

ANCIENT SLAVERY AS  
AN INTERPRETIVE CONTEXT FOR  
THE NEW TESTAMENT SERVANT PARABLES  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO  
THE UNJUST STEWARD (LUKE 16:1-8)

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I. Introduction

As J. D. Crossan has pointed out, the Gospels contain nine parables in which servants figure prominently: the doorkeeper (Mark 13:33-37//Luke 12:35-38); the overseer (Matt 24:45-51//Luke 12:42-46); the talents/the pounds (Matt 25:14-30//Luke 19:12-27); the throne claimant (Luke 19:12b, 14-15a, 27); the unmerciful servant (Matt 18:23-28); the servant's reward (Luke 17:7-10); the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1-11; Matt 21:33-44; Luke 20:9-18); the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-8); and the vineyard workers (Matt 20:1-13).<sup>1</sup> According to Crossan, the "servant parables" form a "thematic unity": "They all concern a master-servant relationship *and* a moment of critical reckoning therein."<sup>2</sup> In view of the number and variety of parables about servants in the NT, it seems legitimate to say that "servanthood" is a leading motif of this early Christian literary type.<sup>3</sup>

Although interpreters are well aware that the "servants" of the NT are usually slaves (δοῦλοι),<sup>4</sup> the historical nature of ancient slavery and Greco-Roman literary traditions about slaves are rarely brought to bear on the

<sup>1</sup> J. D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 96-120; idem, "The Servant Parables of Jesus," *Semeia* 1 (1974) 17-32. To this list might be added the parable of the barren fig tree (Luke 13:6-9), in which the vinedresser, probably an agricultural slave, plays a key role (see my "Parable and Fable," *CBQ* 52 [1990] 473-98). Another servant parable missing from Crossan's list is the waiting servants (Luke 12:35-38). On the servant parables, see also A. Weiser, *Die Knechtsgleichnisse der synoptischen Evangelien* (SANT 29; Munich: Kösel, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> Crossan, *In Parables*, 96.

<sup>3</sup> The concern of this study is primarily with the parables as they appear in the Gospels and not with the parables of the historical Jesus.

<sup>4</sup> W. G. Rollins observes that "in the gospels slaves appear as stock figures, much as they do in plays and essays of the period" ("Slavery in the NT," *IDBSup*, 832).

parables.<sup>5</sup> Crossan, for example, holds that in the servant parables “it makes no difference whether the servant is a minor household slave or a major state official as long as there is a real superior–subordinate crisis involved.”<sup>6</sup>

On the following pages, it will be argued that, on the contrary, information about ancient slavery can provide an illuminating interpretive context for the “slave parables.” The evidence adduced will be of two kinds: (1) historical data about ancient slaves and slavery; and (2) Greco-Roman literary traditions in which slaves figure as characters, notably the comedies of Plautus and the *Life of Aesop*.<sup>7</sup> This evidence will be used to add a new dimension to the exegesis of (1) the slave parables in general;<sup>8</sup> and (2) the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1–8), a notorious *crux interpretum*. The paper will conclude with some observations on the possible social functions of these stories.

## II. Greco-Roman Slavery

The institution of slavery was, of course, ubiquitous in the Roman Empire. Rome was a slave society, in that “many of the accomplishments of the upper classes depended upon the leisure time which accompanied the exploitation of a servile labour force.”<sup>9</sup> It should be noted, however, that although slavery was practiced throughout the empire, not all societies in the οἰκουμένη were necessarily “slave societies” in this sense.<sup>10</sup> Slavery was practiced in Palestine by both Jews and non-Jews.<sup>11</sup>

The question of slave populations in ancient times is a vexed one;<sup>12</sup> W. L. Westermann deduces from a statement of the physician Galen that in the late second century AD, Pergamum had an adult slave population of about forty thousand — “one slave to every three adults of the citizen class.”<sup>13</sup> W. G. Rollins estimates a slave–free ratio of one in five throughout the empire, and

<sup>5</sup> Some exceptions will be noted on the following pages

<sup>6</sup> Crossan, *In Parables*, 96

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to Frances Newcombe for her suggestion that the comedies of Plautus might illumine the interpretation of Luke 16 1–8

<sup>8</sup> The discussion will exclude parables in which the main characters are not explicitly identified as slaves (the vineyard workers, the wicked tenants) or where they appear to be metaphorical, as opposed to literal, slaves (the pounds)

<sup>9</sup> K. R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 14

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 16–17, M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: Viking, 1980) 79

<sup>11</sup> W. L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1955) 124–26, 136–37. According to Westermann, among both diaspora and nondiaspora Jews, Gentile slaves could not be manumitted, but circumcised slaves were to be freed in the seventh year (pp. 124–25, cf., however, p. 136). Westermann also observes that early Christianity showed little antagonism to the practice of slavery (p. 50).

<sup>12</sup> Westermann, *Slave Systems*, 84–90

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 87

probably one in three in Rome.<sup>14</sup> Before the *pax romana*, the slave population was largely drawn from war captives. After Augustus, other sources of slaves, such as kidnapping, debt enslavement (see Matt 18:24), self-sale, home breeding, and the rescue of foundlings were more prominent.<sup>15</sup>

Since slaves performed a wide variety of functions in antiquity, from wretched mine workers to imperial courtiers, slaves never formed a rigid social class.<sup>16</sup> However, as K. R. Bradley points out:

The distinction between slavery and freedom was not meaningless, and no matter how relatively privileged some slaves may have been they nonetheless remained the juridical peers of those less fortunate. Indeed, Cicero gives important expression to the idea that whereas slaves themselves may have been conscious of their own distinct statuses, from the master's point of view they were all servile regardless.<sup>17</sup>

Like land and livestock, slaves were objects to be used to best advantage by their masters. Ancient slavery was intrinsically oppressive and was maintained solely for the benefit of the privileged (slave owners).<sup>18</sup> It is difficult to imagine a slave owner sincerely wishing to trade places with his/her slave.

There are, of course, many references to slaves and slavery in Greco-Roman literature. According to Y. Garlan, life in the real world without slavery was unimaginable in antiquity; the utopian literature that posits slaveless societies does so on the understanding that slavery inconveniences *masters*.<sup>19</sup> There are, of course, examples of slave owners treating slaves humanely, but this is always justified with reference to maintaining or enhancing the utility of the slave.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, virtually all of the ancient literature on slavery is written from the perspective of slave owners; there is no extant "slave literature," although the Greco-Roman fable tradition was attributed to the slave Aesop and some of the fables have been interpreted as betraying servile origins.<sup>21</sup> Some well-known writers such as the playwright Terence, the philosopher Epictetus, and the fable anthologist Phaedrus were freedmen.

### III. Some New Testament Parables of Slavery

According to K. R. Bradley, even among classicists, the realization has only begun to set in "that there is something distinctly unpalatable about

<sup>14</sup> Rollins, "Slavery," 830.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 830; Westermann, *Slave Systems*, 85–86.

<sup>16</sup> Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*, 15–16.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–18.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 19–20.

<sup>19</sup> Y. Garlan, *Slavery in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca, NY/London: Cornell University Press, 1988) 126–38.

<sup>20</sup> Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*, 21–45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 150–53.

slavery in antiquity.”<sup>22</sup> Before the groundbreaking *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* of M. I. Finley (1980), the (non-Marxist) scholarly literature on slavery tended to exonerate the institution. Perhaps somewhat similarly, in interpreting the parables, NT scholars have tended to overlook or to gloss over the servile status of the δούλοι, although they are stock characters. As mentioned above, biblical interpreters well know that, in NT Greek, δούλος almost invariably means “slave” as opposed to “hired servant”; nevertheless, they characteristically translate this word as “servant” (*Knecht, serviteur*) when it occurs in a parable (words with the δουλ- stem occur seventy-two times in the Synoptic Gospels).<sup>23</sup> In a very recent commentary, for example, B. B. Scott discusses the “master and servant” theme of the parables under the rubric of the patron–client relationship, choosing to translate δούλος as “servant” throughout.<sup>24</sup> Admittedly, the patron–client relation was the backbone of Greco-Roman society, and it neatly subsumes all the NT parables of inequality.<sup>25</sup> However, it will be argued below that the translation of δούλος as “servant” rather than as “slave” or “bondsperson” downplays the servile status of the parabolic actors and, in certain instances, leads to interpretations that do not fully comprehend the probable responses of ancient audiences to the parables.

Alongside the hesitancy of translators to use the word “slave” is the reluctance of some commentators to admit that some of the δούλοι of the parables are literal slaves. For example, the δούλοι in the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30) and that of the unmerciful servant (Matt 18:23–35) are interpreted by some scholars as metaphorical rather than actual slaves because of the large amounts of money and heavy responsibilities accorded them by their lords.<sup>26</sup> A Greco-Roman audience, however, whether oriental or occidental, would have understood that slaves could fill an enormous range of functions, including positions involving onerous duties, political influence, and relatively high social esteem.<sup>27</sup> Bradley observes:

slaves provided labour in a broad range of contexts, agriculture and pastoral farming, industry and commerce, domestic and private service, medicine

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>23</sup> Weiser, *Knechtsgeleichnisse*, 42.

<sup>24</sup> B. B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 205–300.

<sup>25</sup> See Crossan, *In Parables*, 96.

<sup>26</sup> E.g., T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1949) 213; J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1954) 145; E. Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1966) 108; D. O. Via, *The Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 138–39; Weiser, *Knechtsgeleichnisse*, 76. W. O. E. Oesterley typifies this approach to the interpretation of Matt 18:23–35 when he notes: “judging from the large sums of money administered by them, [the slaves] must have been thought of as important state functionaries; but when it is considered that all the subjects, even the highest, of an Oriental despot were regarded as his slaves, it will be realized that this word applied to the servants reflects real conditions” (*The Gospel Parallels in the Light of their Jewish Background* [London: SPCK, 1936] 95).

<sup>27</sup> Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*, 15–16.

and education, even, occasionally, the military: there can in fact have been few economic areas in which labour and expertise were not provided by slaves at one time or another.<sup>28</sup>

Ancient audiences would not have been particularly surprised that the slaves in these parables turn out to be untrustworthy, since, in Greco-Roman literature, the venality of slaves is often presupposed.<sup>29</sup>

One clear instance where the servility of a character is underplayed to the detriment of the interpretation is Crossan's reading of Luke 17:7–10, the parable of the servant's reward:

Will any one of you, who has a servant [δοῦλος] ploughing or keeping sheep, say to him when he has come in from the field, "Come at once and sit down at table"? Will he not rather say to him, "Prepare supper for me, and gird yourself and serve me, till I eat and drink and afterward you shall eat and drink"? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty."

Crossan interprets this as one of a cluster of parables (including the unmerciful servant, the unjust steward, the wicked tenants, and the vineyard workers) that contradict the "horizon of expected normalcy" in superior-subordinate relations.<sup>30</sup> According to Crossan, this parable is surprising because it shows that "even good servants are not rewarded," over against other servant parables in which good servants are praised by their masters (the parables of the doorkeeper, the overseer, the talents, the throne claimant).<sup>31</sup> However, the point of the parable is not that the δοῦλος is an outstandingly good or faithful one, but merely that he does what is expected of a slave in Greco-Roman society: he attends to his master's needs without question.<sup>32</sup> As Scott observes: "The parable does . . . exhibit clearly the assumptions of the hierarchical world of patrons and clients . . . a world of dependency and inequality, of clearly worked out relations." Strangely, Scott's commentary on this parable concludes that Jesus' "patron-client" parables "subvert the assumptions" of Greco-Roman hierarchy.<sup>33</sup> On the contrary, this parable is rather conservative in that it casually assumes that the listener is a slave owner who treats his/her slaves without undue consideration. For a Greco-Roman audience, a much more "subversive" parable would be one in which

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 15–26.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 27–32, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Crossan, *In Parables*, 104.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 104, 108. Crossan further argues that only v. 7, a proverbial saying expecting a *positive* response ("Of course I would invite my slave to dine with me after a hard day's work in the fields!"), and thereby *questioning* the master-servant hierarchy, is attributable to Jesus. However, as Scott (*Hear Then the Parable*, 215) observes, the question introducing v. 7 expects a *negative* reply ("Of course not!").

<sup>32</sup> See Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*, 21–46.

<sup>33</sup> Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 215.

a master invited a slave to dine with him as an equal after a hard day's work, or one like the parable of the waiting servants (Luke 12:35–38), where the master rewards his faithful slaves by waiting on them!<sup>34</sup> If there is an unexpected element in the passage, it is the application in v. 10, which reverses the hearer's identification with the slave owner of vv. 7–9 and suggests that the "masters" in the audience align themselves with the *δοῦλος*—an idea that would have been distasteful to some listeners (cf. Matt 20:26–27; 23:11–12; Mark 9:35; 10:43–44; Luke 22:26).<sup>35</sup>

Another parable that can be illumined by data about ancient slavery is Matt 24:45–51 (//Luke 12:41–48), the faithful and unfaithful servants. Many exegetes have remarked that the punishment accorded to the wicked servant in the Matthean version (v. 51)—being "cut in two" (*διχοτομήσει*—seems excessive.<sup>36</sup> C. H. Dodd remarks that "it is difficult to see how a 'dichotomized' person could afterwards be given his portion with the unfaithful [v 51b]."<sup>37</sup> B. B. Scott explains:

The severity of the punishment—its cruelty—is shocking in the light of the servant's actual misdeeds. . . . This shocking disjunction is characteristic of Jesus' parabolic style. It is true that Jesus' parables do partake of the everyday. Yet we ought not to be blinded from observing those occasions in almost every parable which explode the everyday. This is one of them.<sup>38</sup>

The difficulty of v. 51, however, may have more to do with the scruples of modern interpreters than with the values of Greco-Roman slave owners.

For ancient audiences the idea of a slave being "dismembered" for misbehavior would not necessarily have been implausible or startling. Greco-Roman slaves were routinely subject to brutal and terrifying punishments, including sexual abuse, flogging, torture, and execution.<sup>39</sup> More ingenious and sadistic cruelties inflicted on slaves are well documented. Bradley mentions the example of a slave who had stolen a piece of silver plate at a banquet given by Caligula "whose hands were cut off and hung around his neck, . . . then he was paraded around the dining hall with a placard giving the reasons for his misfortune."<sup>40</sup> Vedius Pollio fed to his lampreys a boy who had broken

<sup>34</sup> K. E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 116.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 114–15. This reversal would be more acceptable to a Jewish audience, since many Jewish parables use the master–slave metaphor to describe the relation between God and Israel or God and humanity (Weiser, *Knechtsgleichnisse*, 28–41).

<sup>36</sup> E.g., C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: James Nisbet, 1961) 126 n. 1; Manson, *Sayings*, 118; Jeremias, *Parables*, 46 n. 99; J. R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 100–101; see also the lengthy discussion in Weiser, *Knechtsgleichnisse*, 198–201.

<sup>37</sup> Dodd, *Parables*, 126 n. 1. Dodd, like several other scholars, sees the use of *διχοτομήσει* as a mistranslation of the Aramaic; the original parable referred to the slave being "cut off" from the household; for a survey of opinions, see Weiser, *Knechtsgleichnisse*, 198–201.

<sup>38</sup> Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 210–11.

<sup>39</sup> Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*, 113–17; Finley, *Ancient Slavery*, 93–95.

<sup>40</sup> Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*, 121.

a crystal cup.<sup>41</sup> In the immensely popular comedies of Plautus, the favorite epithets for slaves are “whip-worthy,” “flog-worthy,” and “gallows bird” (*verbero, mastigio, furcifer*); the plays of Menander and Terence use similar terminology.<sup>42</sup> According to E. Segal, “Plautus mentions an astounding number of tortures, including iron chains, hot tar, burning clothes, restraining collars, the rack, the pillory, and the mill.”<sup>43</sup> Although the Plautine *servi callidi* often evade the dreadful punishments that threaten them, it is important to note that Greco-Roman audiences regarded as hilarious the spectacle of a slave facing dire threats of extravagant tortures.<sup>44</sup> The parable’s use of the verb *διχοτομήσει* may be an example of a storyteller’s hyperbole (slave owners were hesitant to destroy their possessions), but ancient readers/hearers would have seen nothing shocking in the idea of a bad slave being severely disciplined; indeed, the unusual nature of the punishment might have struck the ancients as rather comic.<sup>45</sup>

A somewhat more edifying insight from the literature on ancient slavery is that “faithfulness” in slaves is a quality admired both in the parables (Luke 12:41–48; Matt 24:45–51; 25:14–30; Luke 19:12–28; Luke 12:35–38) and in other ancient writings on slavery. Greco-Roman authors, both serious and comic, regarded loyalty and obedience (*fides* and *obsequium*) as desirable, but rare, servile characteristics. In the parables, however, the consequences of faithful behavior are radically different from the “reward” expected by slaves in contemporary accounts. For ancient slaves, freedom was the coveted recompense for good service,<sup>46</sup> whereas in the parables, wise and faithful slaves are rewarded with more responsibility (Luke 12:44; Matt 24:47; 25:21, 23; Luke 19:17, 19).<sup>47</sup>

#### IV. The Parable of the Steward (Luke 16:1–8): The Slave as Trickster

##### *The Parable*

There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and this man was falsely accused (*διεβλήθη*) to him as scattering abroad his goods. And having called him, he said to him, “What is this I hear about you? Hand over the account

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 121

<sup>42</sup> E. Segal, *Roman Laughter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968) 38, see also pp 102–7 on the harsh treatment expected by ancient slaves

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 138

<sup>44</sup> Similar threats are used for comic effect also in the Aesopic tradition, as we shall see below

<sup>45</sup> Oesterley mentions Jewish parables in which slaves are severely punished for misconduct in their masters’ absence, one of these involves decapitation (*Gospel Parables*, 132–33)

<sup>46</sup> Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*, 21–45, 28–29, 81–112

<sup>47</sup> Cf. the temporary role reversal in Luke 12:37, which implies that the “blessed servants” enter into a closer relationship with their lord, at least temporarily

of your stewardship, for you can no longer act as steward!" And the steward said to himself, "What shall I do, since my master is taking away the stewardship from me? I am not strong enough to dig (σκάπτειν), and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what I shall do, in order that when I am put out of the stewardship they shall receive me into their houses!" And having called each one of his master's debtors he said to the first, "How much do you owe my master?" And he said, "A hundred measures of oil." And he said to him, "Take your bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty." Then he said to another, "And you owe how much?" And he said, "A hundred measures of wheat." He says to him, "Take your bill and write eighty." And the master commended the steward of unrighteousness because he acted prudently, for the sons of this age are more prudent than the sons of light toward their own kind (γενεάν). And I say to you, make friends for yourselves outside (ἐκ) the mammon of unrighteousness, in order that when it fails they might receive you into the eternal tabernacles.

The tale of the steward is widely regarded as the most difficult of the parables of Jesus.<sup>48</sup> The most troubling element in the parable is the steward's apparent dishonesty: how could the master (or Jesus, depending on one's interpretation of κύριος in v. 8a) approve of the steward's unauthorized reduction of the debtors' bills? Many interpreters would agree with A. Jülicher that the steward's prudence (φρονίμος) lies in his decisive action in time of crisis.<sup>49</sup> Crossan interprets it as one of a "cluster" of servant parables in which the actions of a servant (in this case, dishonest behavior) lead to an unexpected result (the master's approval).<sup>50</sup> A recent line of interpretation that has received some acceptance is that the steward of the parable is a comic, picaresque character, an attractive rascal.<sup>51</sup> The folkloric motif of the trickster, it has been observed, is found throughout world literature.<sup>52</sup> However, examples of the motif of the slave as *picaro* in ancient literature have not been adduced by parable interpreters. In the following paragraphs, the parable of the unjust steward will be interpreted in the context of a tradition of Greco-Roman biographical anecdotes and fables about another servant: Aesop, the crafty slave.<sup>53</sup> The Plautine comedic motif of the wily slave will also be drawn upon.

<sup>48</sup> See the brief survey in K. E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 86–87. The authenticity of the parable is seldom doubted, because of its difficulty (R. H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981] 106). J. Drury, however, notes that the parable "contains some twenty Lucan words or phrases including nine of the *hapax legomena* which are common in Lucan parables. Altogether, it looks very much like Luke's work" (*The Parables in the Gospels* [New York: Crossroad, 1985] 149).

<sup>49</sup> See A. T. Cadoux, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: James Clarke, n.d.) 134; Dodd, *Parables*, 17; Jeremias, *Parables*, 127–28.

<sup>50</sup> Crossan, *In Parables*, 108–11, 115–19.

<sup>51</sup> Via, *Parables*, 166; J. D. Crossan, "Structuralist Analysis and the Parables of Jesus," *Semeia* 1 (1974) 206–8; B. B. Scott, "A Master's Praise: Luke 16,1–8a," *Bib* 64 (1983) 178–79, 187–88; Donahue, *Parables*, 166.

<sup>52</sup> Crossan, "Structuralist Analysis," 207; Scott, "Praise," 178–79; Donahue, *Parables*, 166.

<sup>53</sup> Ancient fables in the form of biographical anecdotes about Aesop are as follows: *Phaedrus* 3.2, 5, 14, 19; 4.5, 18; Perotti's Appendix to *Phaedrus* 9, 13, 17, 20; Appendix 8, 423, 424.



It is important to note that a Greco-Roman reader would probably assume that the *οἰκονόμος* of the parable was a slave.<sup>54</sup>

Aesop was a well-known character in antiquity. In addition to the hundreds of fables attributed to him, he figured in the drama *Aesop* by Alexis (fourth century BC); the poet Poseidippus composed an *Aesopia* in the third century BC, and the Greek *Life of Aesop* (probably of Egyptian provenance) in its oldest extant written form goes back to the second century AD. Aesop is mentioned by such famous authors as Aristophanes, Aristotle, Herodotus, and Plutarch. B. E. Perry holds that there was a historical Aesop, a Thracian slave, and later a freedman, who lived on the island of Samos in the sixth century BC and became a famous *logopoios*.<sup>55</sup> According to Perry, the man Aesop “must have been an outstanding and picturesque character among the Samians, by virtue of his shrewd understanding and the clever use that he made of fables to carry his point or to win an argument in debating with others in the conflicts of daily life.”<sup>56</sup> Perry summarizes the biographical traditions about Aesop that had developed by the second century AD:

This biography [the *Life of Aesop*] describes in dramatic detail how Aesop outwits his master Xanthus, the formal philosopher, on the island of Samos; how he wins his freedom by interpreting an omen that Xanthus was asked by the Samians to explain but could not; how he was surrendered by the Samians to Croesus; how he won the favour of Croesus and wrote his fables for that king; how he solved riddles for king Lycurgus in Babylon in the latter’s contests with Nectanebo, King of Egypt, which is a long story taken from the Assyrian book of *Ahiqar*, and finally how he came to Delphi, was condemned by the Delphians on a framed-up charge of sacrilege, told them a number of fables in the course of pleading his life, but in vain, and then was killed by being thrown over the cliff.<sup>57</sup>

Undoubtedly, many ancient Jews and Christians were familiar with traditions about Aesop.

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References to the *Life of Aesop* follow the translation by L. W. Daly, *Aesop Without Morals* (New York/London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961). References to the fables follow the translation of B. E. Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

<sup>54</sup> In addition to *δοῦλος*, Rollins (“Slavery,” 830) lists the following terms as indicating servile types or functions: *ἀνδράποδον* (slave taken in war); *ἐνδογενής*, *οἰκογενής* (home-bred slave); *οἰκέτης*, *οἰκέτις* (domestic slave); *θεράπων*, *θεράπεινα* (personal slave); *παῖς*, *παιδάριον*, *παιδίσκη* (slave boy/girl); *οἰκονόμος* (slave in charge of household or estate); *σῶμα*, *σῶμα γυναικείον* (a term used in inventory lists).

<sup>55</sup> Perry, “Introduction,” *Babrius and Phaedrus*, xlvi, xxxv–xlvi, xxxv.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, xlv.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, xlvi. D. Aune opines that the anonymous *Vita Aesopi* is the closest analogy to the gospel “genre” in ancient literature (“The Problem of the Genre of the Gospels: A Critique of C. H. Talbert’s *What Is A Gospel?*” in *Gospel Perspectives* 2 [ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981] 44–45). It is interesting that the reasons given by Babrius and Phaedrus for Aesop’s use of fables are similar to the Synoptic traditions about Jesus’ parabolic teaching. According to Babrius (Prologue), Aesop told stories so that his hearers might “learn and understand”; however, Phaedrus explains that the fable is an obscure form of speech that allowed the slave to escape punishment for his opinions (Phaedrus 3, Prologue) (cf. Mark 4:2, 11–12).

The *Life of Aesop* (and other traditions about the crafty slave preserved in the fable collections) provides a rich source of such trickster tales for comparison with the parable of the steward.<sup>58</sup> The Aesopic material comprises an interpretive context roughly contemporary and culturally contiguous with the parable. Like the parable, many of the Aesopic tales are about the relationship between slave and master.

For the purposes of this paper, three tales about Aesop will be compared with the steward parable, two from the *Life* and one from *Phaedrus*. These will be quoted in full, since the *Life of Aesop* tradition has seldom been compared with the Gospels.

[Aesop is falsely accused by his fellow slaves of having stolen some figs. At this point in the story, Aesop is unable to speak.]

At the appointed hour the master came from his bath and dinner with his mouth all set for figs. He said, "Agathopous, give me the figs." The master, seeing that he was cheated for all his pains and learning that Aesop had eaten the figs, said, "Somebody call Aesop." He was called, and when he came, the master said to him, "You damned scoundrel, do you have so little respect for me that you would go to the storeroom and eat the figs that were set aside for me?" Aesop heard but couldn't talk because of the impediment in his speech, and seeing his accusers face to face, knowing he would get a beating, he threw himself at his master's knees and begged him to wait a bit. When the master acceded, he took a pitcher which he saw at hand and by gestures asked for some warm water. Then, putting a basin before him, he drank the water, put his fingers into his throat, retched, and threw up the water he had drunk. He hadn't eaten a thing. Then having proven his point through his resourcefulness, he asked that his fellow slaves do the same thing so that they might find out who it was that had eaten the figs. The master was pleased with this idea and ordered the other to drink and vomit.

The other slaves said to themselves, "What shall we do, Hermas? Let's drink and not put our fingers down our throat but only in our cheek." But as soon as they drank the warm water, the figs, now mixed with bile, rose up, and they no sooner removed their fingers than out came the figs. The master said, "Look how you've lied against a man who can't speak. Strip them." They got their beating and learned a good lesson to the effect that when you scheme up trouble for someone else, the first thing you know, you are bringing the trouble on yourself. (*Life* 3)

[One of Aesop's pranks has resulted in the departure of his master's wife.]

When several days passed and she was still not reconciled, Xanthus sent some friends to urge her to come back to him. Since Xanthus was very disconsolate at being deprived of his wife, Aesop went to him and said, "Don't grieve, master, for tomorrow I'll make her come back to you of her own accord." He took some money and went to the market, where he bought some birds, some geese, and other things. He carried them with him as he passed the place where his mistress was, pretending, of course, not to know that Xanthus' wife was there. Finding one of her parents' slaves,

<sup>58</sup> For further information on the *Life of Aesop* tradition, see Daly's "Introduction" to *Aesop without Morals*.

he said to him, "Brother, I don't suppose the people in this house have any geese or anything of the sort that would be good for a wedding, do they?"

He said, "And what do you need them for?"

Aesop: "Xanthus, the philosopher, is going to take a wife tomorrow."

He ran off home and reported this to Xanthus' wife. As soon as she heard it, she hurried off to Xanthus and screamed at him, "Xanthus, you can't take up with another woman while I'm alive." (*Life* 50a)

When Aesop was the servant of an ugly woman who frittered away the whole day in painting herself up, who wore fine clothes, pearls, gold, and silver, and still didn't find anyone who was willing so much as to touch her with his finger, he said to her: "May I venture a few words?" "You may," "I think," continued Aesop, "that you will accomplish almost anything you like if you will put aside your ornamentation." "Does it seem to you that I'm so much nicer by myself without any make-up?" "On the contrary; if you don't make presents, your bed will have a lot of rest." "But your sides aren't going to have much rest," she replied, and gave orders for the talkative slave to be flogged. Shortly afterwards a thief carried off a silver bracelet. When the woman was told that it was nowhere to be found she became furious, called in all the servants, and threatened them with heavy blows if they failed to tell the truth. "Threaten others," said Aesop, "you will not deceive me, mistress; I was beaten with whips just a little while ago because I did speak the truth." (Perotti's Appendix to *Phaedrus* 17)

These three tales, like many other stories of Aesop and his betters, are similarly plotted: (1) Aesop is in trouble with his master or mistress; (2) Aesop takes action to remedy the situation; (3) Aesop gets the better of his master or mistress. The parable of the steward has a comparable plot structure: (1) The steward is in trouble with his master (he is accused of "scattering" the master's resources); (2) the steward takes action to remedy the situation (he reduces the bills of the debtors without the master's knowledge); (3) the steward outwits his master (the master comments on the steward's shrewdness). The parable thus conforms closely to the expectations of an ancient audience acquainted with stories in which clever servants, like Aesop and the steward, get the better of their masters. The slave Aesop, as typified in the *Life of Aesop*, is an excellent example of a Greco-Roman picaresque hero.

A second body of ancient literary evidence that corroborates the hypothesis that the steward is a picaresque character is the work of Plautus. Plautus was the most popular—and enduring—playwright, tragic or comic, in Greco-Roman antiquity. A century after his death (ca. 184 BC), over 130 plays attributed to him were in circulation; several centuries later, Aulus Gellius and, near the end of the Roman period, Macrobius were debating the authenticity of allegedly Plautine plays. As Segal points out, the many forgeries of Plautus's comedies is a testament to their popularity: "One never hears of any Aristophanic apocrypha, of Pseudo-Menander or Pseudo-Terence."<sup>59</sup>

For our purposes, Plautus is a rich popular literary source of references

<sup>59</sup> Segal, *Roman Laughter*, 2–3.

to slaves and slavery. One or more slaves are important characters in each of his comic plays; as Segal observes: "The most common dilemma presented is that of a young man *amans et egeus*, 'in love and insolvent,' turning to his clever slave for salvation." Epitomizing such plays is *Pseudolus* (*The Liar*), a story about a wily chief slave, Pseudolus, who wins a beautiful courtesan for his impecunious and lovesick young master by guile and trickery. Segal describes the mood of these plays as "saturnalian"; in a festive spirit, they overturn and reverse the rigid everyday Roman value system of clearly defined roles and relations between patrons and clients, husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves. It is highly questionable whether, in real life, Greco-Roman masters would have tolerated the kinds of antics displayed by slaves in Plautine comedy.<sup>60</sup> Despite the masters' ultimate approval of the slave characters' devious methods,<sup>61</sup> slaves are never immune from threats and beatings, clearly regarded as hilarious, in Plautus's dramas.

Against the background of the Aesopic and Plautine tradition of the slave as clever rascal, certain widely held opinions about the steward parable require reassessment. Most interpreters hold that the steward is in fact guilty of the incompetence of which he is accused (*διασκορπίζων τὰ ὑπάρχοντα αὐτοῦ*), although the verb *διαβάλλω* in v. 1 usually means "to accuse falsely, slander, calumniate."<sup>62</sup> J. A. Fitzmyer observes that the verb "could mean" to slander or calumniate (cf. 4 Macc 4:1; Josephus, *Ant.* 7.11.3 §267) but argues that the failure of the steward to defend himself proves his guilt.<sup>63</sup> However, in the narrative world of the parable, the master dismisses the steward even *before* he has handed in his records, on the basis of hearsay (v. 2). As Scott notes, Fitzmyer's rejection of the normal meaning of *διαβάλλω* is based on "the presumption of what can be."<sup>64</sup> The notion that the steward is wrongfully dismissed is supported by the observation that, in other servant parables, the relations between masters and servants are often hostile (e.g., the wicked tenants; the talents/the pounds; the laborers in the vineyard).<sup>65</sup> The Aesopic and Plautine material amply illustrates the motif of harsh, foolish, or vain masters who are quick to punish slaves for real or imagined faults (Aesop's first master, on the basis of a false accusation, casually orders his overseer to beat Aesop to death if he cannot be sold or given away).<sup>66</sup> As Scott observes,

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 15–69, 141

<sup>61</sup> Bradley observes that "the *seruus callidus* of Plautus' comedies is often a *seruus fidus*" (*Slaves and Masters*, 38–39)

<sup>62</sup> *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (abridged ed., Oxford: Clarendon, impression of 1977) 159

<sup>63</sup> J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Story of the Dishonest Manager (Lk 16:1–13)," *TS* 25 (1964) 171 n. 19

<sup>64</sup> Scott, "Praise," 181 n. 33

<sup>65</sup> According to Scott, hostility between master and servant is a common folkloric motif ("Praise," 179–80)

<sup>66</sup> *Life*, 10. The pity shown by the king in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt 18:23–35) is very striking in this context

the sympathy of many ancient hearers (especially those from the lower classes) would have been with the steward.<sup>67</sup>

As noted earlier, interpreters seldom make the point that the οἰκονόμος of the parable is probably a slave (cf. Luke 12:42–43). Oesterly is an exception.<sup>68</sup> Bailey argues that the steward of the parable is not a slave because he is dismissed (vv. 2–3), not sold.<sup>69</sup> However, as Oesterley pointed out, dismissal of an incompetent slave, especially in a Jewish setting, “meant that he was cast out into the world, without home, without friends, without occupation, and in grave danger of dying of starvation.”<sup>70</sup> In the *Life*, Aesop is anxious to persuade first a slave dealer (12–15) and then the philosopher Xanthus (22–27) to buy him. Death by beating at the hands of a fellow slave was a very real alternative to being resold (11). In a Phaedrian fable (Perotti’s Appendix 20), Aesop advises a slave against running away from a cruel master: “these are the hardships that you suffer, . . . even when you have done no wrong; what if you commit an offence? What will you suffer then?”

It is also possible that the steward’s question “What shall I do, since my master is taking away the stewardship from me?” indicates that the οἰκονόμος is being demoted from a position of responsibility to the status of a common drudge. The use of the verb σκάπτειν (“to dig,” v. 3) suggests that the slave is in danger of being sent off to hard labor in the quarries, a form of imprisonment—the worst fate imaginable for a slave. In Plautus’s *Captivi*, Tyndarus, newly freed from wrongful consignment to the stone-pits, complains: “I’ve often seen pictures of the tortures of the damned in hell; but there’s no hell to equal the place where I’ve been, in those quarries. Down there they make a man work till he’s incapable of feeling tired any more.”<sup>71</sup> The exhausting toil expected of the slave in Luke 17:7–10 is more characteristic of the treatment of ancient slaves by their masters than the mercy shown by the king in Matt 18:23–35.<sup>72</sup> The steward’s only alternative would be to run away and “beg” (v. 3)—another miserable fate. Epictetus, himself a freedman, paints an unattractive picture even of emancipation.<sup>73</sup> Although, as Bradley observes,

<sup>67</sup> Scott, “Praise,” 187.

<sup>68</sup> Oesterley, *Gospel Parallels*, 193–95.

<sup>69</sup> Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 92; cf. Manson, *Sayings*, 291.

<sup>70</sup> Oesterley, *Gospel Parables*, 194–95.

<sup>71</sup> Plautus, *The Pot of Gold and Other Plays* (trans. E. F. Watling; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 93. On the horrors of being consigned to the mines, see also Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*, 15; Carlan, *Slavery*, 145.

<sup>72</sup> On the dehumanization of ancient slaves, see Finley, *Ancient Slavery*, 93–122; Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*, 113–37.

<sup>73</sup> “Then he [the slave] is emancipated, and forthwith, having no place to which to go and eat, he looks for someone to flatter, for someone at whose house to dine. Next he either earns a living by prostitution, and so endures the most dreadful things, and if he gets a manger at which to eat he has fallen into a slavery much more severe than the first: or even if he grows rich, being a vulgarian he has fallen in love with a chit of a girl, and is miserable, and laments, and yearns for his slavery again. “Why, what was wrong with me? Someone else kept me in clothes, and

slaves usually desired freedom and took pride in achieving manumission,<sup>74</sup> in a stable, traditional society, a sudden change of status, especially one that involved a loss of patronage like that experienced by the steward, was not necessarily desirable. The obsession of some Greco-Roman freedmen with where their next meal was coming from (the phenomenon of “parasitism”) may explain the steward’s worry about being accepted into people’s houses (v. 4).

Scott’s suggestion that the parable of the steward is a tale of revenge is supported by comparison with the Aesop stories.<sup>76</sup> Revenge plays a role in all three Aesopic tales quoted above: Aesop’s fellow slaves are punished for their false accusation; Xanthus’s wife, a demanding and lascivious mistress, is frightened by Aesop into returning to her husband; Aesop mocks the ugly woman’s vanity and harshness. Crossan has pointed out that in the parable the steward gains by manifesting the very behavior that he is accused of: “The cleverness of the steward consisted not only in solving his problem but in solving it by means of the very reason (low profits) that had created it in the first place.”<sup>77</sup> Similarly, the Aesop stories delight in turning the tables on the slave’s persecutors: Aesop’s fellows are forced to take the beating they had in mind for him; Xanthus’s wife threatens to desert her husband and is frightened into returning when Aesop announces the philosopher’s imminent remarriage; Aesop will not talk in an emergency because his mistress has previously beaten him for his garrulity. The steward, summarily dismissed by his master on a false charge,<sup>78</sup> avenges himself by doing exactly what he was fired for: mishandling his master’s affairs to the benefit of the debtors.<sup>79</sup>

In view of the Aesopic lore, the master’s approval of the “steward of unrighteousness” (v. 8a) is not surprising. In the *Life*, Aesop repeatedly

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shoes, and supplied me with food, and nursed me when I was sick I served him in only a few matters But now, miserable man that I am, what suffering is mine, who am a slave to several instead of one!” (Epictetus *Diss* 41:35–37, LCL, quoted in Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*, 82)

<sup>74</sup> Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*, 82

<sup>75</sup> On the figure of the parasite in Plautus, see Plautus, *Plays*, 54 “This character, a sort of professional diner-out and jester, seems, both as a social institution and a stage type, to have been a source of inexhaustible amusement to the Roman public”

<sup>76</sup> Scott, “Praise”

<sup>77</sup> Crossan, *In Parables*, 110

<sup>78</sup> The statement in v 8 that the slave is a “steward of unrighteousness” is, of course, uttered by the master who initially accepted the false accusation

<sup>79</sup> In a stylized story of this kind, the question of the exact nature of the transaction in vv 5–7 (rent collection? loan repayment?) may be irrelevant and, because of the extreme brevity of the account, irretrievable (contra, e.g., Fitzmyer, “Dishonest Manager”, J D M Derrett, “Fresh Light on St Luke XVII The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” *NTS* 7 [1961] 198–219, Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 88–94) Whether or not the steward is guilty as accused (v 1), and whatever the nature of the debts, his collection of the bills after being fired is certainly “unjust” (v 8a) The Aesopic stories can be understood without a detailed knowledge of ancient dining habits, wedding customs, or cosmetology!

escapes punishment by his audacity and wins the respect of his betters, as this brief anecdote illustrates:

The next day Xanthus said to Aesop, "Go see if there are many people at the bath." On the way Aesop met the governor. The governor recognized Aesop and said to him, "Aesop, where are you going?" Aesop said, "I don't know." The governor said, "I ask you where you're going and you say, I don't know?" Aesop said, "By the Muses, I don't know." The governor ordered him off to jail. Aesop said, "Master, you can see that I answered you fairly, for I didn't know that I was going to be taken to jail." The governor was so taken aback that he let him go. (*Life*, 65; cf. 15, 22–27, 28, 33–34, 37, 40)

Plautine slaves are also frequently eulogized by their masters for their roguery:

SIMO: I got the better of him all right. And my man has got the better of his opponent too. Now what I'm going to do is to prepare a reception for [the chief slave] Pseudolus — oh, no, not the kind of reception you have seen in many another comedy, a reception with whips and irons — no, I'm going into my house, and I'm going to bring out that two thousand drachmas which I promised to give him if he won. I shall bring it out and put it into his hands before he asks for it. For, by gad, he's the cleverest, craftiest, wickedest creature alive! The trick that took Troy, and all the wiles of Ulysses, are nothing to what Pseudolus can do! . . . Yes, that's what I'll do; I'll go to my house, I'll fetch the money, and . . . spring a surprise on Pseudolus!" (*Pseudolus*)

*Pseudolus* also contains a delightful dialogue in which the merits of a new slave are enumerated: cunning ("a foxy sort of fellow"); sharp wits ("as an acid drop"); but with the ability to please ("serve up the sweet stuff"). In *Miles Gloriosus*, the boastful soldier of the title, Pyrgopolynices, notes with approval that his confidential slave, Palaestrio, has tricked him into mending his lecherous ways. So, as a story of a slave who outsmarts his master and thereby wins his master's approval, the steward parable repeats a common motif in Mediterranean folklore, as typified in the *Life of Aesop* and Plautus.<sup>80</sup> There is no explicit statement that the steward is reinstated as a result of his stratagem, but this would be a more logical outcome of the story than N. Perrin's proposal that the steward "takes the money and runs."<sup>81</sup> It is unlikely that ancient audiences imagined the steward absconding with gallons of oil and bushels of wheat!<sup>82</sup> Perhaps, like the foolish and immoral Pyrgopolynices, the master of the parable realizes that he is blameworthy for his premature dismissal of the steward or for bad judgment in his selection of

<sup>80</sup> Against those who take the view that the master's praise of the dishonest steward is paradoxical or unexpected, e.g., Scott, "Praise"; M. A. Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 89–91; Crossan, *In Parables*, 109. Nor is there anything especially eastern or Semitic in the master's approval (contra Stein, *Introduction*, 110; Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 102, 105).

<sup>81</sup> N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 115.

<sup>82</sup> For the measures involved, see Jeremias, *Parables*, 127.

the οἰκονόμος.<sup>83</sup> By regaining his master's regard, the steward escapes the fate of the ownerless slave: "vagrancy with the prospect of hunger and fear" (*Life*, 26). His scheme succeeds beyond his expectations (being accepted into the houses of the debtors).

As many interpreters have observed, it is difficult to find an edifying moral in this trickster tale. The sayings appended to the parable in vv. 8b, 9 succeed admirably in deriving some religious meaning from the story.<sup>84</sup> Translated into more contemporary terms, the first application (v. 8b) might be paraphrased: "Be as shrewd in spiritual matters as others are in their business dealings." The second application (v. 9) is usually translated "make friends for yourself by means of (ἐκ) unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations" (RSV). The application makes more sense when it is interpreted as reflecting the same ideas as v. 8b: "Make friends for yourselves *outside* (ἐκ) the mammon of unrighteousness, in order that when it fails *they* (δέξονται; the subject is unspecified, as in v. 4b) might receive you into the eternal tabernacles." On this interpretation, "mammon of unrighteousness" (v. 9) corresponds to "the sons of this age" (v. 8b), and the unspecified "they" (v. 9) corresponds to "the sons of light" (v. 8b), the expected denizens of "the eternal tabernacles" (v. 9). The antithetical parallelism of v. 9 is suggested by the following paraphrase: "Stay away from unjust people like the steward and his master now, so that you will belong among the saints on judgment day."<sup>85</sup> The strategy recommended to the hearer echoes the steward's plan to make himself welcome in "their houses" (v. 4b). The correspondences between the parable and the applications can be illustrated this way:

rich master	<i>corresponds to</i>	sons of this age
	<i>corresponds to</i>	unrighteous mammon
debtors	<i>corresponds to</i>	sons of light
houses	<i>corresponds to</i>	eternal tabernacles

<sup>83</sup> Garlan observes that in antiquity "the ideal for a steward was that he should be loyal, careful, sober, active, chaste, motivated, honest, and a good leader. The best example is Evangelus who, according to Plutarch (*Pericles*, 16.4 and 6) 'kept strict order in Pericles' house' and 'was either gifted by nature or trained by Pericles so as to surpass everybody else in domestic economy.' It was probably he who was entrusted with the responsibility of selling 'his annual products all together in a lump and buying in the market each article as it was needed.' According to Pseudo-Aristotle's *Oeconomica* 1.6.4 'in estates managed through stewards, inspections must be frequent. For in stewardship as in other matters there can be no good copy without a good example, and if the master and mistress do not attend diligently to their estate, their deputies will certainly not do so.' Ischomachus, in Xenophon's treatise, makes a point of visiting his estate every day and likewise advises his young wife to keep a close watch on her servants' domestic activities and even to take part in them herself" (*Slavery*, 69–70).

<sup>84</sup> On the similarities between the applications associated with the NT parables and the morals (*promythia* and *epomythia*) attached to the fables of Aesop, see my "Parable and Fable," pp. 482–83.

<sup>85</sup> On the parallelism in vv. 9–13, see Oesterley, *Gospel Parallels*, 195–96.



The reader/audience is instructed to align with the latter group, like the clever steward. Unlike many of the Jewish parables in which masters and servants figure as characters, there is no Master = God, Servant = Faithful typology.<sup>86</sup>

### V. Social Functions of the Slave Stories

Discussions of ancient popular literature that bear on slaves and slavery often refer to the social functions of these writings. Segal argues that the Plautine convention of the clever, impudent slave is deeply conservative in that it provides the staid Roman audience with a “moral holiday,” in which everyday relations—including the master-slave relationship—are safely and temporarily overturned.<sup>87</sup> The comedies of Plautus thus reinforce the social order by making the unlikely spectacle of a slave “lording it over” his/her master an object of mirth. In contrast, since the fables traditionally originated from the slave, Aesop, they may initially have had a subversive function (cf. *Phaedrus* 3.33–37). Bradley has theorized that certain Aesopic fables had an allegorical meaning that challenged the master–slave hierarchy.<sup>88</sup> By the time the collections of Phaedrus (first century BC) and Babrius (early second century AD) were written down, however, the fables were an established part of the Greco-Roman elementary curriculum and hardly were regarded as radical.

The possible social function of the *Life of Aesop* has not been addressed, but the work can be interpreted, like Plautus, either as a comic story about a rascally slave viewed as reassuringly unrealistic by its audience (and perhaps suggesting that slavery is really not all that bad; Aesop is killed only *after* he is freed). On the other hand, the *Life* can be viewed as disrespectful of slavery and slave owners, since Aesop consistently manages to outsmart his masters—although, again, the clever slave functions successfully only with a master to outwit. In general, it can be concluded that the ancient popular literature about slavery legitimates the institution.

It is risky to try to infer the social function of the slave parables in isolation from the other NT parables and references to slaves and slavery; however, since they form a distinctive “cluster,” some reflections on their possible effect on ancient audiences will be attempted. (1) For ancient audiences, especially non-Jewish ones, the suggestion that owners should identify with slaves might have seemed distasteful and outlandish. The kind of role reversal described in Luke 12:35–38 and Jesus’ other sayings about masters taking on

<sup>86</sup> See Weiser, *Knechtsgleichnisse*, 28–33. Weiser also discusses Jewish parables in which the servant figure represents the Gentile nations, as well as other uses of the motif (pp. 34–41). However, in most of the parables, the figure of the master represents God.

<sup>87</sup> Segal, *Roman Laughter*.

<sup>88</sup> Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*, 150–53.

the role of slaves are quite unlike the comic inversions of Plautus and Aesop – and different from Jewish parables about slaves. (2) Like most other ancient literature, parables do not criticize the institution of slavery *per se*;<sup>89</sup> as in contemporary writings, slaves are often characterized in the parables as lazy and irresponsible, they can expect to be whipped by their masters, and they can sometimes be entertaining rascals. The good slave is an obedient (πίστος) slave. However, the parables are distinctive in that the reward offered to faithful slaves is not manumission but more trust and responsibility. Moreover, some of the parables represent slaves as moral agents, capable of making ethical choices over and above simple obedience to their masters (e.g., the unmerciful servant, the barren fig tree) – a status seldom accorded to slaves in other ancient literature.

The slave parables, then, do not directly attack the institution of slavery, but their tendency to dignify the role of the slave and to suggest that the slave owner identify with his/her human property might have been perceived as radical social teaching by ancient audiences.

<sup>89</sup> Garlan, *Slaves*, 119–200.