

THE STORY OF THE DISHONEST MANAGER (Lk 16:1-13)

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THERE ARE few passages in the Synoptic Gospels more puzzling than the well-known story about the Dishonest Manager (or Unjust Steward). Summer after summer Christians hear it read as the climactic Scripture message in the liturgy of the eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Lk 16:1-9), and usually come away wondering what it is all about. Commentators have often discussed its meaning, and what some have proposed has not always been enlightening. Preachers have isolated sentences of it for sermons on extraneous topics, often without attempting to analyze the story itself. Over thirty years ago the noted French exegete, Père M.-J. Lagrange, O.P., wrote of it: "I admit that it is not easy to preach on this subject, because many people imagine that only an edifying story can be told in church." Whether a clear and definitive explanation of this story will ever be arrived at is hard to say. But there is a growing consensus of opinion about various features of it which will always have to be respected. It is our purpose to try to distil this consensus from some recent studies of the story, and to support an interpretation which, we believe, sheds most light on this puzzling episode.

An initial difficulty—which must be recognized—is caused by the liturgical isolation of this story from its Gospel context. Such a difficulty is associated with many of the Gospel episodes taken over into the liturgy, where they acquire a certain setting not native to them. The proper understanding of the story will only be had when it is considered in its own Gospel setting. Secondly, an added difficulty is often encountered with Gospel passages used in the liturgy, because past practice has often been cavalier in abridging episodes and suppressing important verses. A classic example of this is found in the Last Gospel of the Roman Mass, where only the first fourteen verses of the prologue of John's Gospel are used and the important ending in vv. 15-18 is omitted. Liturgical usage has also abridged the story of the Dishonest

Manager, using only vv. 1-9, although the account itself is actually four verses longer. But since the Lucan story is made up of a parable and a multiple conclusion, the result of the abridgment is the adoption of only the parable and *a part* of the conclusion. The relation of the conclusion to the parable itself creates a major difficulty in the understanding of the Lucan story as a whole. The liturgical abridgment has eliminated some of this difficulty, but enough of the Lucan conclusion remains to complicate the task of anyone who would preach a homily on the story.

THE GENERAL LUCAN CONTEXT

The story of the Dishonest Manager forms part of the Lucan narrative of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27). It is found in the specifically Lucan "travel account," that extended insertion of additional material (Lk 9:51-18:14) which the Evangelist had made into what he has otherwise taken over from Mark. This artificial, literary report of what Jesus said and did on His way to Jerusalem from Galilee through Perea (Transjordan) comes from two different sources of Gospel traditions: Q (the source for those episodes common to him and to Matthew) and a private source (peculiar to Luke alone).¹ The story of the Dishonest Manager belongs to the latter, being found only in Luke. It is an isolated account of a parable uttered by Jesus which Luke has made part of his "travel account."

In the immediate context of chap. 16 there are two stories about riches, separated by sayings of Jesus derived from various contexts. Vv. 1-13 relate the story of the Dishonest Manager, told to the disciples; vv. 19-31 tell the story of Dives² and Lazarus. Both of these

¹ This analysis of the story of the Dishonest Manager is based on a modified form of the Two-Source theory of the Synoptic problem, similar to that proposed by J. Levie, J. Schmid, A. Wikenhauser, etc. For further details concerning it, the Q-material common to Mt and Lk, the latter's "travel account," the literary tendencies of the individual Evangelists, see A. Wikenhauser, *New Testament Introduction* (New York, 1958) pp. 209-53; A. Robert and A. Feuillet, *Introduction à la Bible 2* (Paris, 1959) 233-95; A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to the Study of the New Testament* (2nd ed.; Oxford, 1953) pp. 59-91; P. Feine-J. Behm, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (12th ed., by W. G. Kümmel; Heidelberg, 1963) pp. 11-44.

² Since the recent publication of the oldest Greek text (P⁷⁵) of Luke's Gospel in *Papyrus XIV-XV: Évangiles de Luc et Jean: Tome I, XIV: Luc chap. 3-24; Tome II, XV: Jean chap. 1-15* (ed. V. Martin and R. Kasser; Cologny-Genève, 1961), should we continue

stories are parables about riches, a subject of no little importance in the third Gospel.³ But the two stories are separated by isolated logia (or sayings) on Pharisaic hypocrisy (16:14–15), on John the Baptist (16:16), on the Law (16:17), and on divorce (16:18).⁴ A similar combination of two parables separated by independent sayings is found in Lk 12:13–37 (the parable of the Rich Fool, 12:13–21; logia, 12:22–34; the parable on watchfulness, 12:35–37). There is another connection between the two parables in chap. 16 and chap. 12. The parable of the Rich Fool teaches the folly of the pursuit of riches and of the belief that one is secure in the possession of wealth. The story of the Dishonest Manager admonishes Christians about the prudent use of riches (the parable) and the danger of slavish servitude to them (the conclusion). The first of the immediately following independent logia (16:14–15) characterizes the money-loving (*philargyroi*) Pharisees as men enmeshed in such servitude and unable to judge by any other standard than that which is an abomination in the sight of God. And shortly thereafter the story of Dives and Lazarus follows. There is, further, an extrinsic connection of this teaching on riches in chap. 16 with the foregoing parable of the Prodigal Son (15:11–32), which deals with the improper use of wealth. In its Lucan context, therefore, the

to call the rich man by the usual Latin appellation, Dives? His name appears in this 2nd–3rd century Greek text as *Neuās*. This puzzling name seems to be a scribal abbreviation of *Nineuās*, the rich man's name recorded in the ancient Coptic (Sahidic) translations of Lk, i.e., "Nineveh." See our article, "Papyrus Bodmer XIV: Some Features of Our Oldest Text of Luke," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 24 (1962) 170–79; cf. H. Cadbury, "A Proper Name for Dives," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962) 399–402.

³ See X. Léon-Dufour, in Robert-Feuillet, *op. cit.*, p. 251; J. Dupont, *Les béatitudes* (Bruges, 1958) pp. 52, 212–17, 320–25.

⁴ Though the story of the Dishonest Manager is addressed to the disciples, the following saying is uttered in the hearing of the Pharisees; they have listened to "all this" (*tauta panta*). The latter expression might seem at first to refer to the preceding story (16:1–13); and as used by the Evangelist in his account, it does. But one must not insist on such connections between episodes when it is a question of their setting in the life of Christ itself. For this reason the attempt of R. Pautrel to interpret the parable together with vv. 14–15 is misleading and has found little support; see "'Aeterna tabernacula' (Luc, XVI, 9)," *Recherches de science religieuse* 30 (1940) 307–27.—Moreover, vv. 16–18 represent the combination of three isolated sayings. The first of them (16:16) is a key verse in Luke's theology, expressing the significance of John the Baptist (see H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St Luke* [tr. G. Buswell; New York, 1961] pp. 22 ff.). It really has, however, nothing to do with vv. 14–15 or vv. 17, 18. All three verses (16–18) have counterparts, if not strict parallels, in Mt in different contexts (Mt 11:12–13; 5:18; 5:32).

story of the Dishonest Manager forms part of a group of instructions on the use of wealth.

THE GOSPEL STORY ITSELF

1 Jesus said to the disciples: "There was a certain rich man who had a manager, and he heard complaints that this man was squandering his property. 2 So he called him and said: 'What's this I hear about you? Prepare me an account of your management; you can't be manager around here any longer.' 3 Then the manager said to himself: 'What am I going to do? My master is taking my job as manager away from me. I am not strong enough to dig; I'm ashamed to beg.—4 Ah, I know what I'll do, so that when I lose this job, I'll be welcome in people's homes.' 5 He summoned his master's debtors one by one. He said to the first of them: 'How much do you owe my master?' 'One hundred jugs of olive oil,' was the answer. 6 He said to the man: 'Here, take your receipt; sit down and, hurry, write one for fifty.' 7 Then he said to another debtor: 'How much do you owe?' He answered: 'A hundred bushels of wheat.' Again he said: 'Here, take your receipt and write one for eighty.' " 8a And the master approved of that dishonest manager because he had acted prudently.

8b For the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than the children of light are. 9 I tell you, make friends with the wealth of dishonesty, so that when it gives out,⁵ you will be welcomed into everlasting tents.

10 The man who is trustworthy in little things is also trustworthy in what is big; and the man who is dishonest in little things is also dishonest in what is big. 11 If, then, you are not trustworthy when handling the wealth of dishonesty, who will trust you with the wealth that is real? 12 And if you are not trustworthy when handling what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?⁶

13 No servant can serve two masters; either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth.

THE LUCAN CONCLUSION TO THE PARABLE

In analyzing the story of the Dishonest Manager, the reader must learn to look at it as a parable to which several concluding verses of diverse origin have been added by the Evangelist. This analysis repre-

⁵ The preferred reading of the Hesychian recension is *eklipē* (3 sg.), "it gives out," referring to *mamōnas*. The inferior reading of the Koine tradition is *eklipēte* (2 pl.), "you give out" (= die), and is the source of the Latin *cum defeceritis*.

⁶ "Your own" (*hymeteron*) is the reading of Sinaiticus, P⁷⁵, Codex Bezae, Koridethi, the Latin and Syriac versions; it is preferred by Merk and Bover. But Nestle and Kilpatrick read "our own" (*hēmeteron*), the *lectio difficilior*, which is however less well attested (Vaticanus, Origen).

sents the consensus of opinion among Protestant and Catholic scholars who have studied the story on Form Critical methods. Though it is a matter of debate among them just where the parable ends, no one denies the obvious conflated nature of the story as a whole and the traces of the compilatory process that produced it.

Where does the parable end? According to R. Bultmann, W. Grundmann, J. Jeremias, A. R. C. Leaney, H. Preisker, W. Michaelis, etc., it consists only of vv. 1-7. In v. 8 *ho kyrios* ("the master") is interpreted as Jesus and vv. 8-13 are further commentary put on His lips. Others would include v. 8 in the parable (so D. Buzy, J. M. Creed, A. Descamps, J. Dupont, A. Loisy, L. Marchal, T. W. Manson, K. H. Rengstorf, J. Schmid, etc.). In this interpretation *ho kyrios* is usually said to be the master of the parable itself (and different explanations are proposed). Still other commentators would include even v. 9 in the parable (so D. R. Fletcher, P. Gaechter, J. Knabenbauer, M.-J. Lagrange, W. Manson, A. Rücker, and most of the older Catholic commentators—many of the latter did so because they felt bound by the liturgical form of the story and were generally reluctant to adopt Form Critical methods of analysis). This last view has so many problems connected with it that it is generally abandoned today.

In our opinion 16:1-8a constitute the parable proper, and vv. 8b-13 represent the added Lucan multiple conclusion. In including the first part of v. 8 in the parable, we are following the view of B. Weiss, F. Tillmann, B. T. D. Smith, W. O. E. Oesterley, L. M. Friedel, J. Volckaert, P. Samain, etc. The main reason for doing so is that without v. 8a the parable has no real ending. From the beginning the reaction of the master to the manager's conduct is expected; it is finally given in v. 8a: "and the master approved of that dishonest manager because he had acted prudently."⁷ In this view *ho kyrios* is the same as the master in vv. 3, 5.⁸ It also is the most natural reading of the first part of the

⁷ This division has been well worked out by F. Tillmann, "Zum Gleichnis vom ungerechten Verwalter. Lk 16, 1-9," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 9 (1911) 171-84, esp. 177 ff.

⁸ J. Jeremias (*The Parables of Jesus* [tr. S. H. Hooke; London, 1958] p. 33) argues that the absolute use of *ho kyrios* refers in some instances in Luke's Gospel to God, but in all others (18 times in all) to Jesus. Consequently, Jeremias along with many others (J. M. Creed, E. Klostermann, W. Grundmann, K. H. Rengstorf, J. Schmid, etc.) understand "the master" in v. 8a as Jesus. In this they appeal to the sense of v. 8b, which almost certainly reflects a statement of Jesus and seems out of place in the mouth of the master

verse. To interpret "the master" as a reference to Jesus is unexpected, and is really read back into the first part of the verse only by reflection on its second part and the change of subject in v. 9. The change of subject, however, in v. 9 seems precisely to lend support to the view that "the master" in v. 8a refers to the one in the parable. It is clear that the "I" of v. 9 ("I tell you") can refer only to Jesus. So the first part of v. 8 is still part of the parable.

Moreover, v. 8b is not part of the original parable at all. J. Jeremias has pointed out how out of place it is on the lips of the master of the parable.⁹ It actually reads like a generalizing commentary on the parable: "the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than the children of light are." While the Palestinian origin of this part of the verse finds support in interesting Essene parallels,¹⁰ the saying preserved here represents an independent logion of Jesus which has been joined to the parable (either by Luke or his

of the parable. These writers also appeal to Lk 18:6, where an observation of *ho kyrios* is recorded, who cannot be anyone else but Jesus. And in 18:8 there follows a similar introduction of a saying by *legō hymin* (see 16:9).—However, the situation in chap. 16 is not the same as that in chap. 18. There is an earlier mention of *kyrios* in 16:3, 5, whereas there is nothing similar in Lk 18. Moreover, in Lk 12:42, although the first instance of the absolute use of *ho kyrios* refers to Jesus, the second one is generic and does not refer to Him at all, as is commonly recognized by commentators. The attempt to distinguish two different meanings for "the master" in 16:8a is artificial. A. Descamps ("La composition littéraire de Luc XVI 9–13," *Novum testamentum* 1 [1956] 47–53) would have us believe that in Luke's source *ho kyrios* referred to Jesus, but in Luke's Gospel he has been identified with the master of the parable. No reasons, however, have been proposed for this distinction.

⁹ *Parables of Jesus*, p. 33.

¹⁰ "The children of this world" (*hoi huiōi tou aïōnos toutou*) may be a reflection of the Qumrān expression *kl bny tkl* (CD 20:34). More pertinent is the expression "children of light" (*tous 'uious tou phōtos*), which was found only in Jn 12:36; 1 Th 5:5; Eph 5:8 until the Qumrān scrolls were discovered. It is now seen to be a favorite Essene designation for their community of the New Covenant. See 1QS 1:9; 2:16; 3:13, 24, 25; 1QM 1:1, 3, 9, 11, 13. The peculiar dualistic character of the expression is well known. It is not found either in the OT or in rabbinical literature. While the contrast of light and darkness is almost a natural figure for good and evil, and is found in the OT, the division of all humanity into two groups so designated is unknown outside of the Qumrān literature and the NT. This is one of the reasons for maintaining that the expression is not just part of the general Palestinian intellectual climate of the first century A.D. See H. Braun, "Qumran und das Neue Testament," *Theologische Rundschau* 28 (1962) 186–87; P. Benoit, "Qumrān et le Nouveau Testament," *New Testament Studies* 7 (1960–61) 276–96, esp. 289–90.

source). For it follows strangely on v. 8a, and indeed on the whole preceding parable.

When the Lucan conclusion to the parable is studied, the traces of its compilation in the Greek text are not hard to find. Let us work backwards, beginning with v. 13. First of all, though Lk 16:1–12 is without any real Synoptic parallel, 16:13 is paralleled in Mt 6:24, where the context is that of the Sermon on the Mount and entirely unrelated to such a parable as this one. This verse alone, then, in the whole story of the Dishonest Manager is derived from the Q-material, and has been added to the otherwise peculiarly Lucan material.¹¹ Secondly, vv. 10–12 form a unit describing the trustworthy (*pistos*) servant and comparing him with one who is not. The adjective *pistos* is the catchword bond linking the three verses.¹² The subject of these verses is responsibility in handling wealth (or the lack of it). It has only an extrinsic connection with the parable of the Dishonest Manager, the point of which is rather another characteristic of that man. This unit of three verses, then, records an instruction on responsibility, which is really extraneous to the parable, but which draws out of it some further implications. When the verses are scrutinized more closely, v. 10 is seen to be a development of Lk 19:17, or at least a reflection of it. This verse occurs in the parable of the Minas: "Congratulations! You are a good slave! Because you were trustworthy in a small matter, you shall have authority over ten cities."¹³ The verse is more at home in that parable. Lk 16:10 reflects, therefore, a genuine tradition, but it has been at-

¹¹ Note too the change of vocabulary. The parable itself concerns a "manager" (*oikonomos*), but the conclusion mentions a "servant" (*oiketēs*). This points to a different original context for 16:13, preserved neither in Lk nor in Mt. It is not at all certain that Lk has borrowed the saying from the Matthean tradition, as A. Descamps (*op. cit.*, p. 52) would have it. Another indication of its isolated character is given by the fact that it is used in the Coptic *Gospel according to Thomas* (ed. A. Guillaumont, H.-Ch. Puech, G. Quispel, W. Till, A. 'Abd-al-Masih; New York, 1959) Log. 47: "Jesus said: It is impossible for a man to mount two horses and to stretch two bows, and it is impossible for a servant to serve two masters, otherwise he will honour the one and offend the other."—Cf. J. Dupont, *Les béatitudes*, pp. 107–13.

¹² The adjective *pistos* echoes the fuller expression in Lk 12:42, *ho pistos oikonomos ho phronimos*, "the faithful, prudent manager." It is in such an expression that one finds the link between the two characteristics of the servants in the parable (prudence) and the conclusion (trustworthiness). See 1 Cor 4:2.

¹³ Lk 19:17 is actually Q-material, having a parallel in Mt 20:21, 23. This fact may point to a different original context.

tached to a different story of a manager; here it has become the basis of a developed unit of three verses.¹⁴ Thirdly, the joining of the vv. 10–13 to v. 9 is due to another catchword bond, *mamōnas* (“wealth”).¹⁵ Three sayings, dealing with mammon (16:9, 11, 13) and the responsibility or slavish involvement that it entails, are joined together as a multiple conclusion to the parable.¹⁶ (The connection of v. 8a with 8b has always been problematic, and has been discussed above.)

For these reasons—all of which match the general patterns of the recording of Jesus’ parables in the Synoptic tradition¹⁷—the unity of the story of the Dishonest Manager should not be stressed.

¹⁴ Bp. A. Descamps, the rector of the Catholic University of Louvain, has suggested (*op. cit.*, pp. 49–52) that vv. 9–12 are a secondary Lucan construction. V. 9 would have been composed by Luke with vocabulary drawn from the parable proper (16:1–8) and from the isolated saying of 16:13; v. 10 would have been composed on the basis of Lk 12:42 and 19:11–27; and so on. While such an analysis is not absolutely incorrect, it encounters several telling difficulties, not the least being that vv. 10–12 seem to have been composed in Aramaic because of the play on *mamōnas* and *pistos* (see note 15 below). In this respect the critique of J. Dupont (*Les béatitudes*, pp. 109–10) is to be noted. None of the reasons brought forth by Descamps are sufficient to exclude the less radical possibility that vv. 10–12 represent genuine sayings of Jesus derived from another context.

¹⁵ *Mamōnas* is the Greek form of the Hebrew *māmōn* or Aramaic *māmōnā*. Though unknown in OT Hebrew, the word has turned up in the Qumrān literature (1QS 6:2; 1Q27 1 ii 5; CD 14:20 [in the last two instances it occurs only in very fragmentary contexts]). There is, however, another Qumrān expression, which does not use *māmōn*, but *hōn hāmās*, “the wealth of violence,” which is close in sense to the Lucan “wealth of dishonesty” (16:9).—The etymology of *māmōn* is uncertain, but it is commonly explained as derived from the root *’mn* (“to be firm”; causative: “to trust in, believe”). *Māmōn* (< *ma’ mōn*) would, therefore, designate that in which one puts one’s trust. If this is correct—and vv. 10–12 seem to suggest that it is—the play on the words *mamōnas* and *pistos* is obvious. See F. Hauck, “Mamōnas,” *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* 4, 390–92; J. Dupont, *Les béatitudes*, pp. 109–10.—Commentators have often related Luke’s phrase to the rabbinical expression *māmōn dišqar*, “wealth of deceit.” But this expression has a far more pejorative sense than Luke’s, suggesting ill-gotten gains or wealth that has been amassed at the expense of justice. In Luke’s usage, however, the word designates the tendency that wealth has to make men dishonest. Distracting men from the service and devotion of God, it enslaves them in a pursuit of itself and ends in making them dishonest.

¹⁶ The reasons given by A. Descamps (*op. cit.*, pp. 49–50) for the Lucan construction of 16:9 are not impossible; they are better than his analysis of vv. 10–12.

¹⁷ See J. Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, pp. 20–88; C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (rev. ed.; New York, 1961) pp. 1–20; R. E. Brown, *The Parables of the Gospels* (Paulist Press Doctrinal Pamphlet; New York, 1963).

THE MEANING OF THE PARABLE ITSELF

As A. Descamps notes, there is nothing against the attribution of the parable to Jesus Himself.¹⁸ Like many of the other parables used in the Gospels, its historical basis in the life of Jesus Himself offers no difficulty. One may wonder why it should be called a parable, since it lacks the usual introduction which states the comparison. But this is not the only parable of this sort; at the end of the chapter the story of Dives and Lazarus is similar, but only in the Codex Bezae is the latter explicitly called a parable (*eipen de kai heteran parabolēn*, "and he proposed another parable").

In trying to determine the main message of the parable (16:1-8a), certain crucial questions have to be answered. Four of them may be singled out: (1) In what way was the manager dishonest? (2) What was the Palestinian economic situation behind the parable? (3) Why does the master praise the manager's actions? (4) What is the point of the comparison in the parable?

1) In what way was the manager dishonest? This may seem like a simple question, but in many ways it is fundamental to the understanding of the whole parable (and the subsequent conclusion). From the outset of the parable the manager is accused¹⁹ of having squandered his master's property. We are not told in what way he did this, and it is really immaterial. The manager neither subsequently denies the accusation, nor tries to defend himself, nor even attempts to beg off (as the slave does in Mt 18:26). So a reason is already found in the accusation why he could be called "the dishonest manager" (*ton oikonomon tēs adikias*, 16:8).

But is not this last description of him due rather to his conduct subsequent to the accusation and the master's decision to call for an inventory? After all, this description does not occur until v. 8a, and might seem to suggest this. The answer to this question depends on whether the manager's subsequent conduct was wrong or not. A very common

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 48.

¹⁹ The verb *diēblēthē* could mean "was calumniated, was accused falsely" (as in 4 Mac 4:1; Josephus, *Ant.* 7, 11, 3 §267) of having squandered the property. But this meaning does not suit the context. The manager does not try to defend himself, and his subsequent conduct would be illogical if he had not been guilty.

interpretation of the parable so understands it: he summoned the debtors and suggested to them to falsify their receipts or bonds. This was a further dishonest act. Such an interpretation, however, has always encountered the difficulty of explaining how the master (either the master of the parable or Jesus) could commend such a corrupt manager and hold him up for instruction and example to Christians. In this interpretation, according to which the subsequent conduct of the manager is also flagrantly dishonest (though the text does not say so), the description of him in v. 8a is then said to be merited on two counts: (1) for squandering his master's property; (2) for involvement in graft.

In such an interpretation of the parable, commentators customarily point out that the master commends the manager for his "prudence," not for his dishonesty. This "prudence" is then explained as astuteness or cleverness in dealing with his fellow men. So it is not the manager's corruption which is made the object of the application, but only general prudence (if the parable is understood as ending with v. 7) or prudence in the use of money (if v. 8 or v. 9 is included). Or, as J. Jeremias explains it, who limits the parable to vv. 1-7, the parable describes a criminal threatened with exposure who adopts unscrupulous but resolute measures to insure his future security. The clever, resolute behavior of the man threatened with catastrophe becomes an example for Jesus' listeners. Christians too must be aware that they face the crisis of the *eschaton*.²⁰

Yet all of this interpretation *presupposes* that the manager's subsequent conduct was dishonest and corrupt. But there is not a detail in the parable text itself which imposes such an interpretation or clearly intimates that the manager was further involved in crooked knavery. It is, to say the least, strange that the only reaction of the master to the subsequent actions of his manager is one of praise for his prudence.²¹

²⁰ *Parables of Jesus*, p. 34.

²¹ H. Preisker ("Lukas 16, 1-7," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 74 [1949] 85-92) believes that the sense of the adverb *phronimōs* (16:8a) is different from that found elsewhere in the Synoptics (except Mt 10:6b). Elsewhere the adjective *phronimos* describes the person who has grasped the eschatological condition of man (Mt 7:24; 24:25; 25:2, 4, 8, 9; Lk 12:42). But J. Jeremias (*Parables of Jesus*, p. 34) has more correctly noted that the adverb is used precisely in this eschatological sense in the parable. The manager stands for the Christian confronted with the crisis that the kingdom brings in the lives of men.

Again, there is an interesting parallel in the parable of the Dishonest Judge (Lk 18:2-8), who "neither feared God nor respected men." The judge in this parable merits a description very similar to that of the dishonest manager, *ho kritēs tēs adikias* ("the dishonest judge," 18:6). This description, moreover, is given to him only at the end of the parable, even though from the outset of it he is said to be unscrupulous—again we are not told precisely in what way. He finally yields to the pestering widow to be rid of her; but no further dishonest conduct is ascribed to him. In fact, the parable was told to teach Christians to "pray always and not give up" (18:1, probably a secondary application). The similarity with the parable of the Dishonest Manager is striking. Nothing in the latter, subsequent to the reproach of the master, is clearly branded as knavery.

2) What is the Palestinian economic situation reflected in the parable? According to the usual interpretations, the manager who handled the estate of the rich man had charge not only of his household but also of his financial affairs. In various transactions conducted by him (renting of farms to tenants, loans against a harvest, etc.) the neighbors contracted debts with the master of the estate. The manager kept the accounts of such transactions, and the master who lived perhaps in another part of the country presumably checked up on the manager from time to time. Otherwise he was trusted. He was empowered to handle debts and see to their reduction. In the parable the manager's squandering of the property has been reported and an account was demanded. Realizing that his situation was desperate, he summoned the debtors and in a last act of knavery had them change the amounts on the receipts in order to ingratiate himself with them against the time when his job would be taken away from him. This was a form of graft. One must presume that this was eventually brought to the master's attention. His only recorded reaction is one of admiration and praise for the manager's astuteness.

However, if there is nothing in the text that clearly labels the manager's subsequent conduct as dishonest, then possibly some other

In the Lucan conclusion of v. 8b (of distinct origin) the comparative *phronimōteroi* has a little broader meaning because of the reference to the dealings with one's own generation. But even so, the implied contrast is still between those dealings and the reaction to the kingdom.

economic situation is reflected in the parable. Another situation has, in fact, been suggested by a number of writers in this century, though it has not been widely adopted. M. D. Gibson was apparently the first to propose it in 1903 on the basis of modern Near Eastern customs.²² Her suggestion was subsequently supported by others.²³ But none of these writers was able to adduce much evidence for it from antiquity, their parallels being drawn from modern Near and Far Eastern practices. However, a recent writer has amassed an impressive array of data from rabbinical writings and Jewish law to suggest that the practice was known in antiquity too. He is J. Duncan M. Derrett, a reader in Oriental Laws in the University of London.²⁴

Derrett explains the parable as reflecting the Palestinian laws and customs of agency and usury. A duly appointed manager acted as the agent for his master and was legally empowered to act in his name. His job was fiduciary. But "there was no agency for wrongdoing." A criminal act on the part of the manager did not necessarily involve the master; and if the latter ordered a criminal act, which the manager carried out, the manager had to bear the responsibility for it and could not take refuge in superior authority. The agent could involve the master in transactions with third parties (e.g., tenant farmers, borrowers, etc.). But custom permitted him to make a profit for himself, which may not have been precisely authorized by the master. Though

²² "On the Parable of the Unjust Steward," *Expository Times* 14 (1902-3) 334.

²³ W. D. Miller, "The Unjust Steward," *Expository Times* 15 (1903-4) 332-34; E. Hampden-Cook, "The Unjust Steward," *ibid.* 16 (1904-5) 44; P. Gaechter, "The Parable of the Dishonest Steward after Oriental Conceptions," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 12 (1950) 121-31; C. B. Firth, "The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward (Luke xvi. 1-9)," *Expository Times* 63 (1951-52) 93-95; J. Volckaert, "The Parable of the Clever Steward," *Clergy Monthly* 17 (1953) 332-41; G. Gander, "Le procédé de l'économe infidèle décrit Luc 16.5-7, est-il répréhensible ou louable?" *Verbum caro* 7 (1953) 128-41. See also G. Chastand, *Etudes sociales sur les paraboles évangéliques* (Toulouse, 1925) pp. 68-75.—Though the same basic interpretation is common to all these writers, there are variations in details.

²⁴ "Fresh Light on St Luke xvi. I. The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *New Testament Studies* 7 (1960-61) 198-219; "II. Dives and Lazarus and the Preceding Sayings," *ibid.*, pp. 364-80. Derrett's competence in the field of Oriental law may be presumed; his explanation of the legal and economic background of the parable seems well enough supported. However, his flight from conclusions generally admitted today about the composition of the Gospels and the recording of Jesus' parables is another matter; few will follow him in his views on this subject. The same can be said of the general explanation which he proposes for the parable. We have tried to sift from his discussion what seems valid for the understanding of the story as a whole.

he was not remunerated by his master, he was normally compensated for his expenses. In many cases he was a household slave, a *ben bayit* ("a son of the house," one born in the familia). Incompetence, misuse of discretion, negligence, and downright swindling were grounds for reprehension by the master and even for the unilateral dismissal of the agent. But he could not be sued in court as a debtor. The agent, however, could release debts owed to his master, and the latter was expected to ratify and abide by such acts.

In the parable the manager was such an agent. Reported as dishonest in his management of the property, he was upbraided by the master and was going to be dismissed. The master demanded that he draw up an inventory of the estate and an account of his handling of it, so that it could be made over to another manager. His social equals, other managers, would not welcome him, once dismissed; and since he could not face the prospect of hard labor or begging, the crisis forced him to build up good will with the general public (the debtors included). In his management of the estate, he had indulged in the commonly practised usury of the time. He lent his master's goods or land to fellow Jews at an interest apparently customary to the practice of his day, even though unauthorized to do so by his master. This was his profit. Such a practice, however, was a violation of the Torah and especially of the Pharisaic, rabbinical interpretation of it (see Dt 15:7-8; 23:20-21; Ex 22:24; Lv 25:36-37). However, as far as the courts were concerned, there were ways of getting around the law. Rabbinical casuistry discussed the legality of contracts for loans and the way in which they were recorded. For instance, if a receipt or bond read, "I will pay Reuben 1 denarius on the 1st of Nisan; and if I do not, then I will pay $\frac{1}{4}$ denarius annually in addition," this was declared to be usury, and the sum could be recovered in the courts by the debtor. However, if the receipt merely said, "I owe Reuben 10 kor of wheat," this was declared not to be usury in the strict sense (and hence not recoverable), even though the borrower had not actually received the equivalent of 10 kor of wheat. He may have received only 5 or 8, but was constrained by the prevailing customs to write a larger sum on the bond, and the difference represented the interest for the agent.²⁵

When the parable is read in the light of such an economic back-

²⁵ While the rabbinical writings know of this custom of usury and discuss various aspects of it, the question inevitably rises about the antiquity of this material. Does it really

ground, it is understood in a quite different way. The manager, in the interests of ingratiating himself with others than his master, now that his job is virtually lost, has summoned the debtors and ordered them to write new receipts or bonds which represent the real amounts owed to the master.²⁶ He returns the old ones, gets new ones, and prepares his account for the master. The manager has, therefore, merely foregone his own profits on the transactions. In this case his subsequent conduct is hardly dishonest, since he is renouncing what in fact was usury.

3) Why does the master approve of the manager's actions? The master may well have been ignorant of the precise usurious nature of the original transactions; but it is to be presumed that he was aware of the custom of managers. Since "there was no agency for wrongdoing," and usury was a violation of the Mosaic legislation, the master could hardly have authorized it. There was the duty of releasing the debts of distressed fellow Jews. While the master might have tried to claim the usurious gains from the debtors, since the receipts were written to include them, there was nothing to prevent him from releasing them from what they did not really owe him in terms of the main transaction. If, therefore, his manager reduced the debts by eliminating the usurious gain without the knowledge of the master, he would have been expected to approve and ratify such an act subsequently. This is apparently what he did in effect, when "he approved of the dishonest manager." The master was not cheated of anything that was really his. He commends the prudence of the manager in foregoing his profits to win favor with the debtors and others in view of the impending dismissal. While the verb *epēnesen* directly expresses praise for the manager's prudence,

reflect a situation in Palestine in the time of Christ? There are certain indications that it does. Josephus, for instance, records that when Herod Agrippa I was almost bankrupt (ca. A.D. 33-34), he borrowed money through an agent Marsyas from a Near Eastern banker, who forced Marsyas to sign a bond for 20,000 Attic drachmae, though he received 2500 drachmae less (*Ant.* 18, 6, 3 §157). Perhaps one could also appeal to the Murabba'at texts (18 r 4 [*DJD* 2.101]; 114 [*DJD* 2.240-41]).

²⁶ Note that Luke's text does not speak of falsifying the text or even of changing it. Nor do we find the technical expression for canceling a debt, used in the Pap. Flor. I. 61, 65 [A.D. 85]: *ekleuse to cheirographon chiasthēnai*, "he ordered the receipt crossed out" (i.e., marked with a *chi*). All that Luke's text says is that the debtor is to write fifty or eighty, presumably a new *cheirographon* (although the newness of it is not essential to this interpretation).

it may also reflect the official act of approval or ratification of the reduction of the debts and the elimination of the usury.

4) What is the point of comparison in the parable? The conclusion in v. 8a states the important element of the parable: "The master approved of that dishonest manager because he had acted prudently." His prudence in the face of the crisis that was before him is commended; it is not just prudence in general, but rather his prudent use of material wealth with respect to it. He used his wealth (the profits that were coming to him) to insure his future in view of the crisis. In this interpretation the full eschatological nuance of the adverb *phronimōs* is thus brought out, for the Christian situation is one dominated by a need for decisive action. The dishonest manager has become the model for Christians, who are expected to grasp the dramatic situation of the kingdom and the crisis that it brings into the lives of men. It is a situation which calls for a prudent use of one's material wealth. In this there is a connection between this parable and those of the Rich Fool and Dives and Lazarus.

Is there even a slight allegorization of the parable? Modern students of the parables, who have followed A. Jülicher, A. T. Cadoux, C. H. Dodd, and J. Jeremias, tend to restrict the meaning of the Gospel parables to *one* point. Such a position was a reaction against the hyperallegorization of the parables practised in the interpretation of them for centuries. More recent writers, however, have questioned—and rightly so—the "strait jacket" exegesis of the parables which has since developed.²⁷ In some cases there may have been at least a second point of comparison, or even more. Can or should this be admitted for the parable of the Dishonest Manager?

A. Descamps speaks of the slight allegorization of the images in the parable. "Jesus could scarcely utter this parable without making perceptible a slight allegorical nuance in the images—such as that of the master demanding an account from his manager (God calling man to judgment), of the haste with which the manager sets to work (the urgency of the present situation for the disciples). . . ."²⁸ Such a restricted use of allegory can be admitted, but any further allegorization of it

²⁷ See P. Benoit, *Revue biblique* 55 (1948) 598; R. E. Brown, "Parable and Allegory Reconsidered," *Novum testamentum* 5 (1962) 36-45.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 48-49.

would have to be carefully scrutinized and would have to remain within known Gospel modes of thought and expression. Above all, the tendency to anachronism would be inadmissible.

THE MEANING OF THE LUCAN MULTIPLE CONCLUSION TO THE PARABLE

The Lucan conclusion, which begins with v. 8b and ends with v. 13, should be understood as three further lessons which are drawn from the parable. In a sense, they are an inspired allegorization of the parable, exploiting its various aspects. However, since the material is more than likely derived from other contexts, as already pointed out, the conclusion is much rather the result of conflation than mere allegorization. C. H. Dodd is undoubtedly right when he looks on these verses as "notes for three separate sermons on the parable as text."²⁹ In other words, Luke records three different ways in which the early Church moralized the parable. The first sermon is outlined in vv. 8b-9, where a further eschatological lesson on prudence is drawn from the parable. In the parable itself the dishonest manager by his prudence was the model for Christians facing the crisis which the coming of the kingdom has brought into their lives. The first conclusion rather equates the manager with the children of this world. Both of them are more prudent than the children of light; i.e., the manager and the children of this world manifest a prudence in their dealings with one another which is greater than that manifested by the children of light.³⁰ The second sermon is found in vv. 10-12, drawing a lesson of responsible management of what is entrusted to one. The eschatological nuance disappears in this application; the emphasis is shifted rather to day-by-day responsibility and fidelity. There are three points: the contrast of responsibility in the little and big things of life; the contrast of responsibility in handling the wealth of dishonesty³¹ and real wealth; the contrast of responsibility in handling the goods of another and one's own. Finally, the last sermon, which really has nothing to do with the parable, sums up a general attitude toward wealth (or mammon). If a man allows

²⁹ *Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 17.

³⁰ Some might prefer to distinguish v. 8b and v. 9 into two distinct applications. This is possible, since v. 8b and v. 9 are distinct in origin. However, they do have a common eschatological reference and both seem to concentrate on the need of prudent, decisive action in "the children of light."

³¹ See note 15 above.

himself to get involved in the pursuit of it and reduces himself thereby to a slavish servitude, he cannot serve God. Mammon becomes almost a god itself.

When the story of the Dishonest Manager is analyzed along lines such as these, it is seen to have a certain intelligibility. The analysis is complicated, because of the conflation present in the story. But this interpretation has the advantage of reckoning with the separate elements of it and of interpreting them in their own right. At the same time, there is seen to be a unity in it all, which was what the inspired Evangelist was striving for in uniting the disparate elements in his "travel account." When the story is analyzed in this fashion, there is no need to invoke irony as the key to the interpretation of the passage. This has often been suggested²² but has never been very convincing.

HOMILETIC CONSIDERATIONS

The preacher who would present the Gospel of the Dishonest Manager would do well in his homily to recall the general Lucan context of the passage (that this is but one of the Lucan stories inculcating a Christian attitude toward riches). Secondly, he would do well to explain to the congregation that the liturgical form of the story (16:1-9) is shortened, and would do well to read the last few verses in addition. This would enable him to point out the distinction between the parable itself (16:1-8a) and the multiple conclusion (16:8b-13), with its further lessons which the inspired Evangelist draws from the parable. Thirdly, a brief exposé of the Palestinian economic situation reflected in the parable would clear up most of the obscure phrases in the story. This would enable the preacher to drive home the main point of the parable (as explained above). Finally, a brief explanation of any of the added applications would be in order. It should be obvious that a homily based on this Gospel pericope is going to be mainly informative

²² See J. F. McFadyen, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *Expository Times* 37 (1925-26) 535-39; R. Pautrel, "'Aeterna tabernacula' (Luc, XVI, 9)," *Recherches de science religieuse* 30 (1940) 307-27; J. A. A. Davidson, "A 'Conjecture' about the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke xvi, 1-9)," *Expository Times* 66 (1954-55) 31; H. Clavier, "L'Ironie dans l'enseignement de Jésus," *Novum testamentum* 1 (1956) 3-20, esp. 16-17; G. Paul, "The Unjust Steward and the Interpretation of Lk 16, 9," *Theology* 61 (1958) 189-93; D. R. Fletcher, "The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1963) 15-30.

and expository; the moralizing tendency of the preacher would have to be curtailed in this case.

To bring this long discussion to a close, we can recapitulate the essentials by presenting the Gospel text in the following form.

The Parable Proper

1 *Jesus said to the disciples: "There was a certain rich man (the owner of an estate) who had a manager (a servant empowered to handle the household and financial affairs of the estate; he could contract loans in the name of the master, had to keep the accounts, and could even liquidate debts), and he heard complaints (literally, "he [the manager] was accused," but we are not told by whom; it need not have been by the debtors) that this man was squandering his property (through negligence, swindling, incompetent use of discretion, etc.).* 2 *So he called him and said: 'What's this I hear about you? Prepare me an account of your management (i.e., give me an inventory and prepare an account of the debtors and what they owe; the purpose of this account is to prepare for the transfer of management to a new man); you can't be manager around here any longer (the master has decided to dismiss the servant).'* 3 *Then the manager said to himself (soliloquy): 'What am I going to do? My master is taking my job as manager away from me. I am not strong enough to dig (as a servant trained to a "white-collar" job, he knows that he cannot endure the life of a laborer accustomed to hard, physical labor); I'm ashamed to beg.—4 Ah, I know what I'll do, so that when I lose this job, I'll be welcome in people's homes' (literally, "I have known [an aorist expressing decision] what I shall do, that when I am removed from management they will receive me into their houses."* The third plural verb is indefinite, since no persons have yet been mentioned to whom it might refer. It is a Semitic way of paraphrasing the passive.—His decision is to take means to secure his future.) 5 *He summoned his master's debtors one by one (i.e., those with whom he had transacted various "deals"). He said to the first of them: 'How much do you owe my master?' (It should not be presumed that he does not know how much was owed. His question is part of the dramatic presentation of the story.) 'One hundred jugs of olive oil' (literally, "one hundred baths of olive oil." Since the Hebrew measure "bath" equals between eight and nine gallons, this really represents an amount closer to a thousand gallons), was the answer.* 6 *He said to the man: 'Here, take your receipt (literally, "receive your written statement," the IOU or cheirographon ("bond") originally written by the debtor expressing what he owed to the master), sit down, and, hurry, write (one for) fifty (i.e., write a new IOU for the real amount of the debt owed to the master, now minus the interest originally demanded by the manager. Fifty baths of oil are the manager's interest. The exorbitant rate [100%] should not be pressed too literally, for high figures are characteristic of Jesus' parables.³⁸ The rate is exorbitant to drive home the real point in the parable; no one is expected to take the figures*

³⁸ See J. Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 22.

seriously.). 7 *Then he said to another debtor: 'How much do you owe?' He answered: 'A hundred bushels of wheat'* (literally, "a hundred kor of wheat," which is a considerable sum, since the Hebrew kor equals roughly ten to twelve bushels in our metric system. Again, a more realistic modern equivalent would be a thousand bushels of wheat, cut down to eight hundred.). *Again he said: 'Here, take your receipt and write (one for) eighty'* (The manager gives up his claim to twenty-five per cent interest.). 8 *And the master approved of that dishonest manager* (Since the dishonesty is to be understood as the squandering of the master's estate, reported in v. 2, this description of the manager is not to be regarded as derived from his conduct subsequent to the master's calling him to task. The master's approval or praise commends the manager for having made prudent use of the resources that were his in the situation. There is also the nuance that he gave his approval to the reduction of the debts.), *because he had acted prudently* (i.e., he had sized up the urgency of the situation, and in this he becomes the model for Christians, who should face up to their eschatological situation).

The Lucan Conclusion

8b *For* (The Greek conjunction *hoti* ["because"] introduces a further lesson drawn from the parable; it is a redactional suture joining to the parable itself a Lucan reflection, based on the words of Jesus.) *the children of this world* (See note 10. The children of this world are contrasted with the children of light [= Christian disciples]. The manager is now equated with them. Their shrewdness in their dealings with one another becomes an example of the shrewdness which should characterize the Christian disciples in their endeavors to enter the kingdom.) *are more prudent* (The nuance of prudence in the face of the eschatological situation is not completely lost here, for this is the frame of reference for the Christians' activity. But they are compared to the children of this world in their dealings with their own generation. In this conclusion, therefore, the word *phronimos* takes on a further nuance.) *in dealing with their own generation than the children of light are.* 9 *I* (Jesus, the Master) *tell you, make friends with the wealth of dishonesty* (i.e., use prudently the wealth that you have to insure your status when the eschaton arrives. It does not mean that Christians are to make use of ill-gotten gain; the expression is pejorative and expresses only the tendency of wealth as such. It tends to lead man to dishonesty.), *so that when it gives out* (i.e., when the crisis has come), *you will be welcomed into everlasting tents* (i.e., probably into heaven. The expression "everlasting tents" is not found in the OT, nor in rabbinical writings, but appears first outside of Luke in 2 Esdras 2:11 [3rd c. A.D.].³⁴ The saying seems to be inculcating a prudent use of wealth in view of one's future—eschatological—status. The expressions seem to be modeled on v. 4 of the parable.). 10 *The man who is trustworthy in little things is also trustworthy in what is big* (Note that this second application has switched from the eschatological situation of the manager and his

³⁴ For an entirely different interpretation of this phrase, see R. Pautrel, *op. cit.*, pp. 319 ff.

prudence in face of the crisis to the day-by-day fidelity in responsible positions. This and the next two verses comment not on the subsequent conduct of the manager, for which he was praised as prudent, but rather on the idea of what was expected of him by his own master, when he first gave him the job.). 11 *If, then, you are not trustworthy when handling the wealth of dishonesty, who will trust you with the wealth that is real* (The contrast is between that which is material wealth and that which is spiritual.)? 12 *And if you are not trustworthy when handling what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own* (Material wealth is treated as something that does not belong to man; his real wealth is something that is truly part of himself. If he is not trustworthy in handling the former, how can he trust himself in the disposition of the latter?)?

13 *No servant* (the Greek word here is *oiketēs*, a more general expression than *oikonomos*, "manager") *can serve two masters; either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other* (The third application made on the parable. It is only loosely connected with it, and really is linked more closely to the preceding vv. 10–12. Devotion to wealth is not compatible with devotion to God; that is why wealth is called the mammon of dishonesty [16:9]). *You cannot serve both God and wealth.*

At the beginning of this article we mentioned a growing consensus of exegetical opinion about this Gospel story. We hope that we have made it clear that this is a consensus about the composite nature of it. Unfortunately, the same consensus is not found about the interpretation of it. The understanding of the parable which we have presented, however, has the advantage of giving an intelligible and coherent meaning to the whole. It is not, moreover, without some foundation.

In a future rearrangement of Scripture readings for a three- or four-year liturgical cycle of Sundays, such as many are rightly advocating today, it would be wise to adopt the whole story of the Dishonest Manager (16:1–13) and not just the existing liturgical form of it. In no case should it be simply omitted—just because it is difficult to explain or preach about. But if the full text were adopted, the multiple Lucan conclusion would be in the liturgy with its perennially valid application for the edification and instruction of God's People in this twentieth century.