

## A HISTORY OF RECENT INTERPRETATION OF THE PARABLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD (LUKE 16:1—13)

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THERE is little question that the parable of the unjust steward in Luke 16:1-13 is one of the most difficult of all Jesus' parables to interpret.<sup>1</sup> In this pericope a steward seems to be commended for dishonest behavior and made an example for Jesus' disciples. As one of the most influential interpreters of the parable has said, "Much as commentators disagree as to the meaning of the parable of the Steward, all are agreed as to the embarrassment it has caused."<sup>2</sup> It has been called the *crux interpretum* among the parables,<sup>3</sup> the "problem child of parable exegesis [Schwerzenskind der Parabelexegese],"<sup>4</sup> "the prince among the difficult parables,"<sup>5</sup> and "a notorious puzzle."<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, "the literature dealing with the parable of the unjust

<sup>1</sup> In speaking of the parable by this title and as these verses I do not intend either to prejudge the steward's actions in the parable or to beg the much-debated question of the exact limits of the parable and its application(s). I have retained this title for the parable—the unjust steward—both because of its familiarity through long use and its basis in the text itself (v 8a: καὶ ἐπήνεσεν ὁ κύριος τὸν οἰκονόμον τῆς ἀδικίας). I have connected the parable with Luke 16:1-13 because these verses are usually discussed together, even if they are judged to have been pieced together from separate sayings of Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> J. D. M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970) 48.

<sup>3</sup> A. Julicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1910) 2.495.

<sup>4</sup> A. Rucker, "Über das Gleichnis vom ungerechten Verwalter, Lc 16:1-13," *BibS(F)* 17 (1912) 1.

<sup>5</sup> R. Stoll, "The Unjust Steward—A Problem in Interpretation," *Ecclesiastical Review* 105 (1941) 17.

<sup>6</sup> R. G. Lunt, "Towards an Interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke xvi.1-18)," *ExpTim* 66 (1954-55) 335.

steward is staggering."<sup>7</sup> In attempting to survey that literature one is quickly convinced that M. Kramer's description "the jungle of explanations" is apt indeed.<sup>8</sup> To continue his metaphor for a moment, one can very easily become entangled and lost in the literature on this parable.

It is against this backdrop that I offer the following history of recent interpretation of the parable of the unjust steward. Much has been written on the parable since A. Rucker's history of interpretation in 1912,<sup>9</sup> and it may be of assistance to late twentieth-century interpreters to have this more recent work reviewed and catalogued in the context of earlier work. The parameters I have chosen for the study (parameters largely dictated by practical reasons of sheer volume and accessibility of material) are the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (hence "recent"). Rather than organize this literature chronologically (which, though convenient, would be more confusing than helpful) or according to categories such as Rucker used<sup>10</sup> (which, among other things, would raise the difficulty of defining allegory), I have chosen to proceed in a way that seems simpler and more natural. Since the crux of the parable is the praise of the steward (16:8a) for his actions toward his master's debtors (16:5-7), I have organized my study on the basis of how those actions have been interpreted. Two basic interpretations of the steward's actions have been offered, each of which can be further subdivided according to various emphases. The following outline will orient the reader as to these interpretations and the organization of this article. The proportions of the outline (e.g.,

<sup>7</sup> L. J. Topel, "On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward: Luke 16:1-13," *CBQ* 37 (1975) 216. The volume of literature on the parable is illustrated in W. S. Kissinger's helpful book on the parables, *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (ATLA Bibliography Series 4; Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press and The American Theological Library Association, 1979) 398-408. Kissinger lists no less than 107 periodical articles alone on this parable in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

<sup>8</sup> M. Kramer, *Das Ratsel der Parabel vom ungerechten Verwalter, Lk 16:1-13* (Zurich: PAS-Verlag, 1972) 27.

<sup>9</sup> Rucker's work ("Gleichnis") is a survey of the literature on the parable during the period between his own time and M. J. C. Schreiter's history of interpretation from a century earlier (*Historico-critica explicatio Parabolae de improbo oeconomio descriptio, qua varias variorum interpretum super Lucae 16,1-13 expositiones digestas, examinatas, suamque ex Apocryphis Veteris Testamenti potissimum haustam exhibuit*, [Lipsiae, 1803]).

<sup>10</sup> Rucker's three categories are "Allegorical Interpretations Mostly of a Contemporary Kind," "Partial Elimination of Allegory Bound with Moralistic Interpretation," and "Newer Refusals of Allegory and Their Critique" ("Gleichnis," 6-26, 27-52, and 53-64, respectively).

Part I is longer than Part II) should not be construed as a judgment about the relative validity of a given interpretation.

### I. Steward's Actions Fraudulent and Dishonest

1. Traditional (or Monetary) Interpretation
2. Non-Monetary Interpretations
  - (1) Eschatological
  - (2) Non-Eschatological
3. Negative-Example Interpretation
  - (1) Based on Present Text
    - (a) Non-Ironical
    - (b) Ironical
  - (2) Based on Theories of Textual Confusion

### II. Steward's Actions Just and Honest

1. Charity or Similar Quality Stressed
2. Socioeconomic Background Stressed

#### *I. Steward's Actions Fraudulent or Dishonest*

##### *1. Traditional (or Monetary) Interpretation*

Until at least the middle of the twentieth century, the most common (hence "traditional") interpretation of the parable of the unjust steward has been that which judges the steward's actions toward the debtors fraudulent and dishonest, but nevertheless draws from those actions a positive lesson about prudence or wisdom in the use of material possessions.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on the use of possessions (hence

<sup>11</sup> Of the 140 or so interpreters of the parable whom I surveyed, at least 50 understand it in this way. Included among them are the following, listed alphabetically: W. F. Arndt (*The Gospel according to St. Luke* [St. Louis: Concordia, 1956]), P. Bigo ("La richesse, comme intendance, dans l'Évangile. A propos de Luc 16:1-9," *NRT* 87 [1965] 265-71), B. S. Easton (*The Gospel according to St. Luke* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1926]), L. W. Friedel ("The Parable of the Unjust Steward, Luke 16:1-13," *CBQ* 3 [1941] 337-48), N. Geldenhuys (*Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951]), F. Godet (*A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke* [5th ed.; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1976]), W. Grundmann (*Das Evangelium nach Lukas* [THKNT 3; 2d rev. ed.; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1969]), B. A. Hooley and A. J. Mason ("Some Thoughts on the Parable of the Unjust Steward [Luke 16:1-9]," *AusBR* 6 [1958] 47-59), M. Kramer (Ratsel), M.J. Lagrange (*Évangile selon Saint Luc* [7th ed.; Paris: Gabalda, 1948]), T. W. Manson (*The Sayings of Jesus* [London: SCM, 1949]), P.-H. Menoud ("Riches injustes et biens véritables," *RTP* n.s. 31 [1943] 5-17), J. Pirot (*Paraboles et allégories évangéliques* [Paris: Lethielleux, 1949]), A. Plummer (*The Gospel according to S.*

"monetary")<sup>12</sup> distinguishes this interpretation from others to be considered in Part I. So numerous are the interpreters who fall under this category and so nuanced are many of their interpretations that one must be content in an article such as this one with sketching the general and more widely held lines of argument.

In order to avoid the difficulty of the praise in Luke 16:8a, those who interpret the parable along the lines just outlined draw a distinction between different aspects of the steward's actions toward the debtors. The actions themselves are fraudulent, but the underlying wisdom, prudence, or foresight exhibited in them is praiseworthy. A number of interpreters have emphasized this distinction. R. C. Trench, for example, contends that in telling the parable and praising the steward Jesus "disengages" the steward's "dishonesty from his foresight."<sup>13</sup> Jesus' purpose in doing so, according to Trench, is to provoke his people "to a like prudence; . . . a holy prudence, and a prudence employed about things of far higher and more lasting importance."<sup>14</sup> T. W. Manson also champions this distinction. In his opinion, since ethical judgment on the steward's actions is passed in the epithet by which the steward is described in v 8 ("the dishonest/unjust steward [τὸν οἰκονόμον τῆς ἀδικίας]"), praise in that verse does not necessarily constitute moral approval of the steward's plan or actions by either his master or Jesus. It is the astuteness of the plan, not the plan itself, that is praised. There is all the difference in the world, insists Manson, between "I applaud the dishonest steward because he acted cleverly" (which is the case in our parable) and "I applaud the clever steward because he acted dishonestly." "Whether it is the

*Luke* [ICC; 5th ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1922]), L. Ragg (*St. Luke* [Westminster Commentaries; London: Methuen, 1922]), K. H. Rengstorf (*Das Evangelium nach Lukas* [NTD 3; 6th ed.; Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952]), A. Schlatter (*Das Evangelium des Lukas* [2d ed.; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1960]), D. P. Seccombe (*Possessions and the Poor in Luke-Acts* [SUNT, ser. B, vol. 6; Linz, Austria: A. Fuchs, 1983]), C. H. Talbert (*Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* [New York: Crossroad, 1982]), J. Wellhausen (*Das Evangelium Lucae* [Berlin: Reimer, 1904]), F. E. Williams ("Is Almsgiving the Point of the 'Unjust Steward'?" *JBL* 83 [1964] 293-97), and T. Zahn (*Das Evangelium des Lucas* [Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1913]).

<sup>12</sup> This term is used for convenience' sake only and should not be construed as limiting the application of the parable to money per se. Material possessions in a broad sense are included.

<sup>13</sup> R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables of our Lord* (14th ed., rev.; London: Macmillan, 1882) 442.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

employer or Jesus that speaks [in v 8], we must take the purport of the speech to be: 'This is a fraud; but it is a most ingenious fraud. The steward is a rascal; but he is a wonderfully clever rascal.'<sup>15</sup> As v 9 indicates, disciples can learn a lesson even from such a person. Manson explains Jesus' counsel to his followers in that verse ("use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves" [NIV] as follows.

If a bad man will take infinite trouble to get friends for his own selfish interests, the good man will surely take some trouble to make friends in a better way and for better ends. The point of this saying [v 9] is rather that by disposing of worldly wealth in the proper way, one will have treasure in heaven.<sup>16</sup>

Several interpreters, Manson among them, stress the pointedness of this message for the Pharisees and/or the publicans, both groups of whom Luke depicts as present when Jesus spoke the parable (cf. 15:1–2; 16:14).<sup>17</sup>

Like other synoptic parables, the parable of the unjust steward teaches by analogy. "It is a story from ordinary life in the world," writes J. M. Creed, "which is shewn to have a counterpart in the spiritual world."<sup>18</sup> What makes this parable unusual (and troublesome) is that it teaches spiritual truth by analogy to conduct that, for many interpreters, is dishonest. F. Godet explains, with regard to this feature, that Jesus did not scruple to use the example of the wicked for the purpose of stimulating his disciples. "And in fact," Godet continues, "in the midst of conduct morally blamable, the wicked often display remarkable qualities of activity, prudence, and perseverance, which may serve to humble and encourage believers. The parable of the unjust steward is the masterpiece of this sort of teaching."<sup>19</sup> In

<sup>15</sup> Manson, *Sayings*, 292.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 292–93.

<sup>17</sup> Manson (*ibid.*, 291), Easton (*Luke*, 241), Godet (*Luke* 2.160), and Plummer (*Luke*, 380), for example, all call attention to the anti-Pharisaic character of the teaching in both Luke 15 and 16. M. Dods (*The Parables of our Lord* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1904] 362–63), S. Goebel ("Die Gleichnisgruppe Luk. 15 u. 16, methodisch ausgelegt," 1 K 48 [1875] 675–76; pp. 656–76 of this article = his book, *The Parables of Jesus: A Methodical Exposition* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1883] 215–31), and E. R. Stier (*The Words of the Lord Jesus* [8 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1880] 4.106), are among those who argue our parable has special significance for converted or nearly converted publicans, instructing them about their new duties as disciples.

<sup>18</sup> Creed, *Luke*, 201.

<sup>19</sup> Godet, *Luke* 2.160–61.

the same vein, J. M. Creed groups our parable with those of the so-called importunate friend (Luke 11:5–8) and the unjust judge (18:1–8),<sup>20</sup> and argues that "the characters [of our parable] no more serve to immediate edification than the reluctant friend (xi.8) or the unjust judge (xviii.2)." "The emphasis [in our parable] falls upon the steward's 'prudence,' and an analogous 'prudence' in another sphere is enjoined upon the disciples."<sup>21</sup>

Inherent in the analogy, of course, are differences and contrasts between the steward and Jesus' disciples. As R. Stoll puts it, "The only similarity between them is in the matter of prudence and foresight, and even this is of a different nature and in a different order."<sup>22</sup> Jesus' disciples can, however, learn from the steward, despite the differences. As the dishonest steward responded decisively to the crisis of his dismissal, so disciples are to respond decisively in the face of their own analogous crisis. For some interpreters that crisis is the brevity and uncertainty of life<sup>23</sup> or the ever-present prospect of death;<sup>24</sup> for others it is the eschatological crisis occasioned by the coming of the kingdom of God in the person and ministry of Jesus.<sup>25</sup> In either case, when taken with the subsequent sayings (vv 9–13, especially v 9), the parable is understood as a commendation of prudence of a specific kind, that is, prudence in the use of wealth.<sup>26</sup> For the Christian such prudence is to take the form of charity, in general, or almsgiving, in particular;<sup>27</sup> fellow Christians may be especially in view as the

<sup>20</sup> Creed, *Luke*, lxix.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>22</sup> Stoll, "Steward," 26.

<sup>23</sup> C. F. Nosgen (*Die Evangelien nach Matthaus, Markus und Lukas* [Nordlingen: Beck, 1886] 368) is more explicit than most on this point when he speaks of life being as uncertain as the steward's position. E. Riggenbach ("Zur Exegese und Textkritik zweier Gleichnisse Jesu," in *Aus Schrift und Geschichte* [Stuttgart: Calwer, 1922] 24) speaks of the disciples being in a situation similar to that of the steward of the parable. Earthly goods are at their disposal for only a short time—i.e., during their earthly lives—after which an accounting must be given.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., B. K. Jensen ("Uber das Gleichnis vom ungerechten Haushalter," *TSK* 2 [1829] 705) and S. Goebel ("Gleichnisgruppe," 665, 669–670).

<sup>25</sup> E.g., R. H. Hiers ("Friends By Unrighteous Mammon: The Eschatological Proletariat [Luke 16:9]," *JAAR* 38 [1970] 32, 36), T. Hoyt, Jr. ("The Poor in Luke-Acts" [Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1974] 161), Kramer (Ratsel, 67–68, 238), and Seccombe (Possessions, 172).

<sup>26</sup> Creed, *Luke*, 201.

<sup>27</sup> E.g., Arndt (Luke, 357), Bigo ("Richesse," 268), A. B. Bruce (*The Parabolic Teaching of Christ* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1882] 359), Godet (*Luke* 2.163–66), Hiers

intended recipients.<sup>28</sup> A number of interpreters take pains to avoid any hint of salvation by works in these verses, particularly in v 9 ("I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" [NIV]), stressing that the teaching here is that good works done by Christians will be rewarded. At best, the role of the beneficiaries of charity is limited to that of welcoming their benefactors into heaven and/or of bearing witness to the genuineness of their benefactors' faith.<sup>29</sup>

## 2. *Non-Monetary Interpretations*

While, as we have seen, many interpreters relate the message of our parable to the use of material possessions, a number of others disregard or deny this "monetary" note altogether. Sometimes an eschatological emphasis is present in such interpretations, sometimes it is not.

(1) *Eschatological non-monetary interpretation.* The common denominator among quite a few interpreters is their stress on the eschatological background and teaching of our parable without relating it to the use of possessions per se. Instead of an exhortation for disciples to use their possessions with eternity in view, the parable is viewed in more general terms as a call for resolute action in the face of the eschatological crisis caused by the coming (present, imminent, and/

"Friends," 33-36), Hoyt ("Poor," 160-61), L. T. Johnson (*The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts* [Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977] 157), D. F. Koster ("Analekten zur Auslegung der Parabel vom ungerechten Haushalter, Luk. 16:1 ff.," *TSK* 38 [1865] 731), Kramer (in the second tradition-historical stage anyway; *Ratsel*, 134, 234), La-grange (*Luc*, 434), F. J. Moore ("The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *ATR* 47 [1965] 103-5), P. Samain ("Le bon usage des richesses, en Luc XVI, 1-12," *Revue Diocesaine de Tournai* 2/4 [1947] 334), Stoll ("Steward," 26), B. Weiss (*Die Evangelien des Markus and Lukas* [MeyerK; 8th ed.; Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892] 534), and Williams ("Almsgiving," 293-97).

<sup>28</sup> This point is suggested by, e.g., Godet (Luke 2.165-66), J. C. K. von Hofmann (*Die Heilige Schrift*, vol. 8/1: *Das Evangelium des Lukas* [Nordlingen: Beck, 1878] 398, 400), Kramer (*Ratsel*, 234), and Zahn (*Lucas*, 576).

<sup>29</sup> E.g., Arndt (*Luke*, 357), R. R. Caemmerer ("Investment for Eternity: A Study of Luke 16:1-13," *CTM* 34 [1963] 71), Geldenhuys (*Luke*, 416), and Zahn (*Lucas*, 577). Iso cf. O. Hof, "Luthers Auslegung von Lukas 16:9," *EvT* 8 (1948-49) 151-66. Some interpreters effectively deny any role for the beneficiaries in the reception by taking the "friends" and/or the third person plural verb δέξονται (lit., "they may receive") v 9 as an indirect reference to God (e.g., Creed [*Luke*, 205], Grundmann [*Lukas*, 21], Manson [*Sayings*, 293], and Menoud ["Riches," 13]).

or future) of the kingdom of God. While, as we will see, not a few of these interpreters concede that as the text now stands (vv 1–13) the parable is about the right use of money or possessions, this note is effectively neutralized or expunged by separating vv 1–7/8 from vv 8/9–13. The latter verses are judged to be the interpretive additions of tradition, Luke, and/or the early church. As such they were not part of the original telling of the parable, and cannot, therefore, be stressed in its interpretation.

The eschatological non-monetary interpretation has some very prominent advocates. Among them are A. Loisy, C. H. Dodd, J. Jeremias (with some qualification), and K. E. Bailey. A. Loisy argues that the general meaning of the parable (which he restricts to vv 1-7) is the use of the present to prepare for the future, to assure oneself a part and place in the kingdom. The more specific application to the charitable use of terrestrial goods in the following verses (vv 8-13) is the work of the evangelist and perhaps subsequent redactors as well.<sup>30</sup> C. H. Dodd sounds the eschatological note in our parable even more forcefully in his important book, *The Parables of the Kingdom*. Dodd believes vv 1-7 constitute the parable and vv 8-13 "a whole series of 'morals'" appended by the evangelist. He says, in words frequently quoted and endorsed by others, "We can almost see here [in vv 8b, 9, and 11, which he has just quoted] notes for three separate sermons on the parable as text."<sup>31</sup> Dodd goes on to suggest that v 8a ("And ὁ κύριος [= Jesus, not the master of the parable, according to Dodd] praised the steward") was added by the reporter of the parable, and was probably the application of the parable in the earliest form of tradition. When taken with this application, the point of the parable is to urge Jesus' hearers "to think strenuously and act boldly" to meet their own momentous crisis much as the unscrupulous steward did to meet his.<sup>32</sup> For Jesus' hearers that crisis is precipitated by the inbreaking of the long-expected kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus himself. "The eschaton has moved from the future to the present," Dodd writes, "from the sphere of expectation into that of realized experience."<sup>33</sup> "The 'eschatological' Kingdom of God is proclaimed

<sup>30</sup> A. Loisy, *Les Evangiles synoptiques* (2 vols.; Ceffonds: Pres Montier-en-der, 1908) 2.161. Loisy's approach is endorsed by M. Hermaniuk, *La parabole evangelique* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1947) 248-49.

<sup>31</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (rev. ed.; New York: Scribner's, 1961) 17.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.



as a present fact, which men must recognize, whether by their actions they accept or reject it."<sup>34</sup>

The eschatological context and content of this parable, without reference to the use of possessions, is also stressed by J. Jeremias, albeit with less exclusive emphasis on realized eschatology than Dodd. Jeremias's interpretation does, however, need to be qualified. While Jeremias seems willing, on the one hand, to concede that in its present Lucan context the parable is about the proper use of possessions,<sup>35</sup> he insists, on the other hand, that the situation is far more complicated than it appears. In his opinion, as the primitive church sought to apply the parable to the Christian community it added vv 8b-13 and thereby shifted the original emphasis of the parable from the eschatological to the hortatory. What was originally addressed to the " 'unconverted', the hesitant, the waverers, the crowd" as a summons to resolute action in the eschatological crisis of the coming of the kingdom was thus transformed into "a direction [to Christians] for the right use of wealth, and a warning against unfaithfulness."<sup>36</sup> Unlike many others who also detect a shift in vv 8b-13, Jeremias does not, however, believe this shift necessarily introduced a foreign element into our parable. The exhortation was implicit in the original form, he reasons, and the eschatological note has not been excised completely since the eschatological situation of the primitive church itself lent weight to its exhortations.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 29. Dodd's realized eschatology (see esp. pp. 33-34) also figures prominently in A. M. Hunter's work on the parables. See esp. A. M. Hunter, "The New Look at the Parables," in *From Faith to Faith* (ed. D. Y. Hadidian; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1979) 191-99, esp. 193, and his series of articles on "Interpreting the Parables" in *Int* 14 (1960) 70-84, 167-85, 315-32, 440-54. If some writers, such as Dodd and Hunter, have emphasized (almost exclusively) the realized, present aspect of eschatology in their interpretations of our parable, others seem to focus on the future aspect instead. W. Michaelis, for example, explains the teaching of our parable (vv 1-8a, for him) in these words: "The disciples ought to understand clearly their position in view of the Last Day, and then with the same wisdom, the same consistency and resoluteness [as the steward], ought to look after the securing of their future" (*Die Gleichnisse Jesu* [Hamburg: Furche, 1956] 228, emphasis added). He also suggests that vv 9-13 may have been added by Luke from various words of Jesus in order to give Christians of his day instruction about how to use possessions and riches (pp. 228-29).

<sup>35</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (2d rev. ed.; New York: Scribner's, 1972) 46-47.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 48. Other interpreters who, with varying degrees of confidence in the present text, espouse the same position that a shift from the eschatological to the hortatory has occurred in Luke 16:1-13, include the following: D. Velte ("Das eschatologische

K. E. Bailey also explains the parable in eschatological non-monetary terms. Unlike the others thus far considered, he does so, however, on literary-cultural grounds. Bailey argues, on literary grounds, that a clear separation can and should be made between vv 1–8 and vv 9–13, the former verses (the parable) being an eschatological warning to sinners and the latter a poem on the theme of God and mammon. Both sets of verses, he contends, should be read and interpreted independently of the other.<sup>38</sup> The thrust of Bailey's cultural argument is that as the dishonest steward, in having the debtors reduce their debts, risked "everything on the quality of mercy he has already experienced from his master,"<sup>39</sup> so disciples need the same kind of wisdom in relying on God's mercy.<sup>40</sup> The message for disciples is that "if this dishonest steward solved his problems by relying on the mercy of his master to solve his crisis, how much more will God help you in your crisis when you trust his mercy."<sup>41</sup> For disciples, the crisis is eschatological in nature.<sup>42</sup>

Heute im Gleichnis vom ungerechten Haushalter," *Monatschrift für Pastoraltheologie* 27 [1931] 213–14), H. Zimmermann ("Das Gleichnis vom ungerechten Verwalter: Lk 16:1–9," *BibLeb* 2 [1961] 254–61), H.J. Degenhardt (*Lukas—Evangelist der Armen* [Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1965] 118–25), J. Dupont (*Les Beatitudes* [3 vols.; Paris: Gabalda, 1969–73] 3.118–22), W. E. Pilgrim (*Good Jews to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981] 125–29), and R. H. Stein (*An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981] 106–11).

<sup>38</sup> K. E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes. A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (combined ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 86, 110–11, 118.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 98. Mercy is present at the outset in the fact that the steward "is fired but not jailed" (*ibid.*).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 107. In similar fashion, M. Barth ("The Dishonest Steward and His Lord: Reflections on Luke 16:1–13," in *From Faith to Faith* [ed. D. Y. Hadidian; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1979] 65–73) believes that the real hero of the parable is not the steward but the master who was generous to his cheating steward. The wise person, he concludes, is one who puts everything on the good Lord and the riches of his grace and is thus justified by faith (p. 72). Mention can also be made at this point of the interpretations of J. D. Crossan and, with less certainty, D. O. Via, Jr. Both interpret our parable in literary terms, and, with some qualification, both detect in it an eschatological message. Neither writer stresses the monetary note. Crossan (*In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* [New York: Harper and Row, 1973]) describes the parable (vv 1–7) as "a carefully formed mini-drama" with three scenes (p. 110), the point of which is that "one must be ready and willing to respond in life and action to the eschatological advent of God" (pp. 119–20). He qualifies his interpretation by saying that the eschatological advent is that for which readiness is impossible because it shatters our wisdom (p. 120). Via's interpretation (*The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* [Phil-

(2) *Non-eschatological non-monetary interpretation.* A number of interpreters draw lessons from our parable which are unrelated to either the themes of possessions or eschatological crisis. According to A. Julicher, for example, the parable (which he limits to vv 1-7) is not about the right use of riches (that comes in at v 9, which he regards as secondary). Instead the point of the parable is the resolute utilization of the present as prerequisite for a pleasant future.<sup>43</sup> In a somewhat more specific vein, A. Rucker concludes his history of interpretation of the parable by arguing that Jesus is here recommending to his followers wisdom and decisiveness in caring for the future. In striving after heavenly goods they are to behave in a manner analogous to that of the dishonest steward.<sup>44</sup>

W. O. E. Oesterley goes in a somewhat different direction when he argues that the keynote of Luke 16:1–13 is consistency.<sup>45</sup> The steward was wicked from beginning to end, but at least he was consistent with his principles. "Consistency is a virtue; being exercised in a wrong direction does not make it, per se, less a virtue."<sup>46</sup> Christians, however, are often inconsistent with their principles, and can, therefore, learn a lesson from the dishonest steward at this point.<sup>47</sup>

adelphia: Fortress, 1967]) is more difficult to classify because of his particular literary and existential approach, and I include him here with some reservations. He classifies our parable as "a picaresque comedy" (p. 159), and explains that this form suggests man can overcome the danger of a threatening future by responding appropriately to the crisis. He admits that the crisis note in the parable points, albeit "subsidiarily," to the same theme in Jesus' non-parabolic eschatological preaching, but then quickly downplays the connection by stressing the aesthetic autonomy of parables in general (pp. 161–62).

<sup>43</sup> Julicher, *Gleichnisreden*, 2.511.

<sup>44</sup> Rucker, "Gleichnis," 63. J. Schmid (*Das Evangelium nach Lukas* [RNT 3; 4th ed.; Regensburg: F. Pustet, 1960] 256–59) offers a similar interpretation, arguing that the point of the parable in vv 1–8 is wise provision for the future. Classifying Schmid's interpretation is complicated, however, by the fact that he believes vv 9–13 are an appendix about the right use of mammon added by Luke. The original meaning of the parable has thus been shifted and specifically applied to the use of money. Schmid does not stress the eschatological note in our parable, hence his inclusion here.

<sup>45</sup> W. O. E. Oesterley, "The Parable of the 'Unjust' Steward," *Expositor*, ser. 6, 7 (1903) 283.

<sup>46</sup> W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of the Jewish Background* (New York: MacMillan, 1936) 199.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* In his book on the parables Oesterley introduces the monetary note into his interpretation of our parable. As in his earlier article, he still sees the primary purpose of vv 1–13 as the inculcation of the need for consistency of life, but he adds that the parable may contain subsidiary teaching about the danger of the love of money (p.

### 3. *Negative-Example Interpretation*

Despite the differences in the interpretations considered thus far, there is at least one common denominator among them: they all draw positive lessons from negative evaluations of the steward's actions. This approach is not, however, the only possible one, even on the assumption that the steward's actions toward the debtors are fraudulent and dishonest. A number of interpreters argue that the actions of the steward are a warning, a negative example, which graphically illustrates what Jesus' disciples are not to do or be. The vast majority of interpreters who so explain the parable do so on the basis of the present text. A few other interpreters postulate textual confusion as the key to the explanation of the parable.

(1) *Interpretations based on the present text.* Some of those who explain the parable on the basis of the present text detect a note of irony in the parable, some do not.

(a) *Non-ironical interpretation.* The negative-example interpretation of our parable, without irony, is forcefully articulated by J. F. Bahnmaier. While himself rejecting the ironical interpretation of Luke 16:8b (more on that interpretation in the next subsection), Bahnmaier admits that the exponents of that view and he share the presupposition that the faithless steward is in no connection presented as an example for Christians, not even with regard to his care for the future. Quite to the contrary, he contends, the steward is only a "detestable example [verabscheuungswürdiges Beispiel]" in whom there is nothing worthy of imitation.<sup>48</sup> Jesus' purpose in telling the parable is to exhort his followers, in contrast to the steward, to seek again to make friends

202). I have included Oesterley at this point rather than under the traditional interpretation above because the overall emphasis of both his article and book is on the general quality of consistency while the monetary note is secondary, at best. Among others who might be cited as representatives of a non-eschatological and non-monetary interpretation of our parable are H. Firth ("The Unjust Steward," *ExpTim* 15 [1903-4] 426-27), G. Murray ("The Unjust Steward," *ExpTim* 15 [1903-4] 307-10), G. A. Buttrick (*The Parables of Jesus* [New York: Harper, 1928] 118-24), and R. G. Lunt ("Interpretation," 335-37, and "Expounding the Parables: III. The Parable of the Unjust Steward [Luke 16:1-15]," *ExpTim* 77 [1965-66] 132-36).

<sup>48</sup> J. F. Bahnmaier, "Der ungerechte Haushalter Luc. 16:111. von Jesus keineswegs als Beispiel irgend einer Art von Klugheit aufgestellt," *Studien dervangelischen Geistlichkeit Württembergs* 1 (1827) 34. It is perhaps worthy of note at this point that J. Jeremias also believes "the steward is not an example, but a dreadful warning—the parable being understood by contraries" (*Parables*, 47). This interpretation is only true, however, if the parable is interpreted with vv 10-12, verses which Jeremias regards as secondary.

with heaven through the faithful use of goods once gained in unjust ways.<sup>49</sup>

W. Milligan's argument runs in a similar vein. Instead of looking back to chap. 15, however, as Bahnmaier does, Milligan's concern is with the relationship between the parables of Luke 16 and 17. He concludes that the parables of both chapters treat the same subject from different sides, that is, "the odiousness of unfaithfulness and the value of faithfulness in the stewardship with which we have been put in trust by God."<sup>50</sup> The keynote of Luke 16:1-13 is unfaithfulness against which Christians are being warned in the conduct of the steward. The opposite virtue, faithfulness, is inculcated in vv 10-12.<sup>51</sup>

The work of H. Preisker may be cited as a third illustration of the interpretation in question. Like many others whom I have already mentioned, Preisker distinguishes sharply between the parable (in his mind, vv 1-7) and secondary additions and interpretations (vv 8-13). According to him, the parable describes man fallen under the power of mammon.<sup>52</sup> The steward is not converted, but remains completely in the embrace of mammon. The parable is, therefore, a sharp warning against the huge danger of riches.<sup>53</sup>

(b) *Ironical interpretation.* In the course of the recent history of interpretation several interpreters of our parable have argued that irony is the key to its understanding. These interpreters agree that the steward's actions are a negative example for Christians, but, unlike those just cited above, they contend that Jesus conveys his warning message by means of irony, especially in vv 8-9. The interpretations of P. G. Bretscher and D. R. Fletcher illustrate this approach.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>50</sup> W. Milligan, "A Group of Parables," *Expositor*, ser. 4, 6 (1892) 126.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 114. A. Feuillet ("Les riches intendants du Christ," *RSR* 34 [1947] 30-54, esp. 49-51, 53) can also be cited at this point as a representative of the view that the steward's conduct is a negative example. He argues that the main point of the parable is the teaching on stewardship in vv 9-13 which is set in contrast to the unfaithfulness of the steward of the parable.

<sup>52</sup> H. Preisker, "Lukas 16:1-7," *TLZ* 74 (1949) 88.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 90. Mention can also be made at this point of the interpretations of A. T. Cadoux (*The Parables of Jesus: Their Art and Use* [London: Clarke, 1930] 131-37) and A. R. Eagar ("The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *Expositor*, ser. 5, 2 [1895] 457-70). Both explain the parable as providing a negative example and both stress its contemporary-historical significance as a condemnation of Israel's religious leaders. Like the steward of the parable who misused his trust, Eagar explains (ibid., 465), these leaders by their traditions played fast and loose with God's law to preserve their temporal prosperity.

The most thoroughgoing interpretation of the parable in terms of irony is perhaps that of P. G. Bretscher. Whereas most others who detect irony in the parable focus on v 9, Bretscher extends the note of irony into v 8 as well. He puts his finger on the interpretive crux of our parable when he observes that, on the analogy of faith, vv 8-9 (where the steward is commended and the disciples are exhorted to "use worldly wealth to gain friends" for themselves) are the opposite of what one would have expected Jesus to say. The way out of this difficulty, he suggests, is to "read into the voice of Jesus as He utters the words of verses 8 and 9 the overtones of deepest irony." Thus understood, Jesus does in fact say the very opposite of what he actually means.<sup>54</sup> The meaning of the parable on this reading is best conveyed by Bretscher's paraphrases of vv 8-9. He expresses the sense of v 8a in these words.

"You are surely clever!" he [Jesus] might say. "You have displayed real ingenuity, yes, the very highest wisdom this world knows—the wisdom of disguising your sin, pretending righteousness, shrugging off the anger of God, quieting a guilty conscience by gaining the approval of men, showing off a few good works to cover a heart full of evil."

Verse 8b supplies Jesus' own commentary on such wisdom, again in irony. Bretscher continues the paraphrase. "Yes, this is a wisdom and cleverness the sons of light would not dream of. It is a damning cleverness, in fact, deceiving no one more than those who engage in it. The sons of light are not so clever." Verse 9 provides the climax. "Go ahead, then! Use all God's gifts to you for your own unholy and ungodly purposes! Use them to make friends of the sinners of this world! . . . Let them be your judges, let them open the gates of everlasting habitations to you!" The implied conclusion, Bretscher argues, still paraphrasing Jesus, is, "You fool! They cannot do it! It is before God that you stand or fall, the God you ignored and despised. He will condemn you to the torments of hell."<sup>55</sup> The lesson of the parable, according to him, is "The Folly of Sinners Who, by Wisdom, Avoid Repentance."<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> P. G. Bretscher, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward—A New Approach to Luke 16:1-9," *CTM* 22 (1951) 757.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 759 (all the paraphrases are taken from this page).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* Bretscher admits that on a casual reading the parable does not sound like irony. Since, however, irony is conveyed by modulation of the voice and is, therefore, lost in written transmission, only the context can point to irony in its written form (p. 762). Bretscher argues that the context does so in the case of this parable (p. 760).

Perhaps the most well-known and often-cited interpretation of our parable in terms of irony is that of D. R. Fletcher. Fletcher is unpersuaded by various attempts to vindicate the steward's actions,<sup>57</sup> and is also convinced that a "straight" reading of v 9 (which, according to him, would teach self-interest) does not fit the general tenor of Jesus' teaching about a radical distinction between his disciples and the world.<sup>58</sup> He contends instead that "irony is the key which . . . unlocks the riddle of the Unjust Steward."<sup>59</sup> The clue to the presence of irony is found, Fletcher believes, in the contrast in v 9 between mammon which fails (τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας) and the kingdom of God (τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς). He summarizes the force of the contrast as follows.

The irony of Jesus' play on the story of the parable [in v 9] is simply the utter irrelevance of the two concepts, mammon and its absorbing concerns over against the dwellings of God. "Make friends for yourselves," he seems to taunt; "imitate the example of the steward; use the unrighteous mammon; surround yourselves with the type of insincere, self-interested friendship it can buy; how far will this carry you when the end comes and you are finally dismissed?"<sup>60</sup>

Fletcher concludes that "the single theme" of the whole passage (vv 1–13) is "a demand for faithfulness and obedience, particularly in the face of the corrosive influence of ὁ μαμωνᾶς τῆς ἀδικίας ['unrighteous mammon']".<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> D. R. Fletcher, "The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?" *JBL* 82 (1963) 23. Such attempts make up the second major heading of this article.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–25.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–30. Among other interpreters who have detected varying degrees of irony in our parable are the following, listed in chronological order: J. C. Reimpell ("Das Gleichnis vom ungerechten Haushalter, Luk 16," *Zeitschrift für kirchliche Wissenschaft und kirchliche Leben* 1 [1880] 509–15), G. Jäger ("Noch einmal: Der ungerechte Haushalter," *ibid.* 2 [1881] 111–12), W. B. Ripon ("The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *Expositor*, ser. 4, 7 [1893] 21–29), Eagar ("Parable," esp. pp. 465–66), J. F. McFayden ("The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *ExpTim* 37 [1925–26] 535–39), F. Lenwood ("An Alternative Interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward," *The Congregational Quarterly* 6 [1928] 366–73), A. King ("The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *ExpTim* 50 [1938–39] 474–76), R. Pautrel ("'Aeterna tabernacula' [Luc, XVI, 9]," *RSR* 30 [1940] 307–27), H. Clavier ("L'ironie dans l'enseignement de Jesus," *NovT* 1 [1956] 3–20, esp. 4, 16), G. Paul ("The Unjust Steward and the Interpretation of Luke 16:9," *Theology* 61 [1958] 189–93), and G. Sellin ("Studien zu den grossen Gleichniserzählungen des Lukas-Sonderguts. Die *anthropos-tis*-Erzählungen des Lukas-Sonderguts—besonders am

(2) *Interpretations based on theories of textual confusion.* All the interpreters in the above subsection read the parable of the unjust steward as a negative example, and do so on the basis of the text of Luke 16 as it now stands. A few others arrive at the same basic conclusion, but do so by a very different route. Sensing the difficulty of the parable and finding other approaches unacceptable for one reason or another, these interpreters have theorized that the real meaning of the parable has been obscured in the process of the text's translation and/or transmission.

H. F. B. Compston, R. B. Y. Scott, and J. C. Wansey, for example, build their interpretations of the parable on the preposition ἐκ in Luke 16:9 ("Make friends for yourselves ἐκ τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας"). Both Compston and Scott suggest (apparently independently of each other) that behind this preposition stands the Aramaic *min*, one of the meanings of which, they contend, is "away from," i.e., "without."<sup>62</sup> Wansey comes to much the same conclusion, but does so by reference to Greek rather than Aramaic. His suggestion is that ἐκ be emended to ἐκτός [BAGD, "outside"] on the conjecture that a scribe perhaps omitted the last three letters.<sup>63</sup> In this case, the sense of v 9 is the same as that put forward by Compston and Scott—"Make friends without mammon." The point of the parable is that the disciples' means and methods must be entirely different than those of the unjust steward.

Another interpreter who explains our parable on the basis of textual confusion is G. Schwarz. His focus is on v 8 where, he postulates, a twofold translation error has occurred in the words ἐπῆνεσεν ("praised") and φρονίμως ("wisely," "shrewdly"). He argues that "a striking peculiarity" of the Aramaic equivalents for these words (*brk* and *'rym*, respectively) is that both can be used in good and bad senses, and then suggests that a translator has used the good senses in Greek when Jesus really intended the bad in Aramaic. In short, what was spoken by Jesus in Aramaic as condemnation of the steward has been

Beispiel von Lk 10,25-37 und 16,14-31 untersucht," [Ph.D. dissertation, Munster, 1974], esp. 293-98). Ripon, Eagar, Lenwood, and Pautrel stress that Jesus' irony is directed especially against the Pharisees and religious leaders.

<sup>62</sup> H. F. B. Compston, "Friendship without Mammon," *Exp Tim* 31 (1919-20) 282, and R. B. Y. Scott, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke xvi. 1ff)," *ExpTim* 49 (1937-38) 234-35.

<sup>63</sup> J. C. Wansey, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward: An Interpretation," *Exp Tim* 47 (1935-36) 39-40.



mistranslated into Greek as praise. The correct translation of what Jesus originally said, according to Schwarz, is as follows: "And the master [Herr] cursed the deceitful [betrügerischen] steward, because he had acted deceitfully [hinterlistig]." Schwarz adds that the master's judgment on the actions in question would have hit home with those among Jesus' hearers who exercised the function of "stewards," i.e., the spiritual leaders of that time.<sup>64</sup>

## II. *Steward's Actions Just and Honest*

Despite the diversity among the interpreters considered thus far, they at least agree that the steward's actions toward the debtors are fraudulent and dishonest. The actions themselves are not exemplary, and the lesson of the parable is to be found either in a quality exhibited in the actions or in a total contrast to them. In Part II we meet interpreters who view the steward's actions in a very different light. These writers contend that the steward's actions themselves are just and honest, and are, therefore, inherently commendable. As such those actions serve as a direct, positive example for Jesus' disciples and/or others, and no major distinction or contrast needs to be drawn between the actions and the point of the parable. To express it in other terms, these interpreters draw generally positive lessons from what is judged to be *positive* conduct by the steward.

The basic approach of most of those who so interpret the parable is to justify the changes which the steward authorizes the debtors to make in their IOUs. The steward is thus vindicated of wrongdoing in those actions and the difficulty of the praise in v 8 is alleviated. The commendation, whether by Jesus or the master, then becomes appropriate, even deserved. This justification of the steward's actions has been attempted in a variety of ways. I have grouped the attempts according to their stress on charity or a similar ethical quality in the steward's actions or their stress on the socioeconomic background of the parable. Neither category, however, should be viewed as rigid or mutually exclusive; they may overlap at times and in certain interpreters.

<sup>64</sup> G. Schwarz, "' . . . lobte den betrügerischen Verwalter?' (Lukas 16:8a)," *BZN.F.* 18 (1974) 94-95.

### 1. *Charity or Similar Quality Stressed*

The earliest attempt to explain the parable by justifying the debt reductions is apparently that of D. Schulz.<sup>65</sup> Schulz argues that the changes were made in the presence of the master and could not, therefore, have been deceptive. Though a "son of this age" (v 8b), the steward is praised for showing charity to the debtors. Jesus' demand to his disciples is that they use their temporal goods in analogous ways so as to give proof of their love for others and thus gain the friendship of God.<sup>66</sup> A similar but slightly different line of argument is taken by P. Brauns. He also believes the steward's actions took place in the presence of the master and could not have been deceptive, but then goes on to suggest that the steward, like Zacchaeus (Luke 19), repaid his master the amounts that were reduced with his own money. The steward thus made restitution to his master and was charitable to the debtors at the same time.<sup>67</sup> Therein lay his wisdom, "a wisdom of repentance [eine Klugheit der μετάνοια]." <sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> D. Schulz, *Über die Parabel vom Verwalter, Lk 16:1ff. Ein Versuch* (Breslau: J. Max, 1821). The description of Schulz's interpretation as the earliest of its kind is taken from Rucker, "Gleichnis," 33.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-6. Others who, with various interpretive nuances, also describe the steward's actions as charitable are F. Schleiermacher (*Ueber die Schriften des Lukas* [Teil 1; Berlin: Reimer, 1817] 202-4), F. F. Zyro ("Neuer Versuch über das Gleichnis vom klugen Verwalter, Luk 16," *TSK* 5 [1831] 788-92, 804), G. Wiesen (*Die Stellung Jesu zum irdischen Gut mit besonderer Rücksicht auf das Gleichnis vom ungerechten Haushalter* [Gutersloh: Bertelsmann, 1895] 72-73, 75), and J. Coutts ("Studies in Texts: The Unjust Steward, Lk 16:1-8a," *Theology* 52 [1949] 54-60). With the exception of the latter, each of these interpreters emphasizes the special pointedness of the parable for the tax collectors and/or the Pharisees. H. Olshausen (*Biblical Commentary on the New Testament* [6 vols.; New York: Sheldon, 1862] 2.63-70) does not speak of charity per se, but does explain the steward's actions positively in terms of v 13 as serving the true Lord and despising the false (cf. v 13: "hate"/"love" [μισήσει/ἀγαπήσει]).

<sup>67</sup> P. Brauns, "Nun noch ein Auslegungsversuch von Lk 16:1-14," *TSK* 15 [1842] 1014-15. The same explanation of the steward's actions as restitution is given by J. Grant ("The Unjust Steward," *ExpTim* 16 [1904-5] 240) and W. Arnott ("The Unjust Steward in a New Light," *ExpTim* 24 [1913] 510).

<sup>68</sup> Brauns, "Auslegungsversuch," 1017. Zyro ("Versuch," 802-4) and Coutts ("Steward," 57-58) also characterize the steward's actions as acts of repentance. Brauns's argument that the steward's actions were carried out in the presence of the master and therefore were not deceptive is endorsed by Holbe ("Versuch einer Erklärung der Parabel vom ungerechten Haushalter, Lk 16:1ff.," *TSK* 32 [1858] 527-42), who adds the suggestion, later offered and developed independently by others, that the steward reduced the debts by his own share and then handed over the documents. For this generosity he was praised. Holbe regards the parable as a justification of the publicans

Another way in which the steward's actions have been vindicated and the difficulty of the praise alleviated is by explaining those actions in terms of forgiveness.<sup>69</sup> On this reading, the point of the parable is that as the steward forgave his master's debtors, so disciples are to forgive others. Such acts are marks of the sincerity of one's own commitment to God.

E. Kamlah vindicates the steward's actions in yet a different manner. He contends that "steward [οἰκονόμος]" had a well-known metaphorical meaning which would have indicated at once to Jesus' hearers that the parable was about the Pharisaic teachers of the law. Kamlah sees the steward's conduct toward the debtors, then, as an example of and the standard for the appropriate conduct of these leaders. Like the steward, the Pharisees should, among other things, lighten the burdens on their subordinates and also humble themselves.<sup>70</sup>

## 2. Socioeconomic Background Stressed

Perhaps the most common way to justify the steward's actions toward the debtors is by appealing to the socioeconomic background of the parable. Among the first to have done so is J. J. van Oosterzee.<sup>71</sup> His suggestion is that prior to the time of the steward's dismissal he had been extracting more from the debtors than he actually turned

many of whom, though unjustly slurred by the Pharisees, proved to be just and generous as the steward had been in similar circumstances (pp. 534–41).

<sup>69</sup> Among those who describe the steward's actions in this way are Jensen ("Haushalter," 707–9), F. G. Dutton ("The Unjust Steward," *ExpTim* 16 [1904–5] 44), Coutts ("Steward," 57–58), F. Maass ("Das Gleichnis vom ungerechten Haushalter, Lukas 16:1–8," *Theologia Viatorum* 8 [1962] 179), and Topel ("Steward," 224–25). The latter two interpreters are difficult to classify because, on the one hand, they insist on the "injustice" of the steward's actions while, on the other hand, they define that "injustice" as having almost an ironical sense. Their basic argument is that the parable is a call for forgiveness which, like the steward's actions, appears "unjust" according to human standards, but according to God's standards is just.

<sup>70</sup> E. Kamlah, "Die Parabel vom ungerechten Verwalter (Luk. 16:1ff.) im Rahmen der Knechtsgleichnisse," in *Abraham unsex Later* (eds. O. Betz, M. Hengel, and P. Schmidt; Leiden: Brill, 1963) 282–84, 287–88, 292–94. It is interesting to note in passing that whereas Kamlah regards the steward's actions as a positive example of what the Pharisees should have done (i.e., reduce the ceremonial laws), others (e.g., Eagar ["Parable," 465–66] and Lenwood ["Parable," 368]) see them as an indictment of what they were doing (i.e., evading the spirit of the law by their traditions).

<sup>71</sup> J. J. van Oosterzee, *The Gospel according to Luke*, vol. 8 in J. P. Lange's *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical* (12 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960). The first edition of Oosterzee's commentary came out in 1859.

over to his master, perhaps using the difference to support a wanton lifestyle. The debt reductions, then, were not a falsification of the records, but rather a rectification of past wrongs. The new amounts on the bills and the amounts actually collected and passed on to the master finally agreed. The steward thus abandoned his earlier dishonesty.<sup>72</sup> According to Oosterzee, the parable had special relevance for both the tax collectors and Pharisees, reminding the former of their duty as disciples now to make restitution wherever possible, while, at the same time, warning the latter of their status as stewards for whom a day of reckoning was coming.<sup>73</sup>

The essence of Oosterzee's approach to the parable is found in the well-known and often-cited article of M. D. Gibson.<sup>74</sup> Writing just after the turn of this century, Gibson tentatively offers a suggestion which, she claims, had not occurred "to any of our learned commentators."<sup>75</sup> Arguing on the basis of "Eastern customs" at the beginning of the twentieth century, she believes that the steward of the parable had been overcharging the tenants and pocketing the difference. So typical, she asserts, is this practice in Oriental societies even in the twentieth century that many listeners, upon hearing the parable of the unjust steward, would understand the situation intuitively and no explanation would be needed. "They would know that the steward, in telling the cultivators to write less in their bills than he had originally

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 8.245-46. Essentially the same argument is advocated by C. E. van Koetsveld (*Die Gleichnisse des Evangeliums* [trans. O. Kohlschmidt; Leipzig: F. Jansa, 1904] 233-39; the first Dutch edition came out in 1886) and M. Eves (*Die Gleichnisse Jesu* [4th ed.; ed. H. Marx; Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1908] 82-89; cf. his earlier monograph on the parable, *Das Gleichnis vom ungerechten Verwalter* [Krefeld: G. Hohns, 1901]).

<sup>73</sup> Oosterzee, *Luke*, 245. Oosterzee's approach is explicitly endorsed and developed by F. Nagelsbach ("Noch einmal das Gleichnis vom ungerechten Haushalter," *Zeitschrift für kirchliche Wissenschaft und kirchliche Leben* 2 [1881] 481-86), who describes the reductions as the excess rent the steward had been charging the tenants of his master's estate. In the same vein, also cf. A. Wright ("The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *The Interpreter* 7 [1911] 279-87) and L. Fonck (*Die Parabeln des Herrn im Evangelium* [4th ed.; Innsbruck: F. Rauch, 1927] 680, 684, 687).

<sup>74</sup> M. D. Gibson, "On the Parable of the Unjust Steward," *ExpTim* 14 (1902-3) 334. Gibson is usually credited with having been the first to suggest what might be called the socioeconomic vindication of the steward. She does, in fact, claim originality for her interpretation.

<sup>75</sup> She either has in mind only British commentators or she is unaware of the earlier interpretations of Oosterzee, Koetsveld, and Evers.

demanded from them, was simply renouncing his own exorbitant profits, without in any way defrauding his master."<sup>76</sup>

Gibson's "almost casual suggestion"<sup>77</sup> has been endorsed, developed, and modified by many interpreters in this century.<sup>78</sup> P. Gachter has played an important part in disseminating and elaborating Gibson's interpretation. Having concluded that other interpretations of the parable are unable to explain satisfactorily how Jesus can have made "villainy an example for his followers,"<sup>79</sup> Gachter argues for the essential correctness of Gibson's thesis. He does so, however, in more socioeconomic detail. The rich man of the parable, Gachter explains, was a large landowner who lived in a city, perhaps Damascus or Beirut. As an absentee landlord he had to engage the services of a steward to manage the estate for him. The steward was not paid by the owner for his efforts, but instead held the estate under lease. According to the terms of the lease, the steward had to give a definite sum to his master yearly which he in turn collected from sub-lessees or tenants of the estate. In keeping with the usual practice, however, the steward required these people to pay him much more for their manorial rights than he needed to meet the terms of his own lease with the rich man. The excess was the steward's personal income. When the IOUs were reduced, therefore, the steward actually gave

<sup>76</sup> Gibson, "Steward," 334.

<sup>77</sup> This evaluation is K. E. Bailey's (*Poet*, 88), who, incidentally, is very critical of Gibson and others on the very same cultural grounds they use to argue their case (see pp. 88-91).

<sup>78</sup> Although not everyone who so interprets the parable is dependent on Gibson, and despite differences in interpretive detail and nuance, the same basic interpretation that the steward "subtracts his 'cut' from the bills" (Bailey, *Poet*, 88) is found in the following writers: W. D. Miller ("The Unjust Steward," *ExpTim* 15 [1903-4] 332-34), E. Hampden-Cook ("The Unjust Steward," *ExpTim* 16 [1904-5] 44), P. Gachter ("The Parable of the Dishonest Steward after Oriental Conceptions," *CBQ* 12 [1950] 121-31, and "Die Parabel vom ungerechten Verwalter [Lk 16:1-8]," *Orientierung* 27 [1963] 149-50), J. A. Findlay (*Jesus and His Parables* [London: Epworth, 1950] 82), C. B. Firth ("The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward [Luke xvi.1-9]," *ExpTim* 63 [1951-52] 93-95), G. Gander ("Le procede de l'econome infidele, decrit Luc 16:5-7, est-il reprehensible ou louable?" *VCaro* 7 [1953] 128-41), J. D. M. Derrett ("Fresh Light on St Luke XVI: I. The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *NTS* 7 [1960-61] 198-219; = *Law*, 48-77), and J. A. Fitzmyer ("The Story of the Dishonest Manager," *TS* 25 [1964] 23-42, esp. 34-36, and *The Gospel according to Luke [X-XXIV]* [AB 28a; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 985] 1097-98).

<sup>79</sup> Gachter, "Conceptions," 121.

up his own income, and was not cheating his master or the tenants." Gachter concludes that in the application of the parable (vv 8b-9) "Jesus brings home to his disciples how they should detach themselves from riches, apply it to their brethren in need, and, thus secure for themselves an eternal reward."<sup>81</sup>

The major contribution to the socioeconomic vindication of the steward's actions is made by J. D. M. Derrett. The importance and seminal nature of Derrett's work lies in his attempt to explain our parable in first-century Jewish terms. Unlike others before him who were content to explain the parable by means of cultural parallels that were either non-Jewish (e.g., Hampden-Cook and Gachter both argue on the basis of Indian parallels), from the twentieth century, or both (e.g., Gibson), Derrett takes pains to base his interpretation on Jewish law and practice at the time the parable was first spoken by Jesus. The keys to the parable, he believes, are to be found in the Jewish laws of agency and usury.<sup>82</sup> He suggests that the steward, acting for his master as "an agent of the most comprehensive authority,"<sup>83</sup> had been lending money at interest to fellow Jews and had concealed it in the bills by means of Pharisaic casuistry.<sup>84</sup> It may have been precisely this interest (plus insurance) that was deducted from the debtors' bills.<sup>85</sup> If so, the steward thus "was acting righteously, and making amends."<sup>86</sup> "On dismissal his duty towards his master faded before the practical necessity to recognize his duty towards God. He decided to obey the creator instead of his creature."<sup>87</sup> Derrett also suggests that by remitting the usurious part of the debt the steward was in effect giving up his own money. "Any release of rabbinical usury would, therefore, be a payment out of the steward's own pocket."<sup>88</sup> Derrett goes on to argue that the steward's act as an agent

<sup>80</sup> "Parabel," 150. Mention should be made here of J. Steele's almost passing remark to the same effect ("The Unjust Steward," *ExpTim* 39 [1927-28] 236). He suggests that the steward gave up his own legitimate profits which had been figured into the amounts due on the bills.

<sup>81</sup> Gachter, "Conceptions," 131. Gachter is followed in his interpretation by, among others, J. Volckaert ("The Parable of the Clever Steward," *Clergy Monthly* 17 [1953] 332-41) and E. H. Kiehl ("The Parable of the Unjust Manager in the Light of Contemporary Economic Life" [Th.D. dissertation, Concordia Seminary, 1959]).

<sup>82</sup> Derrett, "Steward," 200.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 204. See pp. 201-4 for his discussion of agency.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-9, 214.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 209, 214-15.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

for his master would have been regarded by the debtors as an act of the master himself.<sup>89</sup> The master, in order to preserve this undeserved reputation as a pious man, not only praised the steward, but adopted and ratified his actions.<sup>90</sup> The point of the parable for the disciples, according to Derrett, is that charity to the poor is proper stewardship of God's wealth.<sup>91</sup>

### *Conclusion*

As the foregoing survey makes clear, the strong statements at the outset about the difficulty of the parable of the unjust steward are well-founded indeed. Many interpretations of the parable have been offered (and not all have been listed); some are mutually exclusive, some complementary. While it is not the purpose of this article to critique each interpretation outlined above or to argue in detail for a particular interpretation, let me conclude by indicating several lines of evidence in Luke-Acts that I believe support the traditional (monetary) interpretation of the parable with an eschatological emphasis.<sup>92</sup> In so doing my hope is to provide stimulus to further discussion of this enigmatic but important parable.

As most interpreters will admit, the parable of the unjust steward, at least on *the redactional level*, is about possessions. The following items in Luke 16:1-13 and its immediate context are significant in this regard. The word **μαμωνᾶς**, "mammon" (= material possessions of all kinds), occurs in vv 9, 11, 13; Luke comments that the Pharisees

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 216—17.

<sup>91</sup> *Law*, 74. Among those who have explicitly endorsed Derrett's approach are the following: H. Zimmermann ("Verwalter," 257-58), Fitzmyer ("Manager," 34-36, and Luke 2.1097-98), A. C. Thiselton ("The Parables as Language-Event: Some Comments on Fuchs's Hermeneutics in the Light of Linguistic Philosophy," *SJT* 23 [1970] 459—60), L. Morris (*The Gospel according to St. Luke* [Tyndale NT Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974] 245-46), E. E. Ellis (*The Gospel of Luke* [NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1974] 199), I. H. Marshall (*The Gospel of Luke* [NIGTC; Exeter: Paternoster, 1978] 614-16), and S. J. Kistemaker (The Parables of Jesus [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980] 228-31). M. D. Goulder ("The Chiastic Structure of the Lucan Journey," in *SE* 2 [1964] 198) puts forward the same conclusion that the steward remitted his own usurious profits, but does so without reference to Derrett.

<sup>92</sup> For a detailed argument of this position, see my Ph.D. dissertation, "Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: An Exegetical and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1-13," Westminster Theological Seminary, 1989. The present article is an abridgement of chapter one of my dissertation.

were "lovers of money [φιλάργυροι]" (v 14); and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in vv 19–31 seems calculated to illustrate the dire consequences of serving mammon. The latter parable also implies that the positive course of action exhorted in v 9 includes care for the poor. It seems clear, therefore, that Luke understood 16:1–13 as treating the use of possessions, and this fact must control our exegesis of the present text. If a good case can be made for the unity of vv 1–9 (cf., e.g., the striking verbal parallels between vv 4 and 9), the monetary interpretation of Luke 16:1–13 is further strengthened.

This interpretation is corroborated and clarified by the well-known emphasis on riches and poverty in Luke-Acts. Concerned to instruct the rich as well as to comfort the poor, Luke warns the former about the dangers riches pose for wholehearted discipleship (e.g., 6:24–26; 12:13–21; 16:19–31; 18:18–30) in order to exhort them to the proper use of their possessions. Such use involves charity to the poor (18:22 and 19:8) and almsgiving in particular (11:41; 12:33; Acts 3:2, 3, 10; 9:36; 10:24, 31; 24:17). Given the prominence of the theme of riches and poverty in Luke-Acts and Luke's avowed purpose to confirm Theophilus's faith (Luke 1:1–4), there apparently was some question or confusion in Theophilus's mind on the matter of stewardship. Luke makes it clear, especially in the central section of his gospel (9:51–19:44), that faithful stewardship is an integral part of true discipleship (cf., e.g., 14:25–35, esp. v 33 where the point is made negatively). Luke 16:1–13 makes just this point (positively) and is summed up well by E. E. Ellis, who entitles the pericope "Faithfulness: The Badge of Acceptable Discipleship." The discipleship-stewardship called for in this parable and the gospel as a whole is illustrated in the life of the early church in Acts (e.g., 2:42–45 and 4:32–37).

Several arguments can be advanced in favor of understanding the steward's actions toward the debtors as dishonest and fraudulent. First, the description of the steward as ὁ οἰκονόμος τῆς ἀδικίας in v 8a ("the dishonest manager," NIV; "the unrighteous steward," NASB) likely characterizes him in terms of the actions narrated in vv 5–7 (where the IOUs are changed) rather than in terms of the charge at the outset of the parable (that he was "wasting [ὡς διασκορπίζων]" his master's possessions, v 1). If so, the epithet in v 8a is Jesus' passing indictment of the steward's actions and also provides a hint for distinguishing between the actions themselves and the commendable

<sup>93</sup> Ellis, *Luke*, 198.



quality exhibited in them. Second, any element of surprise or attention-grabbing value the praise in v 8a may be intended to have in this parable is lost if the steward's actions are honest. If his actions are honest the praise (whether by the master or Jesus) comes as no surprise at all. We would have been surprised, in fact, if he were not commended! Third, it is highly unlikely that Luke's (predominantly) Gentile readers would have had all the background knowledge necessary to understand the steward's actions as honest. This difficulty for the attempt to vindicate the steward is conceded even by some of those who advocate doing so.<sup>94</sup> Unless Luke himself has missed the point, it is reasonable to assume the parable contains the necessary information for the reader to understand it. Fourth, the attempt to vindicate the steward is open to question on cultural grounds themselves. K. E. Bailey, for example, contends that any "extras" the steward may have received would have been "under the table" and "off the record" and would not have been included in the accounts.<sup>95</sup> The debt reductions authorized in vv 5–7 were, therefore, dishonest and would have meant economic loss for the master.

The underlying eschatological context of the parable of the unjust steward is confirmed in a number of ways. An eschatological note permeates Luke 16:1–13 and the immediate literary context. It is present, for example, in the image of eschatological judgment in the accounting the steward is called to give (v 2), in the contrast between the sons of this age and the sons of light (v 8b), and in the enigmatic saying about the kingdom of God in v 16. The same note is also present in other passages on the theme of possessions in the central section of Luke's Gospel (e.g., 12:31, 33, 35–48, and 18:18–30). The prominence of eschatology in such contexts implies an integral relationship between eschatology and stewardship and is of a piece with Luke's emphasis, shared by the other synoptic writers as well, that the kingdom of God is the central topic of Jesus' preaching, including his parables. Both the future and present aspects of the kingdom have an important bearing on the faithful stewardship called for in Luke 16:1–13. The future aspect provides hope and incentive by holding out both the prospect of reward for faithfulness (v 9—be received into eternal dwellings; v 11—be given true riches; v 12—property of one's own) and of judgment for unfaithfulness (vv 11–12; 19–31).

<sup>94</sup> E.g., Derrett, "Steward," 200, and Marshall, Luke, 615.

<sup>95</sup> Bailey, Poet, 89–90.

The present aspect supplies the dynamic for obedience. By acts of charity like those exhorted in this parable and illustrated in the life of the early church in Acts Christians give evidence of their citizenship and actualize the values and conditions of the kingdom in anticipation of its final coming. Among those kingdom conditions is the end of physical deprivation and suffering.

In view of the foregoing considerations it is my contention that the best interpretation of the parable of the unjust steward is the traditional one, difficulties notwithstanding. Luke 16:1-13 is, to use D. P. Seccombe's words, "a fundamental evaluation of possessions in the light of the Kingdom which will lead the wise disciple to use his possessions in the service of the needy."<sup>96</sup> Such a message is surely as relevant in our own day as it was in Luke's.

<sup>96</sup> Seccombe, *Possessions*, 172.

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