

## THE PARABLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD (LUKE 16:1-13): A REEXAMINATION OF THE TRADITIONAL VIEW IN LIGHT OF RECENT CHALLENGES

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The parable of the unjust steward in Luke 16:1-13 is well known for its vexing exegetical difficulties. Who is the *kyrios* of v. 8? Why would he praise a dishonest steward? How could Jesus possibly hold the steward up as an example for his followers? What is the relationship of vv. 8b-13 to the rest of the parable? J. S. Kloppenborg goes so far as to say that "in the ninety years since the publication of Adolf Jülicher's monumental study on the parables of Jesus there is hardly a consensus on any single aspect of this parable."<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally Luke 16:1-13 has been understood as portraying a steward who cheats his master but who is commended for his wisdom, a quality to be imitated by Christ's disciples in their use of material possessions in light of the coming eschatological kingdom. But the difficulties in the parable have elicited a variety of challenges to this consensus. In answer to the question of how a master could praise a dishonest steward, some scholars have postulated on socioeconomic grounds that the steward's actions were not really unjust at all and that he was merely releasing his commission.<sup>2</sup> Others have seen the parable as a clear case of irony or have appealed to textual emendation or mistranslations of an Aramaic original. Furthermore most scholars deny that vv. 8b-13 have anything to do with the original parable and that the parable has anything to do with wealth.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, however, a significant and comprehensive treatment of Luke 16:1-13 by D. J. Ireland has convincingly reasserted and defended the traditional understanding of the parable against these and other challenges.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. S. Kloppenborg, "The Dishonoured Master (Luke 16:1-8a)," *Bib* 70 (1989) 474.

<sup>2</sup> See most importantly J. D. M. Derrett, "Fresh Light on Luke XVI: The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *NTS* 7 (1961) 198-219. Subsequently several scholars have endorsed some form of Derrett's argument. Cf. J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Story of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13)," *TS* 25 (1964) 23-42; I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 614-617; P. Perkins, *Hearing the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1981) 167; and at a more popular level S. J. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 227-234.

<sup>3</sup> For a brief survey of these and other attempts at interpreting Luke 16:1-13 see D. J. Ireland, "A History of Recent Interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13)," *WTJ* 51 (1989) 293-318. Cf. also W. S. Kissinger, *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1979) 398-408.

<sup>4</sup> D. J. Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: An Historical, Exegetical, and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1-13* (NovTSup 70; Leiden: Brill, 1992).

After surveying a wide array of challenges to the traditional interpretation and unity of Luke 16:1–13 Ireland finds them wanting and concludes that the traditional interpretation still remains the most plausible on exegetical, contextual and theological grounds. A steward has acted dishonestly in releasing debts but shrewdly in preparing for his future. Jesus uses the parable to inculcate in his disciples the need to be equally wise (not dishonest) in their use of material possessions in light of the coming eschatological kingdom.

Yet since the writing of Ireland's important work several recent studies have surfaced that continue to challenge the traditional understanding of this parable.<sup>5</sup> The comprehensive nature of Ireland's work precludes a detailed exegesis of Luke 16:1–13 here. Rather, taking the traditional view as articulated by Ireland as a starting point this paper will consider several of these recent challenges to this understanding in an attempt to show that the traditional view of the parable of the unjust steward is still the most plausible.

#### I. RECENT CHALLENGES TO THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

The most recent attempts at overturning the traditional interpretation of Luke 16:1–13 usually either deny that the parable has anything to do with possessions by isolating vv. 1–8 from its present context, or attempt to emend the present text, or reinterpret the nature of the lesson to be drawn from the parable concerning the use of material possessions.

1. *Interpretations that deny an emphasis on use of wealth.* In an important article on the parable of a "Master's Praise" B. B. Scott argues that the parable portrays a steward who cheats his master but who unexpectedly is praised by his master for his prudence.<sup>6</sup> Scott then goes further to argue that the parable conveys a lesson on "justice" by challenging the reader's conception of justice where "power and justice are coordinates."<sup>7</sup> The master's praise and the steward's behavior clash with justice normally implied in the kingdom. By praising the steward the master reminds the reader that the steward's "fun at the master's expense" is unjust and at the same time has caused him to forfeit his own power of tyranny. Thus the parable "breaks loose the bond between power and justice and instead equates justice and vulnerability."<sup>8</sup> Thus the message of the parable of the unjust steward is that the "kingdom is for the vulnerable; for masters and stewards who do not get even."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ireland's work was first produced in 1989 as a dissertation at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Yet at the time of publication in 1992 the author confessed not to have interacted with any new works that had appeared since the writing of the original dissertation.

<sup>6</sup> B. B. Scott, "A Master's Praise: Luke 16:1–8a," *Bib* 64 (1983) 173–188. One of the glaring omissions of Ireland's work is his failure to interact with the work of Scott.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 187.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 188.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Against this understanding, however, is the fact that there is nothing in the parable itself that suggests that justice is its main thrust. Moreover the steward is explicitly praised for his prudence in the face of a crisis. Furthermore Scott's understanding of the parable forces him to view the conclusions (esp. vv. 8b-9) as odd attempts at doing away with the disturbing effect of the parable and having nothing to do with its true meaning. Yet rather than "diverting attention away from the story's roguish character," as Scott claims, vv. 8b-9—as will be shown shortly—are integral to the telling of the parable.

W. Loader argues that the parable portrays a master who praises his dishonest steward. But then Loader attempts to break fresh ground by suggesting that the parable is Christologically focused.<sup>10</sup> While he admits the parable is about wise use of wealth in its present context (vv. 8b-13), he contends that originally it was not about our response. Instead the steward originally represented Jesus, who was justified in releasing debts to sinners. According to Loader, then, Jesus uttered this parable hard on the heels of the parables in chap. 15 in response to accusations that he acted unjustly in forgiving sinners (Luke 15:1). But Loader is forced to ignore the present context of the parable, which stresses wise use of wealth, in favor of an original meaning that was supposedly lost in the story's transmission. Furthermore, although it would be wrong to deny any Christological implications to the parables it is unlikely that Jesus is to be identified with the servant figure here.<sup>11</sup> Rather, the applications of vv. 9-13 suggest that the disciples were to identify with the steward. Moreover, if forgiveness was Jesus' point, one might have expected that the steward would have released all the debts rather than just part of them.

According to Kloppenborg the parable is not about the steward's character but the master's honor.<sup>12</sup> Kloppenborg convincingly shows that the first readers would not assume that usury or the releasing of the steward's commission was the focal point of the story.<sup>13</sup> He then argues that the parable can only be understood by reconstructing the socioeconomic background of the story. When the social codes that the story evokes are understood, the focus of the story becomes the master's honor. Others have

<sup>10</sup> W. Loader, "Jesus and the Rogue in Luke 16:1-8a: The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *RB* 96 (1989) 518-532. For a similar view cf. more recently C. Brown, "The Unjust Steward: A New Twist?", *Worship, Theology, Ministry and the Early Church* (ed. M. J. Wilkins and T. Paige; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992) 121-145. Notwithstanding Brown's more detailed defense of this Christological interpretation, he still fails to account adequately for the parable's present context, seeing vv. 9-13 as a later addition by Luke. Furthermore his understanding of the release of debts is dependent on Derrett, and his explanation as to why the entire debt was not released (which is what one might expect if this refers to Jesus releasing the debts of sinners) is unconvincing and appears to me to be a case of special pleading (see p. 138).

<sup>11</sup> On the Christology of the parables see P. B. Payne, "Jesus' Implicit Claim to Deity in His Parables," *Trinity Journal* 2 (1981) 3-23. See also C. L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990) 313-324.

<sup>12</sup> Kloppenborg, "Dishonoured."

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 479-486. Against Fitzmyer ("Story"), Kloppenborg demonstrates from literary sources that there was no uniform means for remuneration of household agents. This means that an

come to him with the charges that his steward is scattering his goods. These charges cause him to be seen by his peers as an incompetent manager who cannot control his own household. What is at stake in the story is the master's honor in an honor/shame culture. Therefore the master's only recourse is to recover his honor by dismissing the steward. Yet when the steward defrauds his master by reducing the amount of the bills, the audiences' expectations are frustrated when the master praises his steward. In praising his steward the master has ignored his own honor and the honor/shame codes of his society, thereby challenging the "appropriateness of insisting upon one's honour."<sup>14</sup>

Yet Kloppenborg can maintain his interpretation only at the expense of ignoring the present context. According to him vv. 8b–13 are secondary and irrelevant to the true meaning of the parable, a problem to which I will turn shortly. Furthermore, although the honor/shame code may explain certain aspects of the parable (e.g. why the master had to act decisively in dismissing his steward), there is nothing in the context of the parable itself to suggest that this is Jesus' point. Kloppenborg's proposal shifts the emphasis away from the steward to the master.<sup>15</sup> But according to the structure of the parable the prominent, unifying figure in the parable is the steward, not the master.<sup>16</sup> Thus "it is better to take the story as developing on the basis of the steward having been 'found out' than as turning upon the honor of the master."<sup>17</sup> What is at stake in the parable is the steward's future.

Common to all the above proposals is the assumption that the true meaning of the parable has been lost or set aside in the transmission process or that it has been badly skewed in the redactional process.<sup>18</sup> As S. E. Porter notes: "A common flaw of much parable interpretation has been to isolate individual parables and then to analyse them acontextually."<sup>19</sup> Verses 8b–13 in particular continue to be viewed with considerable skepticism.<sup>20</sup> Concerning these verses Kloppenborg says that v. 9 introduces a "dichotomy between

explicit reference to the steward's "commission" would be necessary if this was the conclusion that Jesus wanted his audience to draw (pp. 481–482). Against Derrett ("Fresh Light") Kloppenborg adduces evidence from Egyptian loan documents to show that the standard interest rates did not match up to the amounts reduced in the parable. Thus "the narrative would have had to include much clearer indications of this if a first-century audience were to discern that intent" (p. 486).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 494.

<sup>15</sup> J. L. Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1993) 797.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. R. W. Funk, *Parables and Presence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 37–39. Funk includes this parable in a group of parables that have three main participants: a determiner (D) and a principal respondent (R) who "sustains narrative contact with D on the one hand and a second, subordinate character (r) on the other. In this case R is the mediating term between D and r" (p. 39).

<sup>17</sup> Nolland, *Luke* 797.

<sup>18</sup> For a concise critique of form and redaction criticism as it relates to Jesus' parables and for an argument for the reliability of their transmission cf. Blomberg, *Parables* 71–131.

<sup>19</sup> S. E. Porter, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–13): Irony Is the Key," *The Bible in Three Dimensions* (ed. D. J. A. Clines *et al.*; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990) 134.

<sup>20</sup> Representative of this skepticism are the oft-quoted words of C. H. Dodd: "We can almost see here notes for three separate sermons on the parable as text" (*The Parables of the Kingdom* [New York: Scribner's, 1961] 17).

the earthly and the eternal" that "alters the sense of the parable."<sup>21</sup> Also "the sayings in vv. 10-12 divert attention yet further away from the parable and its conclusion by exploiting the dichotomy of earthly and spiritual introduced in v. 9."<sup>22</sup> Scott says that vv. 8a-9 "attempt to impose sense (consistency) upon the parable by diverting attention away from its roguish character."<sup>23</sup> More recently J. L. Nolland has argued that v. 9 is a Lucan formulation that provides a bridge to vv. 10-13, which "have no connection at all with the preceding parable."<sup>24</sup> Apart from its Lucan development the parable simply challenges its readers to "shrewdness to recognize and seize the opportunity that exists in the midst of threat."<sup>25</sup> Thus there appears to be a consensus that vv. 8b-13 are secondary additions, even if authentic, compiled by Luke to apply further the parable to his readers.

But as most interpreters admit, the parable as it stands in its present redactional context concerns the wise use of possessions. Luke 16:1-13 falls within a segment of Luke's well-crafted and organized central section that deals with the topic of the use and abuse of riches (16:1-31), an emphasis attested elsewhere in Luke,<sup>26</sup> and the repetition of *mamōnas* in vv. 9, 11, 13 and Luke's *philargymoi* in v. 14 tie this parable closely to this theme of one's use of wealth. This present context of the parable must serve as our starting point.

Furthermore, v. 8b is most likely an original part of the parable. Ireland says, "The verse also indicates that the point of comparison between the steward and Jesus' disciples is wisdom and foresight, not dishonesty."<sup>27</sup> Thus it serves as a necessary transition point between the parable and the more direct application that follows in vv. 9-13.<sup>28</sup> The reasoning of this verse is *a fortiori*: If the people of this world are prudent in the handling of their master's wealth, how much more should the "sons of light" reflect prudence in the use of worldly possessions.<sup>29</sup> Hence the verse serves to reprove the sons of God's kingdom "for being less alert to the eschatological situation than worldly people in their own generation, i.e. in their dealing with each other."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Kloppenborg, "Dishonoured" 475.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Scott, "Master's Praise" 186.

<sup>24</sup> Nolland, *Luke* 806.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 802.

<sup>26</sup> For the arrangement of Luke's central section see especially C. L. Blomberg, "Midrash, Chiasmus, and the Outline of Luke's Central Section," *Gospel Perspectives: Studies in Midrash and Historiography* (ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1983) 3.217-261. Cf. I. H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 141-144, 206-209 for a treatment of Luke's emphasis on wealth and riches. See further Ireland, *Stewardship* 117-216.

<sup>27</sup> Ireland, *Stewardship* 86. Likewise K. E. Bailey says that this verse "provides the necessary corrective to the approval of the unjust steward. He is praised for his wisdom . . . , not for his dishonesty" (*Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* [combined ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983] 107). See also R. H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 110.

<sup>28</sup> Ireland, *Stewardship* 90.

<sup>29</sup> Among those who have noted the *a fortiori* argument of v. 8b see *ibid.* 76; Bailey, *Poet* 105.

<sup>30</sup> Marshall, *Luke* 621.

In fact C. L. Blomberg has suggested that vv. 8a, 8b and 9 nicely convey lessons to be drawn from the three main characters of the parable: The master's praise reflects God's praise of his followers, the cleverness of the steward emphasizes the need for prudence in Jesus' disciples, and the debtors' welcome of the steward reflects the future heavenly reception awaiting God's followers.<sup>31</sup> Once the parables are understood as limited allegories, as recent research has suggested, rather than as stories that have been altered or misinterpreted or allegorically exploited in the process of transmission and redaction, then "all three points make perfect sense as Jesus' original conclusion to the parable."<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore the appended sayings of vv. 9–13 need not be seen as extraneous or unrelated to the parable of vv. 1–8. As already shown, v. 9 forms a fitting application to be drawn from the parable giving concrete application to the "shrewdness" exemplified by the steward. Jesus' "disciples are to use their material possessions and money for spiritual purposes as wisely as the worldly do for material aims."<sup>33</sup> Moreover, as Ireland points out, the close verbal parallels between v. 9 and v. 4 argue in favor of v. 9 being an original part of the parable spoken by Jesus himself.<sup>34</sup> Verses 10–13 also draw fitting lessons from this parable. Verses 10–12 center on responsibility with worldly wealth as a test of one's ability to handle true, heavenly wealth. This is understood first in terms of a contrast between responsibility in small things and large things (v. 10). Verses 11–12 then develop further this contrast in terms of earthly riches versus true heavenly riches and in the responsibility of handling the goods of another versus one's own goods.<sup>35</sup> Yet one's use of worldly possessions is an effective test of one's ability to handle eternal reward because it reveals where ultimate loyalties lie (v. 13). A disciple cannot render loyalty to mammon and at the same time give to God the exclusive loyalty that he deserves.<sup>36</sup> Far from being a col-

<sup>31</sup> Blomberg, *Parables* 93, 245–246.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 93. Blomberg gives the most up-to-date defense of the parables as allegories. According to Blomberg the parables are limited allegories that communicate a main point associated with each main character or group of characters. Therefore the parables can convey one, two or three main points depending on the number of main characters present in the parable. Cf. also L. Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 139–153, 199–203, for a treatment of the parables as allegory.

<sup>33</sup> Ireland, *Stewardship* 96. Cf. also Marshall, *Luke* 622. For a detailed exegesis of this verse see Ireland, *Stewardship* 96–105.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 95. The most striking parallels between v. 4 and v. 9 are the following:

v. 4	<i>hina hotan metastathō</i>	v. 9	<i>hina hotan eklīpei</i>
	<i>dexōntai me</i>		<i>dexōntai hymas</i>
	<i>eis tous oikous autōn</i>		<i>eis tas aiōnious skēnas</i>

While the above parallels do not prove that Luke could not have formulated this saying (cf. Nolland, *Luke* 805–806), these connections are strong enough that it is unnecessary to deny that v. 9 originally belonged to the parable or to look for a source other than Jesus himself (cf. Ireland, *Stewardship* 94–96).

<sup>35</sup> See Fitzmyer, "Story" 38; Ireland, *Stewardship* 107–113.

<sup>36</sup> See Marshall, *Luke* 624; Ireland, *Stewardship* 113; Blomberg, *Parables* 246–247.

lection of disjointed, unrelated sayings that divert attention away from the true meaning of the parable, these verses appropriately summarize lessons on what it means to be prudent in the use of one's resources. What better test is there of one's loyalty to God and the ability to handle true wealth than one's use of material possessions?

Moreover, if this much structure and connection are admitted there is no good reason Jesus himself could not have appended these sayings to the parable.<sup>37</sup> At the very least the interpreter must account for the fact that in their present Lucan context vv. 8b-13 are connected with the parable.<sup>38</sup> Therefore when the parable is seen as a limited allegory, and when vv. 8b-13 are allowed as Jesus' own commentary and implications drawn from the parable, the case for an interpretation that stresses the wise use of wealth is enhanced.<sup>39</sup>

2. *Interpretations that attempt to emend the present text.* Some challenges to the traditional interpretation propose that the true meaning of the parable has been obscured as a result of the text's faulty translation or transmission. Recently D. M. Parrott has suggested that the original point of the parable had nothing to do with cleverness in preparing for the future.<sup>40</sup> In his view the parable of the unjust steward is to be understood in light of the main theme of Luke's parable collection: the exalting of the repentant and humbling of the unrepentant. Parrott then compares the parable to the parables of the foolish rich man (Luke 12:16-20) and the prodigal son (15:11-32). The unjust steward contrasts with the prodigal son who exemplifies repentance but resembles the rich man who is unrepentant and is called a fool by God for trusting in something that would fail him. The problem is that if this were the case, one would have expected the master

<sup>37</sup> For instance J. Jeremias, who argues that vv. 8b-13 were added to the parable only later when the primitive Church applied it to the Christian community, says, "Exhortation is already implicit in the original form of the parable, for Jesus' command to be resolute and make a new start embraces the generosity of v. 9, the faithfulness of vv. 10-12, and the rejection of mammon in v. 13" (*The Parables of Jesus* [2d rev. ed.; New York: Scribner's, 1972] 48). Yet one wonders why Jesus himself could not have drawn out these implications. Once again the structure and close connections do not prove that Luke 16:1-13 was a unit uttered by Jesus. But it does make it unnecessary to look elsewhere for its composition, and it places the burden of proof on those who would dissect the parable and its application into various parts.

<sup>38</sup> Ireland, *Stewardship* 107. Bailey has shown that vv. 9-13 constitute a carefully structured poem with three stanzas: Mammon and God (v. 9), Mammon and Truth (vv. 10-12), Mammon and God (v. 13) (*Poet* 110-116). However much one may disagree with the details of his analysis, it makes it unlikely that these verses circulated as unconnected sayings. Rather, they constitute an original unity spoken by Jesus himself. Bailey, however, goes on to argue for a clear separation between vv. 9-13 and vv. 1-8. But his reasons (see p. 111) are unconvincing, especially in view of the close connections between v. 9 and v. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. the similar conclusion by M. Barth, who argues that the parable of the unjust steward is a two-part unity that illustrates the saying of Matt 10:16. 16:1-9 illustrates the saying "Be wise as serpents" and vv. 10-13 "Be innocent as doves" ("The Dishonest Steward and His Lord: Reflections on Luke 16:1-13," *From Faith to Faith* [ed. D. Y. Hadidian; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1979] 65-73).

<sup>40</sup> D. M. Parrott, "The Dishonest Steward (Luke 16.1-8a) and Luke's Special Parable Collection," *NTS* 37 (1991) 499-515.

to condemn his steward in v. 8a rather than praise him. Parrott then attempts to account for the present text by suggesting that in its underlying Aramaic form the parable originally ended with a question that demanded a negative answer ("Would the master have commended the dishonest steward for his cleverness?") but was subsequently misunderstood in its Greek translation as a parable of preparation for the future, thus making a concluding question inappropriate. Therefore the original meaning of the parable is that repentance "is incompatible with trusting in one's own cleverness for ultimate security."<sup>41</sup>

Yet Parrott's reconstruction is unconvincing. Parrott largely ignores Luke's emphasis on material possessions throughout his gospel and in the parable's present context (esp. vv. 9–13) as well as the parable's clear eschatological tone.<sup>42</sup> More telling is that his suggestion of a mistranslation of an underlying Aramaic question demanding a negative answer is speculative and appears to be an attempt to overcome a difficulty with the present text created by his theory. As the parable stands the steward is commended for his prudence in the face of a crisis.

According to C. S. Mann the parable of the unjust steward has to do with a contrast between the unrealism of the Essenes' rigid exclusivity and those (Jesus' followers) who must make accommodation to a situation where they will soon be outnumbered by Gentiles and those outside the covenant.<sup>43</sup> Mann envisions the steward as a commodities manager who is responsible for making deals and profits for his master. After some disastrous losses and subsequent suspension the steward comes to terms with his clients and reaches an accommodation agreeable to everyone, including his master. But the master's praise of an unjust steward presents a difficulty. Mann alleges that there is an error in the text of 16:8 where *adikia* ("unjust") originally read *alikia* ("experience" or "expertise"). The Lord would then be commending the prudent or experienced manager because he acted wisely in the face of a situation that was beyond his control. The parable teaches, then, that Jesus' followers can learn from the children of the world who, like the steward, are compelled to make accommodations daily. Jesus' followers face a situation where they must come to terms with increasing alien influence in their midst, a situation that calls for a wealth of experience in accommodating to these changing circumstances.

Like most of the above proposals, Mann's suggestion does not fit the present context. But more difficult for his theory is that it depends on a hypothetical textual error for which we have no evidence, as even Mann himself admits. Rather, it appears that Mann's socioeconomic reconstruction

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 515.

<sup>42</sup> See especially the detailed survey of Luke's teaching on riches and poverty in Ireland, *Stewardship* 165–197. For those who have noted the parable's eschatological emphasis see esp. *ibid.*, 70–72, 82–83, 198–215; Bailey, *Poet* 105–109; Marshall, *Luke* 621. The evidence adduced by Ireland and others makes Kloppenborg's statement incredible: "Yet nothing in the parable evokes an apocalyptic situation" ("Dishonoured" 478). Most commentators on this parable have recognized its "crisis" nature.

<sup>43</sup> C. S. Mann, "Unjust Steward or Prudent Manger?", *ExpTim* 102 (1992) 234–235.



and proposal, in which he apparently thinks the steward's actions are not unjust, have contravened the present text so that he is forced to postulate an unverifiable textual error to solve the discrepancy. As Mann himself admits, we probably should grant his proposal a status of "no more than intelligent guess-work."<sup>44</sup> The major difficulty with several of the above proposals is that the historical reconstruction and interpretation so override the present text that the interpreter is forced to emend or ignore the present text in order to uphold the theory rather than alter the theory to fit the text.<sup>45</sup>

3. *Interpretations that reinterpret the nature of the lesson to be drawn concerning material possessions.* Attempts to reinterpret the nature of the lesson of the parable usually understand it as a clear example of irony or sarcasm, seeing the steward as a negative example. Porter sees irony as the key to unlocking the meaning of the parable.<sup>46</sup> According to Porter the traditional understanding of the parable is unacceptable because "the applause of the steward for acting cleverly seems to entail applause of the means evidencing his clever action."<sup>47</sup> Thus Jesus could not have commended the steward as a worthy example for his disciples. A satisfactory solution to this discrepancy can only be achieved by invoking irony. Porter seeks to support this by examining the context (chaps. 15-16) in which the parable appears. This context establishes the fact that those who expect a place in the kingdom cannot curry favor with the sons of this age in their use of finances. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31) the rich man is portrayed in striking contrast to the poor man as "a son of this age, having accumulated all of its much-desired baubles."<sup>48</sup> His "reversal of fortune" represents the danger of putting one's trust in worldly wealth for eternal reward. The parable of the prodigal son (15:11-36) shows that those inside the kingdom community must shun the financial ploys of this world. The prodigal is reinstated only after having made the unwise decision to use his money to ingratiate himself with the world. Thus to take the statements of 16:8-9 at face value is at odds with the values established in this surrounding context. The steward, like the prodigal son, is attempting to ingratiate himself with the sons of this age so they will receive him. But in doing so he forfeits acceptance in the kingdom. In fact he is a failure, having been caught twice. He is unable to secure a place with others—hardly an appropriate example for the sons of the kingdom.

The statements of vv. 8-9, then, are clearly ironic. In praising the steward the master ironically chides him for making an unwise choice in becoming friends with this world and in failing to consider the larger, eternal

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 235.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. W. W. Klein *et al.*, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 178-179.

<sup>46</sup> Porter, "Parable." See the earlier, well-known attempt to interpret the parable ironically by D. R. Fletcher, "The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?", *JBL* 82 (1963) 15-30.

<sup>47</sup> Porter, "Parable" 131.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 136.

picture (v. 8a). The sons of this age think that by their wise behavior they can secure an eternal reward (v. 8b). Likewise v. 9 is to be understood as ethical irony: "Jesus is commending his followers for using worldly wealth in its most negative sense to secure reward, a clear impossibility for this world, as the prodigal learned, and for the world beyond, as the rich man learned."<sup>49</sup> But Porter goes beyond other treatments of the parable as irony in seeing irony in vv. 10–13 as well. Verses 10–12 ironically ridicule those who, like the steward, trust in unrighteous mammon to secure eternal reward. Only by shunning unrighteous mammon can one be entrusted with true, heavenly wealth. Verse 13 is "Jesus' final ironic comment upon the actions of the steward."<sup>50</sup> The steward has chosen to serve two masters. Porter proposes that we repunctuate the final saying of v. 13 as a question with *ou* demanding a positive answer. The irony then becomes pointed: "Of course, you will be the first to do what cannot be done, won't you?"<sup>51</sup>

I. J. du Plessis contends that if we take the pronouncements of vv. 8a and 9 at face value they contradict Jesus' teaching elsewhere.<sup>52</sup> Verse 9 especially would seem to entail using earthly goods in a selfish way to earn eternal life. Therefore the steward's shrewdness in v. 8a is used ironically to encourage the same enthusiasm in Jesus' disciples for eternal interests. The force of v. 9 as sarcasm is captured in the paraphrase: "Make friends by applying your money or worldly possessions and find out whether it can earn you eternal life! See if these 'friends' will receive you into their 'eternal home.'"<sup>53</sup>

What can be said about taking the parable as irony or sarcasm? Although such an approach has much to commend it, the interpretation is not entirely convincing. The main difficulty is that on a first reading it is not the obvious explanation. There is nothing in the context of the parable itself to suggest that irony or sarcasm are present apart from the perceived difficulty of how Jesus could uphold the steward as an example to be followed.<sup>54</sup> Thus if there is an explanation that fits better there is no need to resort to irony. Furthermore the applause of the steward does not necessarily entail applause of his dishonesty. As pointed out above, v. 8b limits the point of comparison to shrewdness (*phronimōs*), not dishonesty. The argument of the parable is *a fortiori*. "If the dishonest steward displayed wisdom at a critical moment in his evil and temporal sphere of existence, *how much more* should Christian disciples do so in their righteous and eternal sphere."<sup>55</sup> A common assumption of both Porter and du Plessis is that the

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 148–149.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 151.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 152.

<sup>52</sup> I. J. du Plessis, "Philanthropy or Sarcasm?—Another Look at the Parable of the Dishonest Manger (Luke 16:1–13)," *Neot* 24 (1990) 1–20.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>54</sup> See Ireland, *Stewardship* 78. Ireland labels this view as too subtle. Against taking these verses as irony Nolland says that "there are no adequate signals in the preceding text" (*Luke* 801).

<sup>55</sup> Ireland, *Stewardship* 76. See also Bailey, *Poet* 105. As Ireland notes, Jesus elsewhere is prepared to draw lessons from the behavior of bad men in the parables of the importunate friend (*Luke* 11:5–9) and the unjust judge (18:1–7; *Stewardship* 75–76; see also Marshall, *Luke* 614). As Ireland further notes, all three parables also include an *a fortiori* argument.

steward was caught both times and that his plans failed. In praising the steward, however, the master is admitting the success of the scheme (he is received into the debtors' houses), although ultimately injurious to him.<sup>56</sup> As M. A. Beavis has shown, a rascal slave who outsmarts his master and thereby wins his approval was a common motif in ancient comedy.<sup>57</sup> As the traditional view recognizes, it is this shrewdness in securing the future that is praised in v. 8a.

Finally, Porter's understanding of vv. 10-13 is unlikely. As shown above, a natural reading of these verses would suggest that how one uses wealth here on earth is indicative of the ability to handle true, heavenly wealth and is evidence of one's ultimate loyalties. Such an emphasis on a proper attitude and use of wealth is confirmed elsewhere in Luke (cf. esp. 12:33; 18:22; 19:1-10).<sup>58</sup> This would also make it unnecessary to take v. 13 ironically or to take the final saying as a question. In contrast to the rich man in vv. 16-31, then, the unjust steward of vv. 1-13 teaches a positive, even if surprising, lesson on the proper use of wealth for the Christian disciple.<sup>59</sup>

## II. CONCLUSION

Recent alternatives to the traditional interpretation of the parable of the unjust steward are not compelling enough to overturn the traditional view. Jesus has utilized a parable that portrays a steward cheating his master in order to secure his future but uses it to teach a positive, even if shocking, lesson on the prudent use of wealth. Christian disciples should display just as much prudence in their use of possessions, especially in view of the more important crisis that faces them—namely, the coming eschatological kingdom. Such prudence is an effective test of their ability to handle true, heavenly riches. It is also an effective test of their allegiance to God. Christians in this century, perhaps more than any other, need to hear this message anew.

<sup>56</sup> Blomberg, *Parables* 245; Scott, "Master's Praise" 184; L. J. Topel, "The Injustice of the Unjust Steward," *CBQ* 37 (1975) 218-219; Nolland, *Luke* 800; Ireland, *Stewardship* 55. As Ireland points out: "Without the presumption of success, the parable loses much of its impact" (p. 55). Furthermore to take the parable as irony would divest it of any element of shock or unexpectedness, now recognized as a major characteristic of Jesus' parables.

<sup>57</sup> M. A. Beavis, "Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables With Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8)," *JBL* 111 (1992) 37-54.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Ireland, *Stewardship* 189-196.

<sup>59</sup> Significantly, Ireland notes that Luke elsewhere juxtaposes illustrations of both wise and foolish use of material possessions. Cf. 12:22-34 with 12:13-21; 19:1-10 with 18:18-23; Acts 4:36-37 with 5:1-11 (*Stewardship* 197). The parable of the unjust steward and the rich man and Lazarus would fit this pattern well.