THE PARABLE OF THE PRUDENT STEWARD AND ITS LUCAN CONTEXT

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The Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke 16:1–8), or the "Unjust Steward" as it is commonly known, presents several problems to the reader which scholars have multiplied into incalculable difficulties. One remarks that "more than any other parable it can be expected to keep its mystery for future generations of exegetes, for it bristles with difficulties."[1] The difficulty has caused exegetes as early as Cyril of Alexandria to argue the inappropriateness of finding some meaning in every detail as this would obscure the point of the parable,[2] and still causes some exegetes to turn to the very allegorizations which Cyril hoped to avoid. Perhaps one of the most helpful of recent methodologies for studying a parable such as the "Unjust Steward" is one which remembers the nature of a parable as an aural/oral experience which aims at evoking a response or realization in the hearer or reader.

It is the aim of this study, after establishing the boundaries of the parable itself, to analyze first what the parable by itself achieves in its hearers/readers, namely the setting up (for imitation) of a picture of one who prudently responds to the present, though unexpected, eschatological moment of decision. Then, more briefly, we will examine how the tradition preserves for the hearer/reader a concrete plan for meeting the demands of the eschatological moment and thus for gaining the commendation and welcome of the Master. The hermeneutical move, as it were, centers on the expedient use of material wealth,

[1] J. Topel, "On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward," *CBQ* 37 (1975) 216.
[2] Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Luke* (USA: Studion, 1983) 439.

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and moves from the steward's context of remitting debts to the context of using wealth to benefit the disenfranchised members of the community and society.

Boundaries of the Parable

Scholars continue to advance arguments concerning where exactly the parable ends. The beginning of the parable at *anthrōpos tis* ("a certain person"), a very common incipit (14:16, 15:11, 16:19, 19:12), is not debated. The ending is variously placed at 16:7, 8a, 8b, and even 9. Crossan advocates the early ending based on his study of the parable against the background of a certain trickster-dupe genre of story.[3] The trickster has played his trick on the master by the end of 16:7 and presents a picture (for the moral) of "laziness organizing itself under crisis."[4] Scott rightly counters that Crossan has neglected the fact that the primary plot, which initiates an accounting story as a frame for the trickster plot, is left open-ended until v 8a.[5] The hearers, he argues following reader-response concerns, are led from the beginning to anticipate the master's response to all that the steward has done. This makes perfect sense as it is the rich man who initiates the action and creates the crisis in the first place. Crossan's scheme is missing its last scene, the return to the steward/master relationship for closure.

Those who object to ending the parable at 8a, whether they choose like Crossan to look for the end in v 7 or like earlier or more conservative writers to look in v 8b, object on the basis of finding it inconceivable that the master of the parable, having suffered such a loss at his hands, would commend the steward.[6] The popular alternative is to suggest that *ho kyrios* ("the master") refers to Jesus, who breaks into the story itself and commends the steward.[7] The supporters of this alternative look to 18:6 as a parallel case where Jesus breaks in, but here it is followed by a direct quotation referring back to the judge. As Blomberg among others points out, however, there is no such sense of a break in 16:8a,[8] but only in v 9 does a clear break occur. Those who support this position often further defend the impossibility that any immoral act be commended in Scripture by pointing out that Jesus went on to say 8b as the final word of the parable "to prevent possible misunderstanding."[9]

[3] J. D. Crossan, *In Parables* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1973) 109–10.
[4] Ibid.
[5] B. B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) 260.
[6] Crossan, *In Parables*, 109.
[7] J. Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Scribner, 1966) 34.
[8] C. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990) 246.
[9] A. Plummer, *Saint Luke* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901) 384–85.

It seems likely, however, that those who end the parable in 8a have the strongest arguments on their side. It is appropriate for the end of a parable concerned with depicting the kingdom to have a sort of "Twilight Zone" ending. One recalls the action of the landlord in the "Laborers in the Vineyard" story, or the father in the "Prodigal Son," the host of the "Great Supper," the Samaritan who provides the example of a neighbor, and so forth. It is the stumbling block of such characters or actions in a parable which is needed to make the hearer look beyond the story for its meaning. The unembarrassed affront to the norms which everything is expected to follow allows for the hearers' discovery of a new set of norms which violate the old ones but lead to the Kingdom. From the point of view of literary closure, then, one expects the second scene of interaction between master and steward and the commendation of the steward by the duped master to strike us as strange, but appropriate for a parable's ending.

The Summons to Reckoning: Questioning Traditional Assumptions about the Characters

Having set the boundaries of the parable at *anthrōpos tis* and *phronimōs epoiēsen* ("he had done prudently"), we proceed to a closer exposition of the parable itself. The first character introduced is "a certain rich man who had a steward." He is the center of attention in vv 1–2. It has been suggested that *plousios* ("rich") is redundant here (having a steward is enough to define the man as well-to-do) and possibly is Luke's own addition to the parable to fit it closer into the theme of rich and poor in his gospel. If this is true, then it holds equally true for the parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" of 16:19 and the "Rich Fool" of 12:16. It is true that Luke develops the theme of rich and poor and the proper relationship one should have with respect to riches, but this concern must no doubt be located originally in Jesus' teaching (which Luke transmits).

Scott points out that, for the Palestinian hearer, identifying a character as *plousios*, "rich," might lead to a negative valuation.[10] The rich were stereotypically despots, treating their poorer dependents with an arbitrariness consummate with their power. A lexical study of Luke's gospel affirms this hypothesis. *Plousios* occurs in 6:24; 12:16; 14:12; 16:19, 21, 22; 18:23, 25; 19:2; and 21:1. All those depicted as rich in the text are in one form or another excluded from the redeemed community or disapproved, with the single exception of Zaccheus, whose salvation comes when he ceases to be notably *plousios*, giving away (or giving back) more than half his possessions. This should serve as a

[10] B. B. Scott, "A Master's Praise," *Bib* 64:2 (1983) 179.

strong warning to those who would move too quickly to identifying the rich man with God or Jesus, suggesting already that the place to look for meaning or impact is not in a simple substitution of the "familiar allegorical referents for master, servant, and debtors."[11]

The steward comes on the scene already in a position of disadvantage. He is "denounced hostilely," *dieblēthē*, to the rich man by some unnamed accusers. The verb is a hapax here in the gospels, but is linguistically related to *diabolos*, the "accuser," or more often "false accuser," as in 2 Tim 3:3, 3:11, or Titus 2:3. With the noun having such overtones, one might well ask whether or not the verb *diaballein* has more to do with slander than faithful testimony. Fitzmyer, along with others, reasons from the absence of an attempt to defend himself on the part of the steward that the accusations were correct.[12] Scott notes, however, that the effect of the swift move from accusation to dismissal is the impression that the steward was not given nor would be given a chance to answer his accusers.[13] Pressing a point based on the absence of evidence is often not a sound methodology and would lead to some embarrassment if applied in the same manner to Jesus' trial, where he, too, does not defend himself.

Also against the quick assumption that the accusations are reliable is the use of *oikonomos* ("steward") generally in the NT. The saying concerning the "prudent and faithful steward" in Luke 12:42 points the follower of Jesus to see in the steward a positive example of how awareness of the kingdom is to affect his or her own life. The ecclesiastical appropriation of the figure of steward in 1 Cor 4:1–2, Titus 1:7, and 1 Pet 4:10 suggests further that the image of steward ("of the grace of God," etc.) was used generally as a positive example in exhortation or for describing faithful functionaries of the gospel. It is undoubtedly the strength of the exegetical decision which reads *oikonomos tēs adikias* as "dishonest steward" which influences those readers who so quickly believe the slanderous accusations about the action of the steward. Van Daalen and Blomberg, for example, take this for granted with no explanation.[14]

Finally, the nature of the "crime" itself contains nothing criminal. The steward is accused of *diaskorpizēn ta hyparchonta autou*, of "wasting his substance," understanding the loss to be the master's directly, not the steward's. This is the same verb as appears in the story

[11] Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 245.

[12] J. A. Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke, X-XXIV* (New York: Anchor, 1964) 1097.

[13] Scott, "A Master's Praise," 182.

[14] D. van Daalen, *The Kingdom of Heaven is Like This* (London: Epworth, 1976) 52; Blomberg, 244.

of the prodigal son, who wastes *tēn ousian autou*, "his substance" again. He is unprofitable, even negligent, but not dishonest. If anything, it shows the steward's innate inability to serve the interests of the rich man, which as we have seen are not necessarily untainted interests. Indeed, the questions of how he might have used *ta hyparchonta* ("the property") better or why the way he did at last use *ta hyparchonta* in vv 5–7 received commendation (this might have been supposed to be the object of commendation, and not the dynamic prudence itself) might have led to the moral reflections on this parable generated in v 9 especially.

The command of the rich man completes the opening picture and defines the nature of the story which we are hearing. *Apodos ton logon*, "give the account," coupled with the earlier *phonesas*, "summoning," creates the atmosphere of an accounting or judgment story. The same word is used in the parable of the talents (19:15) when the servants are to give an account for how they managed the funds in the nobleman's absence. The phrase *apodidōmi ton logon* is used particularly with respect to an ultimate judgment in Rom 14:12, Matt 12:36, 18:23 (The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant), Heb 13:17, and 1 Pet 4:5. The use of *apodos* in Luke 12:59 and Acts 19:40 also refers to matters of legality.

Economic Accounting and Eschatological Judgment

Verses 1 and 2 draw up the picture, then, of an accounting, and the use of such language in the NT tends toward eschatological judgment. The audience may well have been conditioned by life experience to expect antagonism from the rich and therefore would have reserved their allegiance for the character in the one-down position, which would have been closer to their situation anyway. The particular appellation of this servant as *oikonomos* may have given added impetus to identifying with him and looking for some sort of positive moral example in his actions or posture. What the hearer is concerned with is not the truth of the accusations which were brought against the steward by unnamed and unimportant characters, but what the steward is going to do about the situation in which he finds himself. How will he respond to the crisis of the hour?

There is an ambiguity surrounding the rich man's pronouncement which also makes the steward's response the focus of the parable. The alleged facts are laid out and the steward dismissed, yet he is allotted an indefinite amount of time to prepare the account of his stewardship, presumably for his successor and not as a defense which might reinstate him. He thus is dismissed yet retains legal power to

act legitimately (in some sense) for a brief period.[15] The story maintains tension by creating this "already/not yet" scheme in terms of the accounting, or the judgment. It draws out a scenario to which the steward *must* respond in some way. This internal, paradoxical tension points to what Jeremias argues is the thrust of the parable in Jesus' own context. In light of the dawning Kingdom of God, the people of A.D. 31 face a *krisis* of ultimate proportions. They stand as those already judged by the *kanon* of the kingdom, yet have some indefinite (but fearfully short) space of time in which to respond to the crisis in such a way as to make provision for the future. Jeremias sees the "bold, resolute, and prudent" action of the steward in light of the economic crisis as an exemplary response which might be emulated by the unconverted or the hesitant in light of the eschatological crisis which they face.[16] It is therefore a call to decisive action and realignment couched in parabolic terms.

Verse 3 draws the hearer closer to the character of the steward by opening up his mind to the hearer in a soliloquy. The phrase *en heautō(i)* ("in/to himself") combined with some verb of saying, thinking, or realizing, appears at significant junctures in three other Lucan parables: The Rich Fool (12:17), The Prodigal Son (15:17), and The Judge (18:4). (The Parable of the Unforgiven Pharisee [18:11] uses the phrase with a verb of praying, and so steps somewhat aside from the reflective emphasis in the other four parables.) By itself, the soliloquy serves to make the audience further identify itself with the steward. Taken together with the other parables, this inward reflection suggests the greater significance of the moment of crisis and decision.

All four characters which are given these internal soliloquies are faced with a crisis, a situation which calls for immediate attention. The stakes vary from peace of mind to survival itself, but the essential dynamic is the same. Three realize the nature of their predicament and act positively and successfully. The Rich Fool, as the title usually given him suggests, reveals that he does not realize the significance of the moment and the sort of attention and redirection it demands, and dies disapproved by God. The repertoire suggests that it is demanded that the people of this world recognize the crisis of the hour and respond effectually. The seriousness of the moment and the response is heightened by cases of failure to do so. The move toward internal monologue brings the hearer closer to one who is facing crisis and formulating a response, such that the hearer may begin to sense the demand that he or she engage in the same internal monologue and decision-making process.

[15] G. B. Caird, *Saint Luke* (England: Penguin, 1963) 187.
[16] Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 144.

The Steward's Plan: Seizing the Eschatological Moment

Presented with the scenario, the steward takes stock of his own resources. He is limited by his strength with respect to what sort of work he might seek out and by his pride with respect to living on the charity of others. Scott believes this would cause the hearers to "reflect upon the estimation of the steward" in a negative way,[17] but this might depend on the particular circumstances of each hearer. Tax-collectors and whores could certainly sympathize, let alone honest merchants and managers. The steward recognizes his limitations, whatever their source. He does not have time to build up his stamina for digging nor seek counseling with regard to his attitude problem, if there is one, but instead settles decisively on some plan which does lie in his power to execute. He sees one way out, which represents a radical departure from the behavior and principles which a steward is expected to exhibit, and sets to work on it at once. Two points here deserve attention.

The steward rejects a plan of action wherein he relies on himself. This option is negated by his estimation of his strength. He also rejects a plan by which he throws himself on the system of almsgiving, relying thus on others' munificence without any contribution of his own. The plan that he will execute focuses on the relationship of himself to others. He pawns material capital for relational debt. The moral possibly drawn by later tradition in v 9, but possibly highlighted by Jesus, is thus not without its roots in an aspect of the parable itself. The admonitory application flows naturally from the eschatological coordinates, following Jeremias.

Second, the terms *metastathō* ("[when] I am expelled") and *dexōntai* ("they will receive [me]"), while referring explicitly to the stewardship and to the debtors' homes, cannot be without some broader connotations given the expectations which arise alongside a story of accounting or judgment. The fact of impending exclusion is very real for the steward, and the image of being "turned out" is closely related to the images of being cast out in other parables, such as the Great Banquet or the Sheep and the Goats. There is here also the correlative to the pair, "being welcomed" or "received" into the community of the blessed. One recalls the wise investors of the talents who are bid to "enter into the joy" of their master. These two concepts, the threat of being turned out and the desperate hope of being welcomed, become the two coordinates of the steward's thought. His fixation upon these points enables him to fashion and execute an appropriate plan. Both

[17] Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 263.

in Jesus' original context and the context of the early church, these two coordinates were commended to the hearers or congregation as the ultimate principles which should guide action. Realizing the reality and measure of the judgment, and discovering the way toward inclusion and being welcomed, must form the "first principles" of the believers' world.

Donahue and others look to the work of Derrett and Fitzmyer for an explanation of the plan as described in vv 5-7.[18] Traditionally this plan has been understood, or misunderstood, as the steward's swindling the rich man out of his principal which had been lent out, but these scholars argue convincingly that more than likely it was primarily the interest on the principal which the steward remitted. Documents from India, later rabbinic texts, and an incident recorded in Josephus bear witness to the practice of writing a bill of indebtedness for the sum of principal plus interest, noting no such breakdown *per se* on the bill.[19] Scholars have reconstructed at length the rabbinic arguments in support of this practice as a way of doing business profitably while not violating the letter of the law.

Caird takes this one step further in noting that, if this interpretation is correct, the act of the steward was in fact truly pious, even though executed for his own advantage.[20] A knowledge of this level of meaning in the early church would explain how this parable could then be linked with sayings concerning the true fulfillment of the law in 16:14-18 and the place of the law and the prophets in 16:27-34. While many might view this explanation on the basis of the practice of usury in Palestine against the background of Jewish Law as contrived at best, this would more likely be owing to our distance from such practices and concerns. The avenues it opens up for exploring the unity of Luke's redaction of this section justify entertaining it as a viable option at least. Here Blomberg's argument, namely that these historical reconstructions "are not spelled out" and "may or may not have been self-evident to Jesus' original audience," is of questionable help to the interpreter.[21] Spelling out the economic background would, of course, be out of place in a parable—sort of the filler that kills good stories in a bad storyteller's mouth. The fact that it is not "spelled out," coupled with the evidence found for the practice in Jewish circles, strengthens the supposition that it would have been self-evident to Jesus and his hearers. Further, Jesus would have no need to challenge his disciples to lend without expecting anything in return, let alone

[18] J. R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 165.
[19] Fitzmyer, *Gospel*, 1098.
[20] Caird, *Saint Luke*, 187.
[21] Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 244-45.

interest, if it were not a hallmark of economy to lend with interest (cf. Luke 6:34, 35). Nevertheless, investigation into the social, economic, and political backgrounds of the time is an indispensable step toward closing the distance between us and the original audiences. Rather than "reading into" the text, such investigation helps to open up the first-century world and prevent our reading into the text our twentieth-century suppositions.

The Surprising Commendation

The parable comes at last to its surprising ending. "The master praised the steward of injustice, for he had acted prudently." Fitzmyer attempts to understand the master's commendation in terms of the actual plan of the steward. He suggests that the steward eliminated only his own commission from the total debt, which might well elicit the praise of the master.[22] The steward was willing to forego some profit in order to make better provision for the future. Donahue refers to Fitzmyer as if the latter agreed that the steward canceled the whole part of the interest and not simply the steward's own profit.[23] Fitzmyer's concern, however, to make the master's commendation intelligible to this world's logic is in direct violation of the intrinsic *skandalon* ("offense" or "stumbling block") of these parables which jars the hearer out of everyday, intelligible existence to glimpse an alternative intelligibility.

The master of the parable has sustained substantial loss, but the new debt may well be in accordance with the requirements of God's law, "one jot or tittle" of which cannot pass away. There is scandal, but is there really injustice or dishonesty? We will return to this point in a discussion of the genitival construction *tēs adikias* ("of unrighteousness"). The steward is praised for his shrewdness, which may also entail being praised for his shrewd plan. The strangeness of seeing a man who has just been duped praise the trickster is not too different from the strangeness of the behavior of the landowner who pays all his hirees the same wage or the extravagant father's unreserved welcome of the wastrel son. It seems to be part of the genre to point to or convey meaning in this way. No attempt to rationalize the strangeness, whether through arguing that the master was making the best of a bad situation by sharing in the pious act of the steward in this way,[24] or simply that one shrewd and cynical businessman applauded

[22] Fitzmyer, *Gospel*, 1098.
[23] Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 165.
[24] Caird, *Saint Luke*, 187–88.

a consummate fellow con artist,[25] fits the focus of the parable, which was on the response of the steward to the crisis. The commendation of the prudent self-application to the problem is more important than speculations as to its motivation. The steward has simply moved from impending exclusion and being turned out to a place of favor through his diligent and single-minded attention to the demands of the hour.

The Genitive "tēs adikias": Personal Characteristic or Eschatological Realm?

We noted earlier that the motivating factor in many scholars' inquiries into v 8a, whether it was spoken by the master of the parable or by Jesus, *ho kyrios*, was the apparent trouble of seeing a criminal praised. Even Jeremias takes the steward's criminality for granted.[26] There are many questions as to whether or not the steward has in fact acted criminally at any point in his career, let alone in the parable. While being unconcerned with this, he nevertheless disallowed himself and his master the interest on the debt and so worked a pious conversion of the accounts. Still, the appellation *oikonomos tēs adikias* is taken as the justification for calling him unjust and so judging that at some point his actions have been criminal.

The question becomes a grammatical one. Is the genitive *tēs adikias* a subjective or objective genitive?[27] It is generally translated as a subjective genitive, "unjust steward." Fitzmyer provides a defense of this traditional rendering by appealing to the Semitism behind it, the Hebrew construct chain.[28] This doesn't really solve the problem. While it is true that this construction, as Fitzmyer states, often indicates a characteristic (in the absolute position) of a subject (in construct), it far more often denotes possession or relationship. The fact that the word in the genitive here, corresponding to the absolute of such a chain, is an abstract quality does not necessitate the conclusion which Fitzmyer supports. The expressions which follow in v 8b, "sons of the light" and "sons of this age," both of which are closely related to Qum'ranic expressions and therefore have Semitic counterparts,[29] ought to be enough to disprove the certainty of Fitzmyer's conclusion. We have in fact "sons of the light" and not "radiant sons."

[25] E. M. Poteat, *Parables of Crisis* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1950) 155.
[26] Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 144.
[27] Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 165.
[28] Fitzmyer, *Gospel*, 1101.
[29] Ibid., 1108.

Other uses of the genitive *tēs adikias* or *tēs dikaiosynēs* ("of righteousness") offer support for an alternative rendering. In Rom 6:13, Paul speaks of yielding our members as *hopla adikias* ("instruments of unrighteousness") no more, but rather as *hopla dikaiosynēs* ("instruments of righteousness"). There is no argument that the genitive expresses alignment with one of two opposing qualities and not a simple modifier. We have "instruments of righteousness," not "righteous instruments," and so forth. Likewise in 2 Pet 2:13–15, the author speaks of a *misthon adikias*, a reward which comes to those who have practiced unrighteousness, not an unjust reward.

One further problem is the proximity of *mamona tēs adikias* ("mammon of unrighteousness") and *adikō(i) mamōna(i)* ("with regard to unrighteousness mammon") in vv 9 and 11. Would Luke, who has otherwise been credited with much redactional acuity and activity, not regularize the language a bit more? Scholars hold that these sayings were brought together because of such catchword connections as this. If this is true, would a redactor not cement the connection by smoothing out such differences in syntactical constructions, unless he desired to preserve some semantic nuance?

These considerations may justify looking beyond simple Semitisms to explain the appellation *oikonomos tēs adikias*, as well as *mamōna tēs adikias* and *kritēs tēs adikias* ("unjust judge," 18:6). All that takes place in parables, with the single exception of Lazarus and the Rich Man, is set in the everyday, ordinary world. The characters, the props, the activities, and the dangers, are all common, everyday experiences. Yet this same world is the world which is "passing away," or "this age" which has its termination in the arrival of the Kingdom of God. The theme was common to Pharisaism and separatist movements such as settled in Qum'ran. It became a major vehicle for Paul's making sense of Jesus Christ and salvation (our being transferred from the realm of *nomos*, "law," to that of *charis*, "grace"). In light of this, it is conceivable that the genitive *tēs adikias* is appended to define the sphere in which the steward has been operating, within whose limits he has concerned himself and responded. It makes the next move necessary for the hearer—to determine what this commended response would look like for him or her with respect to the penetration of the realm of light into the realm of unrighteousness.

The parable of the *kritēs tēs adikias* provides a close parallel. The judge cannot be reasonably called unjust because he is "no respecter of persons." That is required of judges. His boast concerning his *asebeia* ("lack of piety"), however, indicates his distance from the perfect Judge who is beyond the limited, terminal realm of the earthly judge who does not know God. Here the point of the parable

is obviously to extend a quality demonstrated by a finite being in one realm to the Infinite being in a higher realm. The Judge's response to the persistent widow points positively to what one ought to expect from the Heavenly Judge—to be answered benevolently. It is an argument *a fortiori*, but it goes further in its signification, moving from the realm of *adikia*, this age, to that of *dikaiosynē*, God's Kingdom.

If this understanding of the genitive is correct, then the conclusion or moral drawn by an early commentator, or perhaps Jesus himself, in v 8b has its roots in the parable itself. That is, the parable points to what 8b makes more explicit—the need for the children of light to respond in a corresponding prudence with respect to the coming age, with its yoked threat and hope. The use of *genea* here calls to mind the division of ages, not simply generations, along the eschatological lines. When Peter calls out in Acts 2:40, "Save yourselves from this generation," Luke links, as he does throughout Luke-Acts, the generation alive in Palestine or the Mediterranean world with a quality or cosmological entity, the *genea* which corresponds to "this present evil age" (Gal 1:4).

Concretizing the Steward's Correct Response

The parable is ultimately a call to act and align oneself *phronimōs*, "wisely," in light of the crisis in which the hearer finds himself or herself. It portrays the movement of the prudent one from the realm of exclusion to the realm of favor, which is highlighted by the fact that one must move the parable from the realm of this world (disfavor) to the realm of the dawning Kingdom (*charis*, "favor"). When we turn to examine the parable in its present Lucan context, however, we see that the tradition has preserved an interpretation of how the hearers/readers may respond concretely to their situation of crisis and decision. Here we are concerned only with the present form of the Lucan context, not with questions of how it came to stand thus. The literary context of 16:9–31 particularizes what sort of decision/response/action was called for by the parable. The parable advises eschatological readiness, but within it provides the key to its concrete application, namely the use of material goods. In the move "from the eschatological to the admonitory," as Jeremias puts it, the tradition elaborates on the proper use of possessions (9),[30] the proper qualities to exhibit with respect to possessions (10–12), and the proper relationship one is to have with possessions (13). The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus completes the concretization as the hearer/reader

[30] Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 34–36.

is shown most explicitly where to direct her or his efforts in preparing for the final accounting.

St. Cyril exemplifies this move, although he comes late on the scene. He sees in the parable the "way of salvation for the rich."[31] Right stewardship, distributing to the poor—these things save a rich man from the judgment which falls on "Dives" in 16:19–34. Several scholars have attempted to analyze larger sections to formulate a "larger picture" from Luke's redaction. J. Topel discusses the parable in connection with the three which precede it, drawing on the image of debts and debtors as figures for sin and transgressors.[32] Remitting debts, that is, forgiving, becomes the work of the prudent steward. While his argument commends itself at many points, and while the signification of debt as sin is well established in the NT, the argument is a little forced and looks like an allegorical rendering of the Steward parable guided by a desire to make it fit the parables of chap. 15.

Donahue does better to focus on the theme of wealth in Luke 16 and then in Luke generally,[33] but only in connection with the work of Byrne does the richness of Luke's weaving come to the fore. Normally one must be content to unravel a strand. Byrne begins with the verses on the Law in 14–18, noting the stress on the replacement of the Law on the one hand and the permanence of the Law on the other.[34] The external observance of the Law, accompanied by the neglect of the heart of the Law, cannot coexist with the Kingdom. Here Caird's observations on the Steward's [unconscious] recovery of the Law from the forensic acrobatics which nullified its intention to protect the poor so that business could continue as usual are helpful.[35] Byrne argues that the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus lays its stress and primary admonition on vv 27–34, where the hearing of the Law and the Prophets is all that is given to keep the five brothers from sharing the wretched man's fate.[36]

The text combines themes of the proper use of wealth, the decisive devotion to a plan in time of crisis, and the abiding demand of the Law which come together in laying aside one's devotion to wealth, power, and position in order to serve the unempowered and the poor. Here even the logion concerning divorce, a potentially disenfranchising crisis for a woman, finds a place.[37] Those with a concern to be

[31] Cyril, *Commentary*, 440.
[32] Topel, "On the Injustice...", 224–25.
[33] Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 172–73.
[34] B. Byrne, "Forceful Stewardship and Neglectful Wealth," *Pacifica* 1 (1988) 11.
[35] Caird, *Saint Luke*, 187.
[36] Byrne, "Forceful Stewardship...", 9.
[37] Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 174.

welcomed into the community of the blessed shall be welcomed by the poor which they bless (a welcome the Rich Man missed through not blessing Lazarus).

The certainty of the judgment of the coming Kingdom plunges one into this new intention for wealth and new investment in relationships, so that when we are "turned out of doors," or when we "fail/ die," they shall welcome us into eternal dwellings. The eschatological direction of Jesus' original telling is preserved, to be sure, but it is also enfleshed in particularity. The decision to act in light of an understanding of the import of the hour is also given a specific content in new personal ambitions and social relations.