were to be the referent of the third-person κύριος in verse 8 also.⁶⁷ Stein agrees that the parable continues into 16:8 because the parable would be left incomplete if it ended at 16:7.⁶⁸ Without a clear indicator that this “master” refers to someone other than the first two instances, one should assume that they all refer to the same person.⁶⁹ A shift to first person in verse 9 implies also a concomitant shift in the person referred to.⁷⁰

⁶⁶Du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?” 8. See, for example, Luke 12:36-47, where a form of κύριος appears eight times, shifting from a parabolic master described by Jesus to Jesus himself and back to a master. Where the shifts occur, there are clear indicators (e.g., in 12:41, “Peter said, ‘Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?’”)

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Stein, *Luke*, NAC, vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 414; idem, *Introduction to the Parables*, 107.

⁶⁹Stein, *Introduction to the Parables*, 107.

⁷⁰Ibid.

Why is the Steward Praised?

The obvious reading of the parable is that the master's praise was in some way a response to the debt reduction about which he had just learned. Yet, it appears unusual that the master would praise a steward who has reduced the debt of those who owed him. Marshall explains that the “older view” is that the master simply praises the steward for his shrewd self-interest and that the more recent view is that the master praises the servant for his correction of his illicit behavior and/or his newly acquired reputation for generosity and the concomitant honor from his subjects.⁷¹ However, it appears that Marshall is too quick to dismiss the “older” explanation, for, compared to the “newer” views, it explains the praise in the least convoluted fashion and does not appeal to questionable assumptions outside of the text.

In Chapter 4, it was concluded that it is untenable to argue that the master praises the steward because of the boon to his honor. Also in Chapter 4, it was concluded that the master was not praising the steward for bringing the accounts in line with the Mosaic law regarding usury.⁷² The only plausible explanation remaining is that “what is praised is the ability of a person to match means with end.”⁷³ Those who criticize this view simply cannot see how a master could bring himself to praise an act that was both illegal and acted against his own interests. However, one cannot simply reject *a priori*

⁷¹Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 620.

⁷²The fact that the steward is implicitly associated with the “children of this age [i.e., the world]” means that it is unnecessary for the him to have brought accounts in line with Mosaic law or to have done anything morally superior. In fact, if the Mosaic law were his main concern, then one might expect him to be called a “child of the light.” That he is dealing with ones of his “own generation” and that they are all dealing with “wealth of dishonesty” imply that his *modus operandi* was confined to worldly opportunistic dealing.

⁷³John J. Kilgallen, “Luke 15 and 16: A Connection,” *Bib* 78 (1997): 373.

any interpretation that would have Jesus using a parable in which the lauded character (or characteristic) is represented by something less than savory, for this kind of story is paralleled in ancient literature. As proven in Chapter 5, although Beavis' overall thesis is weak, she at least does supply ample evidence from classical literature to prove that duplicitous characters were often the heroes. There are even parallels to this literary convention in the NT. For example, the parable of the unjust judge, where the judge represents none other than God Himself, features an imperfect main character to prove a point about prayer.⁷⁴ So too, the Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1-13) portrays clearly selfish characters in order to make a point about eschatological preparation. Here Jesus is not commanding the selfish actions of the five virgins who would not share their oil; he was simply stating that they were wise (*φρόνιμοι*, 25:2, 9) and should be emulated only with respect to their acumen vis-à-vis the coming judgement.⁷⁵ In the same way, the morality of the steward is not the source of commendation; it is his wisdom in providing for the future.⁷⁶ Another point of comparison is that both parables are encouraging the hearer/reader to be wise namely with respect to one event: the coming judgment (represented by the return of the bridegroom for the virgins and the final termination of the job for the steward). Another explanation for the master's surprising commendation

⁷⁴Holmes Rolston, "Ministry to Need. The Teachings of Jesus concerning Stewardship of Possessions," *Int* 8 (1954): 145. Some have objected that although Jesus here is using a character with an unrighteous background, the act itself is not unrighteous. While this may be true, the self-seeking motivation is no different, and the same general question—why would Jesus use an unrighteous example at all?—still emerges. So the difference between the two parables is not as wide as some have suspected.

⁷⁵Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 56. The moral of the story is explicitly stated in Matt 25:13, as it also is in Luke 16:8.

⁷⁶Pickar, "Unjust Steward," 251. Rolston is correct in claiming, "We can be certain that Jesus does not intend in any way to place his approval on the rascality of the steward" ("Ministry to Need," 144-45).

is offered by Gagnon, who argues that the master praises the steward because he sees in the steward “a kindred spirit: someone who recognized the money was not an end in itself but a means to the end of a better life,” a point similar to that made by the parable of the talents (Luke 19:11-27).⁷⁷ Moreover, if the master is also understood from the beginning to be corrupt (granted, a questionable assumption), it is less of a logical stretch to understand his approval of another’s corruption; under this scenario, he simply recognizes their essential affinity. In the same way that the manager was not primarily intending to be beneficent to the debtors, so too he was not primarily attempting to “get even” with the master. Neither the debtors nor the master was his main concern; self-preservation in the face of imminent crisis was his main concern. Indeed, all of these considerations might have been in play, but only one was primary. Thus, Green’s statement is sensible, “Neither altruistic nor vengeful, [the steward] is simply concerned with his own security.”⁷⁸

Given this evidence, there is no reason to preclude the master’s praise for such an obviously ingenious plan, even if the same plan worked against his own economic interests. The plan, in fact, was very clever and the story would feel unresolved if there were not at least a mention of its cunning. For one thing, even if the honor-shame background has been overstated, it is still reasonable to assume that the first-century readers would have recognized this plan to be clever, especially since it forced the master into a position in which “reneging on these benevolent acts carried out in his [the

⁷⁷Gagnon, “A Second Look at Two Lukan Parables,” 3.

⁷⁸M. Dwaine Greene, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward as Question and Challenge,” *ExpTim* 112 (2000-01): 87.

master's] name would ravage his reputation.”⁷⁹ The reader can assume that if the master attempted to recoup his losses, it would have been a more socially expensive move to revoke numerous, welcomed debt reductions than to do nothing at all; it simply was not worth it for him, the patron, to enrage his clients. Moreover, rather than seeking debt reinstatement, if he instead decided to prosecute the steward to recoup his losses, he would have been on shaky legal ground. For, since the manager dealt with each debtor individually, and since he had each one destroy the old promissory note, the master would have had no tangible proof of the dishonest debt reduction.⁸⁰ Even if there were proof of the dishonest scheme, it was still unlikely that he would have taken the manager to court because it was considered “highly dishonorable” to litigate to seek justice.⁸¹ For “legal satisfaction does not restore honour”; instead, one must restore his own honor by himself or by one of his social extensions (e.g., a family member).⁸² But, even if honor does not factor in here, the jobless manager would have had no means to pay indemnity; if he had that much money to begin with, the parable’s whole premise of a manager in crisis would not have worked. Moreover, if Derrett’s observations about the agency regulations apply to this culture, then the debtors were to assume still that the steward had wide-ranging authority, and an uproar would have ensued if the master had abrogated this cultural expectation. Because of this agency regulation, as explained in Chapter 2, even if there were proof of the dishonest deed, prosecuting for fraud was difficult. The master,

⁷⁹Young, *Parables*, 241.

⁸⁰Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 415.

⁸¹Combrink, “Social-Scientific Perspective on the Parable of the ‘Unjust’ Steward,” 296.

⁸²Ibid.

again, would have realized that it was not worth the effort. In sum, the master was saddled with the irreversible actions of the steward; he had no course of action in any direction and had only the option of accepting what had happened. The master was in a legally, socially, and economically weak position to do anything other than resign to the new reality—much the same as the steward’s acceptance of his new reality at the beginning of the parable. The master’s acceptance of the unchangeable situation is demonstrated by his commanding the steward for such a well-laid plot. It, of course, is possible that the master simply admires the manager for his shrewdness, but the possibilities mentioned above provide more depth to that shrewdness and are based on assumptions that a first-century reader could have made without too much convolution. Whether the master admires him for simple shrewdness or a richer shrewdness defined in part by the intricacies of the plan outlined above, however, it does not change the parable’s meaning or the general purpose for the master’s commendation.

How Does the Parable Proper Relate to Its Applications?

Scholars such as Creed, Jülicher, Weiss, Hunter, and Jeremias have seen verse 9 as not original; however, most make this claim on the assumption that the parable originally had to be about only one theme (e.g., preparation for the kingdom) without any admixture of another theme (e.g., exhortation to use money properly). For example, since the application material brings forth a monetary meaning, Jeremias does not believe that the appended sayings are original; they are, instead, “actualized” hortatory applications of the early church.⁸³ Fletcher offers several reasons why verse 9 should be

⁸³Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 48. Behind this assumption stands the outdated assumption, also found in Conzelmann (*Die Mitte der Zeit*), that the early church came to terms with the unexpected delay in the Parousia by shifting the theological emphasis from eschatology to ethics. The unmistakable

considered original: the saying is “closely adjusted to the parable”; it is a terse, enigmatic saying characteristic of many of Jesus’ other sayings; it yields no independent meaning, which it presumably must have had if it circulated apart from the text.⁸⁴ The clear parallel between verses 4 and 9 suggests that the two should be read similarly. The using of “worldly wealth to gain friends” is exactly what the manager was doing (as demonstrated by his stated motivation in v. 4), so verse 9 both makes explicit the thesis of the parable and acts as the concluding word of the verse. The next verse begins a new (yet concatenated) thought.

Most scholars have identified three distinct sayings in verses 9-13. In addition, many scholars perceive the difference between the parable proper and the applications to be so stark that they assume that Jesus could not have uttered both and that the latter sayings were appended by the gospel writer, perhaps as a way for the Evangelist to “redeem” a seemingly “unredeemable” parable.⁸⁵ The unity of the three sayings is up for debate, although those arguing for a closer connection (both within vv. 9-13 and the connection between vv. 1-8 and 9-13) do more justice to Luke’s redactional skill. Bovon suggests that the three groups of sayings are linked together by the “mot-crochet [word-hook] ‘Mammon,’ ”⁸⁶ although there appears an even tighter coherence than the similarity of just one word. Du Plessis explains that the scholarly consensus is that verses 10-12 and verse 13 are separate sayings appended to the parable because of their similar

interweaving of already/not-yet eschatological understandings in Luke, however, prove this assumption to be simplistic.

⁸⁴Fletcher, “Riddle of the Unjust Steward,” 19-20.

⁸⁵Barth, “Dishonest Steward and His Lord,” 65-66.

⁸⁶Bovon, *L’Évangile selon Saint Luc*, 3:66.

themes; however, the sayings should not be interpreted individually but “within their mutual relationship and within their wider context.”⁸⁷ Since Luke tends to give a summary conclusion at the end of a parable or series of sayings, Du Plessis believes that verse 13 should be used to determine the meaning of what preceded.⁸⁸ In the same way that Luke 14:33 sums up several short parables dealing with the cost of discipleship, 16:13c sums up the message of the entire pericope.⁸⁹ Barth sees coherence based on a different division. He points out that the two divisions of Luke 16:1-13 parallel Jesus’ exhortation in Matthew 10:16 to be as wise as serpents but as innocent as doves, the parable proper and the two related comments (vv. 1-9) constituting the first element and the proverbs after (vv. 10-13) constituting the second.⁹⁰

The scholarly consensus is that verses 10-12 form an *a fortiori* argument (*qal wachomer*, in rabbinic terms⁹¹) that one who is faithful with little (worldly wealth) will be faithful with much (heavenly reward).⁹² This lesson is reminiscent of the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30), and even the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23-35) is an inverse lesson: one will not be forgiven much when he cannot forgive a little. What further binds the Unjust Steward and Unforgiving Servant parables is that both

⁸⁷Du Plessis, “Philanthropy or Sarcasm?” 2.

⁸⁸Ibid., 3, 15.

⁸⁹Ibid., 15.

⁹⁰Barth, “Dishonest Steward and His Lord,” 65.

⁹¹Gächter, “Parable of the Dishonest Steward after Oriental Conception,” 131. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, SP, vol. 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 246, also points out that this type of argumentation is an illustration of the *qal wehomer* (“light and heavy”) in Hebrew.

⁹²Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 191. This verse is quoted in 2 Clem 8:5. Cf. a very similar “light and heavy” rabbinic argument in *m. Dem.* 2:2: “He who would not be faithful in what concerns himself, how then could he be faithful in what concerns others?” (Young, *Parables*, 245).

feature monetary debt forgiveness in order to demonstrate the workings of the Kingdom of God, workings which can (and should) be reflected in the believer's actions, especially his/her financial dealings. Both begin with a monetary image, which is elevated to a spiritual truth, which then, completing the logical circle, is made manifest in a monetary truth. Verse 13 offers another perspective on the same point: disciples owe their allegiance mainly to the greater (God) rather than the lesser (Mammon), although one's stewardship of the lesser tends to demonstrate his allegiance to the greater. If one accepts the *a fortiori* argument, then the steward's dishonesty is not "overlooked" but is instead "emphasized": if a dishonest steward is a model for imitation in this respect, how much more so should "the children of light" be clever in preparing for the coming kingdom, especially by allocating their monetary resources well. This is also a lesser-to-greater argument in the sense that the loss of one's job and reputation is a crisis that can motivate one to clever action, but this crisis is of relatively minor importance to one's decision about the kingdom. Derrett claims that this is not an *a minore ad maius* argument, but his explanation is less than clear, resembling a mere assertion more than an argument.⁹³

In sum, there is ample evidence in the parable proper, in the applications, and in the close thematic parallels in the Gospels that exhortations to prepare for the kingdom and exhortations about proper use of money can easily be understood as inextricably linked. Therefore, to argue that only one half of the argument could have originally existed and that the other half must necessarily be a non-original later (even misguided) accretion is not warranted. If one insists on a sharp Hirschian line between meaning and application, the spiritual truth represents the former while the monetary truth represents a

⁹³J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Fresh Light on Lk XVI: II. Dives and Lazarus and the Preceding

legitimate implication. The problem with some interpretations is that they often accept one while dismissing the other in an attempt to retain only one “point.”

How Does This Parable Cohere with the Theology of the Third Gospel?

This question alone could warrant an entire chapter—if not more. A comprehensive treatment of Luke’s theology will not be attempted here, in part because this has already been done well by numerous other scholars. Since few would debate Stein’s main categories, this dissertation will accept without question the eight primary theological emphases in the Third Gospel that he identifies: the sovereign rule of God over history, the kingdom of God, the Holy Spirit, Christology, the Great Reversal, the call to salvation, the Christian life, and the atonement.⁹⁴ The prominence of all these themes in Luke, of course, does not require that all be read into the Unjust Steward parable. In fact, many of these cannot without doing injustice to the parable. As explained in earlier chapters, some have attempted to force a Christological understanding onto the parable—or a forgiveness emphasis, or a social justice emphasis, or something else not clearly evident in the parable or its immediate context. This dissertation’s contention is that the Unjust Steward reflects several emphases characteristic to Luke; the parable combines eschatological, ethical, and evangelistic emphases to demonstrate their interconnectedness.

Sayings,” *NTS* 7 (1960-61): 365.

⁹⁴Stein, *Luke*, 45-56. More germane to this study, one might note the Lukan emphasis on the poverty-wealth dichotomy and the exhortation to proper use of riches. The ideas are practical corollaries, respectively, to the Great Reversal and Christian life theological emphases mentioned by Stein.

Eschatological Preparedness

That Luke contains an eschatological emphasis is beyond question. The most famous Lukan theology in the twentieth century was Conzelmann's *Die Mitte der Zeit*, whose argument is based heavily on assumptions about Luke's explanation of the eschatological confusion characterizing the primitive church. Conzelmann argued that the traditions that Luke received regarded the kingdom as an imminent future expectation, but a delayed Parousia forced Luke to shift the focus from the coming of the kingdom to a three-epoch *Heilsgeschichte* (with Christ's earthly ministry as "the middle of time") in which the kingdom is already present; as such, Luke has historicized his received tradition and has pushed the eschaton to a distant point in the future that is outside history.⁹⁵ Conzelmann's thesis was immediately greeted by a flood of criticism that denied a historicizing, crisis-of-delay rearrangement by Luke.⁹⁶ The result is that the current consensus represents a much more balanced understanding whereby the Third Gospel simultaneously contains elements of realized, imminent, and futuristic eschatology. It is this nuanced understanding of Luke's eschatology, which is both already and not-yet, where the Unjust Steward perfectly fits.

The crisis leitmotiv, strongly associated with the coming kingdom, is implicit yet clear in this parable. Not only is the parable's plot infused with crisis, but also, as discussed in Chapter 3, the language of the parable and applications have strongly

⁹⁵Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), which is the English translation of *Die Mitte Der Zeit*. For a summary of Conzelmann's thesis, see I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian & Theologian*, 3rd ed., New Testament Profiles (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 128-36.

⁹⁶Robert H. Smith, Fred O. Francis, S. G. Wilson, I. Howard Marshall, E. Earle Ellis, Eric Franklin, and many others have found fault with Conzelmann's general premises.

eschatological overtones. Perhaps even the language of the firing may be taken as a reflection of Luke's already-not yet eschatology: in verse 3, the steward explains that his master "is taking" (present tense with perhaps a future understanding) the stewardship away, he speculates about "when" he is dismissed (futuristic in tone although presumably already done), and the master to him "you are no longer able" (present tense but with the full consequences to be experienced in the future) to be steward. To drive the eschatological point home further, the following material is full of eschatological ideas: "eternal homes" (16:9) imply an afterlife and an end to the present one; the "kingdom of God" is explicitly mentioned in 16:16; heaven and earth are said to "pass away," an apocalyptic idea, in 16:17; the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31), though not intended to be a lesson about the afterlife, certainly assumes one; and an extended teaching about the coming of the kingdom (17:20-37) falls shortly after all material. In short, the Unjust Steward should be understood primarily as one of the repeated calls in the Third Gospel to accept the present eschatological reality represented by the Christ in their midst and to prepare for the future eschatological reality that will greet each one in the end. Thus, Stein is correct when he argues that the parable's main point is that in light of the coming judgment, "one should act decisively and with shrewd self-interest (16:8) to prepare for that time when an accounting must be made before God (16:2)."⁹⁷ For the Pharisees and disciples that time was before them in the person of Christ and yet still remained to be fulfilled in the final consummation.

^{⁹⁷}Stein, *Luke*, 414.

Ethical Instruction

The category “ethical instruction” might just as well be called a “call to discipleship,” for the two are synonymous here. While the parable’s main point is eschatological, the ethical application for the disciple in the face of the eschatological crisis is hard to miss. That Luke has a concern for the poor and that proper use of wealth with respect to them is beyond question, and here is yet another place where Luke makes that concern clear. As described in Chapter 2 and earlier in this chapter, many scholars have argued that the ethical application about money was a later addition by the church to make sense of this enigmatic parable.⁹⁸ The *Traditionsgeschichte* behind the pericope’s components and the authenticity of the applications are not under examination here, but suffice it to say that the parable proper and applications fit together harmoniously. It is perfectly unsurprising to find Jesus offering a theoretical injunction (eschatological preparedness) coupled with an example of the means to make that advice a reality (use of money). There is, therefore, no need to posit an inauthentic, *non sequitur* application by a primitive church that could not make heads or tails of a parable that was strangely transmitted apart from its explanation. The two parts as they stand in Luke are symbiotic. In the same way that the parable advocates money as means to an end, so too the main point of the parable subordinates the monetary/ethical considerations to the eschatological; money is means to an end, and the monetary theme in the parable is means to the eschatological point in the parable. The kingdom of God is of ultimate importance, and the wise use of money is of penultimate importance as a tangible

⁹⁸For example, H.-J. Degenhardt, *Lukas—Evangelist der Armen* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1965), 119-20, believes that the Lukan additions in vv. 9-13 replace the original eschatological message of vv. 1-8 with an ethical message. So also Bovon, *L’Évangile selon Saint Luc*, 3:67, who claims

reflection of whether one is prepared for and participating in the kingdom. If one takes verses 1-13 as a unity, then Fitzmyer's assessment is correct: the point of the parable is that one should prudently use material possessions to ensure future security, especially in light of the crisis of the kingdom preached by Jesus.⁹⁹ The two themes work in tandem with the eschatological abstraction providing the theological framework for the ethical instructions.

If one assumes that the primary point of the parable is only about money, though, there is a possible problem. Many members of the explicit audience (the disciples) and many of the early readers lacked a large surplus of resources to enact Jesus' advice. In fact, by this point in the Gospel, Luke had explained that many of the disciples had "left everything" already (5:11, 28; cf. also 18:28-29), so they presumably had little if any "mammon" to use for this purpose. However, if one recognizes that the main point of the parable is an appeal to prepare for the kingdom, and that one of the main ways to demonstrate that preparation is the proper use of the money, all disciples—from poor to rich—can fully appreciate the meaning, and the main ones overhearing the appeal (i.e., the Pharisees, and, in a sense, Theophilus), can appreciate it with even more trenchant specificity. Moreover, for those who had already "left everything," it is a further vindication that they had taken the correct route to discipleship. For those who have meager or moderate resources (e.g., probably many of the Pharisees who are also in the audience), there is still room for generosity, as later poignantly demonstrated by the indigent widow (21:1-4), who practiced Jesus' exhortation to the greatest extent that her

that the early church would often append its own interpretation to a logion of Jesus; it did the same here "maladroitly."

⁹⁹Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 2:1099.

scanty resources would allow. In sum, the Unjust Steward is perfectly consistent with Lukan theology, and it resonates with several themes that abound in the Third Gospel. The meaning of the parable is the same for all audiences, and even the application is the same for all, although it has proportionately greater direct significance for those who have greater resources (or those who desire gaining—not using magnanimously—greater resources, specifically the Pharisees [16:14]). For this reason, the focus explicitly shifts next to the money-loving Pharisees.

Evangelistic Exhortation

Whereas the eschatological framework provides the backdrop, and the ethical instruction provides the concrete action, the evangelistic exhortation implied in the parable provides the goal of such action. Granted, this theme is not as immediately apparent as the other two, but it is implicit in the wider context. As stated before, the poor who are helped by one's beneficence are a main concern for Luke. However, Luke's concern for someone like a poor Lazarus or any other kind of social pariah (or “outcaste”¹⁰⁰) is not that he become more financially secure or socially accepted. Certainly, these are desirous outcomes, but the main concern for Luke is that they find salvation. Luke, realizing that a poor or outcast person is likely to be more receptive to the message of salvation from someone who acts generously toward him, establishes a parallel with the steward who has acted “generously” toward the debtors.

Although the steward worked in his own self-interest (gaining potential patrons) within the parable, the application parallels this self-interested activity with

¹⁰⁰As Hiers, “Friends by Unrighteous Mammon,” 34-35.

gaining “friends” who will welcome one into an eternal abode. This parallel is especially fitting if one considers that Luke was addressing his letter explicitly to Theophilus, who was probably a man of some means. It is probably more than mere coincidence, then, that Luke includes this exhortation for those with the financial means to use that money to win “friends” (i.e., converts). Indeed, the conversion of the Gentiles (to the chagrin of some Jews) is at least one point of the parable of the Prodigal Son, and the conversion of Jews is mentioned at the end of the Rich Man and Lazarus (which Chapter 5 argues is clearly related to the Unjust Steward thematically and verbally), where the rich man did not use his wealth to gain converts to heaven. The rich man (like the Pharisees in v. 14) had the financial wherewithal to act beneficently to many, thereby gaining their indebted attention, thereby cultivating the ability to direct them to the message of salvation. Thus, the ultimate aim of one’s generosity is to produce the rejoicing over a lost-sinner-found alluded to in 15: 6, 9-10, 23-24.

Such generosity is a two-way street because it also confers a spiritual reward on the benefactor—evidence of his true discipleship and a warm reception in the end from the “friends” who have been materially enriched and who have been led to salvation by the munificent acts of the giver. In the Rich Man and Lazarus, it is not that the rich man would have earned his admittance into heaven if he had just given more alms or helped more poor people. The use of one’s riches is a tangible indicator of something more important: one’s internal disposition toward God and his creation. In Luke’s theology, by the time the reader reaches this point in the Gospel, it is presupposed that where one’s possessions are used is an indicator of where one’s heart resides (so stated already in Luke 12:34). The rich man’s lack of charity was not the central issue; his

heart's fondness for the world was his problem, and this skewed perspective was manifest most clearly in his miserly grasping of his worldly "mammon." If he had given alms, it would have been an external indicator that he was in line with Jesus' kingdom exhortation—both the immediate ("already") acceptance of Jesus and also the expected ("not yet") eternal abode in the final kingdom.

In conclusion, it can be stated with solid contextual support that the Unjust Steward coheres with the Third Gospel's theology by interweaving several significant Lukan themes. The lineaments of the argument are as follows: In light of the present and coming kingdom (eschatology), one should prepare for it with wisdom, especially by cleverly using material possessions (discipleship ethics), which can be the worldly vehicle whereby its recipients become receptive to the message of salvation (evangelism), and, having accepted it, greet the giver at the "gates" of heaven when both the world and its money are gone (16:9).

Conclusion

The review of the current state of research on the Unjust Steward in Chapter 1 and the survey of the parable's history of interpretation in Chapter 2 both attest to the fact that this parable continues to vex scholars and is susceptible to numerous competing readings, more so than other passages of similar length. As such, a fresh appraisal of the evidence is warranted. The traditional view perceives the steward as dishonest in his debt reduction, while the point of the parable is a dual exhortation about eschatological preparedness in general and proper use of money in specific. While this was the accepted reading of the Unjust Steward for most of the twentieth century, the proposals of Derrett and Fitzmyer in the 1960s and 1970s opened up the possibility for readings that

understand the steward's actions to be less despicable. Despite Ireland's meticulous monograph defending the traditional reading, steward-vindicating readings have been proliferating apace in the past few decades.

Chapter 3 has determined that a reliance on textual variants does not offer a satisfying solution. In this chapter, the examination of the language of 16:1-13 on the lexical, grammatical, and syntactical levels demonstrates that the steward, wantonly profligate like the prodigal son, is an employee who is fired by his superior for probable wrongdoing. The parable's ensuing language underscores the steward's intense crisis and the sudden cleverness of his scheme to save himself. His plan is to eliminate partially the debts of numerous wealthy businessmen, who would then be socially indebted to him for his initiative. Although the steward's authority for taking this action was illegitimate, the master is socially fettered, unable to revoke the illegal action for fear of appearing harsh and fickle to his client debtors. He, therefore, commends the steward for his single act of cunning with no implicit endorsement his morality or any other of his actions. The applications after the parable explain the point of the parable in the form of an *a fortiori* argument: if a self-serving worldly man can act with such shrewdness to benefit himself, how much more so should Christian disciples prepare wisely for the kingdom of God, namely through the proper use of wealth for the benefit of others. One can rely on either God or worldly wealth, and the actions one takes indicate where one's ultimate allegiance lies.

Chapter 4 has examined four features of the parable's socio-historical background that some have alleged as important interpretative keys. The conclusion here is that, while there is some limited interpretive value to each of these features, the

importance of each should not be overemphasized, as many recent interpreters have tended to do. The chasm between the (despised) rich and (pious) poor “classes” in first-century Palestine is not as profound as some have understood it to be, especially given the Lukan context, in which there are references to wealthy pious believers and numerous individuals who fall somewhere between the two socioeconomic tiers. Likewise, arguments strongly appealing to ancient Mediterranean cultural features, like honor-shame, dyadic personality, limited-good economy, or patron-client relationships, tend to overplay their hands. Moreover, studies assuming implicit usury in the loans are lacking hard evidence from first-century Palestine. Lastly, studies that wish to identify the target of the parable’s implicit criticism as anyone other than the Pharisees fail on numerous counts. The love of money that these Pharisees demonstrate is a quality universally condemned in ancient culture.

Chapter 5 has examined the parable in its literary context. After establishing the fact that the NT “parable” is closely descended from the OT *mashal*, with all of its connotations of elastic meaning and interpretive density, the general history of parable interpretation presented here has demonstrated that the ever-changing trends in parable interpretation have not always taken this *mashal*-parable relationship seriously enough. Most notably, many after Jülicher have offered interpretations that are too simplistic because of their reductionist tendencies; at the other extreme, reader-response critics have allowed for too many subjective meanings to be foisted illegitimately upon the parable. In the examination of the parable with respect to its immediate context in Luke, the Unjust Steward has been concluded to be an integral component of the concatenated units comprising Luke 15 and 16. Since it shares a closer affinity to the Prodigal Son than

previous interpreters have been willing to recognize, it serves as a thematic link between the parables that flank it on either side. Viewed with a wider lens, the parable thematically coheres with the rest of the Central Section material, which is characterized by a wealth of didactic material often directed at the nature of proper discipleship, especially with respect to the use of money. Finally, Chapter 5 has examined a few literary conventions that some scholars have proposed as interpretive keys for the parable. The conclusion is that some of these are of more value than others for understanding the Unjust Steward. For example, Luke's use of an open-ended parable intensifies the drama of the steward's crisis, and the interior monologue is Luke's best clue to the steward's motivations. On the other hand, the literary convention of the "praised slave" has been overused in interpreting this parable because allegedly parallel examples betray too many dissimilarities and are too far removed from first-century Palestine to be of direct use in interpreting the parable. The loose "praised slave" parallels, however, do have value insofar as they demonstrate that it was possible, even common, in ancient literature to have a duplicitous character praised by the object of his trickery.

Lastly, Chapter 6 has synthesized the conclusions from the previous chapters to answer the nine most troublesome questions that the reader of the parable encounters. The study has concluded that these answers are most probable: (1) the steward was fairly accused of wronging at the beginning of the parable; (2) the commodities he was forgiving were ultimately due to the master, not to him; (3) the steward was only interested in benefiting himself by lowering the debts, and any other benefit was coincidental; (4) the large sums demonstrate that the debtors were clearly wealthy

businessmen; (5) the parable proper ends with verse 8a, so (6) the master, not Jesus himself, is the one who praises the steward; (7) the steward is praised for only one reason—his sly self-preservation; (8) the parable’s applications probably did not originally follow the parable, but they probably derive from Jesus himself and do legitimately exploit the meaning behind the parable; and (9) the parable coheres with the Third Gospel’s theology in its emphasis on eschatological preparedness, ethical instruction (especially regarding the proper use of wealth), and evangelistic exhortation, an idea clearly permeating all of Luke-Acts. In sum, this study has concluded that the traditional interpretation, which perceives the parable to be about a dishonest transaction that teaches about both the proper use of monetary possession and preparing for the kingdom of God, is still the most plausible.

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Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

DOING JUSTICE TO THE UNJUST STEWARD: AN EXEGETICAL EXAMINATION OF LUKE 16:1-13 AND ITS CONTEXT

Joel Allen Troxler, Jr., Ph.D.
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003
Chairperson: Mark A. Seifrid

This dissertation ascertains the meaning of the Unjust Steward parable (Luke 16:1-13) by examining its language, historical background, and literary context. Chapter 1 introduces the parable's interpretive problems, acknowledges that it is perhaps the most difficult of Jesus' parables to understand, and offers a method for deciphering the meaning.

Chapter 2 offers a detailed history-of-interpretation with special attention given to the work of Dennis J. Ireland (*Stewardship and the Kingdom*, 1992) and the interpreters who have come after him, especially those who depart from the traditional interpretation.

Chapter 3 first examines the text-critical concerns for the parable and then analyzes the language of 16:1-13 at the lexical, grammatical, and syntactical levels.

Chapter 4 examines four historical background matters that some scholars have offered as interpretative keys for understanding the parable and determines that most of these background features have been overemphasized and are of limited help.

Chapter 5 examines the literary concerns of the parable. This chapter first examines the nature of the “parable” genre, Luke’s use of parables, and the history of parable interpretation in general. The chapter then examines the literary context of the parable, giving special attention to the relationship between the Unjust Steward and all of the major units in Luke 15 and 16. Finally, the chapter examines a few literary conventions that some scholars have proposed as interpretive keys. The conclusion is that some are of more value than others.

Chapter 6 synthesizes the information and conclusions from Chapters 3, 4, and 5 to answer the nine most pressing questions that the parable presents to the reader.

The dissertation concludes that the traditional interpretation, which perceives the parable to be about a dishonest transaction that serves as an exhortation about both the proper use of monetary possession and preparing for the kingdom of God, is still the most plausible.

VITA

Joel Allen Troxler, Jr.

PERSONAL

Born: December 30, 1973, Nashville, Tennessee
Parents: Joel, Sr., and Suzanne Troxler
Married: Yelizaveta Pavlova Klimova, December 22, 2001

EDUCATIONAL

Diploma, Davidson Academy High School, Nashville, Tennessee, 1992
B.A., Vanderbilt University, 1995
M.Div., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999

MINISTERIAL

Associate Pastor, The Church at Hickory Hollow, Nashville, Tennessee,
1997-99
Associate Chaplain, Veterans Administration Medical Center, Nashville,
Tennessee, 1999

ACADEMIC

Adjunct Professor of Biblical Studies, Baptist College of Florida
(Internet), 2000-
Greek Tutor, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002-
Greek Instructor, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003

ORGANIZATIONAL

Student Member, Evangelical Theological Society, 2000-
Associate Member, Society of Biblical Literature, 2003-