

HONOR RESTORED: NEW LIGHT ON THE PARABLE OF THE PRUDENT STEWARD (LUKE 16:1–8a)

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Almost every article or book section devoted to the so-called parable of the Unjust Steward begins by noting that it is the most difficult of the parables. A whole series of seemingly intractable problems is involved in its interpretation. When the master accuses his steward of “squandering” his property, what does he mean? And is this accusation fair or unfair? When the steward responds by forgiving a portion of the amount owed by his master’s debtors, is he acting righteously or committing fraud? Who is the κύριος of Luke 16:8a? Is he the “master” of the parable or Jesus himself? Why does the κύριος “commend” the steward for an apparent act of fraud? Where does the parable end? The following essay reviews the answers scholars have given to these questions and proposes a relatively novel interpretation, based on a combination of literary and sociological criticism. Its thesis is that the steward’s job is threatened because he has dishonored his master by squandering his property, and he attempts to restore his master’s honor (and preserve for himself the prospect of future employment as a steward) by forgiving the debts and making his master appear to be generous and charitable. The master sees that the steward has acted loyally toward him (while at the same time the steward has advanced his own self-interest) and he commends the once “unjust” steward for his ingenious plan.

I. Common Interpretations

This parable has spawned a wide variety of interpretations, although none has produced anything resembling a scholarly consensus. While it would not be

wise to provide a comprehensive review of the literature here, we will go over the most popular and the most recent solutions to the puzzle of the Unjust Steward.¹

The Limits of the Parable

Two issues that are central to every interpretation of the parable, although not finally determinative, are where the parable itself ends and whether one should even attempt to make sense of the one or more “interpretations” of the parable appended to it in the following verses. There is agreement that the story proceeds at least through 16:7, and that the interpretation of the parable (by either the character Jesus or the narrator) begins at the latest in 16:8b. The debate concerns whether to include 16:8a as part of the parable or part of its interpretation. Some scholars believe that the parable ends at 16:7, and that the κύριος who commends the unjust steward in 16:8a is not the “master” of the story but Jesus. If it is the narrator’s voice and not Jesus’ that we hear in 16:8a, then 16:7 must mark the end of the story proper and 16:8a the beginning of its interpretation. Critics of this position argue that the only reason for claiming that the κύριος of 16:8a is Jesus is an inability to understand why the “master” of the parable would “commend” a steward who seems to have just defrauded him.² If they can explain this phenomenon (either by showing that the steward did not actually defraud his master or by explaining why the master might commend someone who has stolen from him), then there is no reason to think that the parable ends at 16:7. Moreover, it is unlikely that the referent of ὁ κύριος would change from the master to Jesus without some clear indication of this in the text. As Bernard Brandon Scott points out, elsewhere in the Gospel Luke is careful to give clear signals that a change of speaker has occurred. Finally, many scholars have pointed out that if the parable ends at 16:7, there is no satisfactory conclusion to the story.

These are among the few issues relating to this parable on which there is something resembling a consensus. A majority of scholars agree that the parable ends with 16:8a rather than 16:7.³ Moreover, most scholars seem to agree

¹ In a thorough review of the literature, literally hundreds of interpretations would have to be listed. For some of the more comprehensive attempts at giving the history of scholarship on this parable, see Michael Krämer, *Das Rätsel der Parabel von Ungerechten Verwalter: Luke 16,1–13* (Biblioteca di Scienze Religiose 5; Zurich: PAS-Verlag, 1972); or Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV* (AB 28A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) 1102–4.

² Joachim Jeremias cites this as his main argument in favor of ending the parable at 16:7. “It is hard to believe that the κύριος of v. 8 refers to the lord of the parable: how could he have praised his deceitful steward?” (*The Parables of Jesus* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1972] 45).

³ Notable exceptions include Jeremias (*Parables of Jesus*, 45–47) and J. D. Crossan in *In Parables* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 109. Scholars who agree that the parable proper ends at 16:8a include Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Story of the Dishonest Manager (Lk 16:1–13),” *TS* 25 (1964) 23–42; Bernard Brandon Scott, “A Master’s Praise: Luke 16:1–8a,” *Bib* 64 (1983) 174–77; John S. Kloppenborg, “The Dishonoured Master (Luke 16, 1–8a),” *Bib* 70 (1989) 475–79; David A.

that the interpretation(s) that follow the parable in 16:8b–13 are either only tangentially related to the parable or they represent misinterpretations of a parable told by Jesus by the author of the Gospel. In either case, interpretations that attempt to include 16:8b–13 are relatively rare.⁴

Economic Solutions

Joseph A. Fitzmyer and J. D. M. Derrett provide variations on the theme that the steward does not cheat his master (and hence the master reasonably commends him) because the steward is not depriving his master of his own property when he forgives the “debts” in 16:5–7. Derrett argues that the amounts forgiven by the steward represent the usurious interest being charged by the steward on loans involving his master’s property.⁵ Although various legal loopholes had been found that allowed Jews to practice *de facto* usury, it was clearly *de jure* against God’s law, Derrett argues. The steward decides to align himself with God’s law rather than human law, and for this he is commended by his master.⁶ Fitzmyer asserts that the forgiven sum was actually the steward’s commission.⁷ Regardless of whether the amounts represent the steward’s commission or the interest on a loan, in either event the steward is not cheating the master by reducing the debts since he is either forgoing his own profit or saving his master from sinning against God by engaging in usury. The steward is called “unjust” in v. 8a not because of the actions in vv. 5–7 but because of the prior actions referred to by the master in 16:1.

Neither the Fitzmyer nor the Derrett variety of this theory has won wide acceptance, and many scholars have found flaws in one or another aspect of their arguments. Kloppenborg disputes Fitzmyer’s interpretation by pointing out that what the steward asks—“How much do you owe my master?”—indicates that the steward is cutting his master’s profit and not his own.⁸ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh’s analysis of the social context of the parable

deSilva, “The Parable of the Prudent Steward in its Lucan Context,” *Criswell Theological Review* 6 (1993) 256–57; Dan O. Via, *The Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 156; William Loader, “Jesus and the Rogue in Luke 16, 1–8a: The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” *RB* 96 (1989) 518–32; and L. J. Topel, “On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward: Lk 16:1–13,” *CBQ* 37 (1975) 218.

⁴ There are, of course, many exceptions (most recently Dave L. Mathewson, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–13): A Reexamination of the Traditional View in Light of Recent Challenges,” *JETS* 38 [1995] 29–39), but the trend is in the opposite direction. Most of the articles on the parable that indicate its limits in the title of the article—like those of Kloppenborg and Scott—cite these as 16:1–8a and discuss only these verses within.

⁵ See J. D. M. Derrett, “Fresh Light on St. Luke XVI: The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” *NTS* 7 (1960–61) 198–219.

⁶ Kloppenborg (“Dishonoured Master,” 484) points out that Derrett is simply assuming that both the alleged lender and his debtors were Jews.

⁷ See Fitzmyer, “Dishonest Manager,” 34–35.

⁸ Kloppenborg, “Dishonoured Master,” 481.

reveals that “there is no warrant for the frequent assumption here that an agent could exact as much as 50 percent above a contract as his fee.”⁹ Scott agrees that in 16:5–7 “the debt is clearly owed to the master.”¹⁰ Kloppenborg also points out (against Derrett) that the amounts forgiven do not correspond to the interest usually charged for loans.¹¹ Moreover, the idea that in 16:4–7 the steward suddenly realizes that usury is wrong has little or no support in the text. As we will argue below, the steward’s main concern is not morality but employment (his own). Scott adds to his critique of the Fitzmyer/Derrett solution the second point that the steward’s “injustice” is probably related to what he did in 16:5–7 and not (only) to what he did prior to that time. “The master praises the steward for his prudence while calling him unjust, indicating a relation between the two.”¹² William Loader contradicts the Derrett and Fitzmyer readings on the grounds that they are not surprising: “16:8a, far from being intolerable on the lips of the master, tells of a very natural sequence of events. Indeed, it is all so natural that it is almost bland and superfluous.”¹³ The impact of the final line is dissolved. Finally, several scholars have pointed out that if the amounts forgiven represented either the interest on a loan or the steward’s commission, this would have been made clear in the text. The fact that this is not made clear, and indeed that there are several indications to the contrary, is fatal to the Derrett/Fitzmyer solution.

Literary Solutions

Several attempts have been made to find literary parallels to the parable of the Unjust Steward and to read the text in light of these parallels. J. D. Crossan sees the story as belonging to a cycle of trickster-dupe stories that follow a standard pattern:

1. (a) A situation evolves that enables a Rascal to play a trick on a Dupe;
(b) Dupe reveals his foolishness so that Rascal can utilize it;
2. Rascal plans a trick;
3. Rascal plays a trick;
4. Dupe reacts as Rascal wished him to do;
5. Dupe has lost/Rascal has won.

⁹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 374.

¹⁰ Scott, “Master’s Praise,” 177.

¹¹ “The suggestion that the steward reduced the usurious component of the loan implies that the interest rate for the loan of oil was 100% (v. 6) and 25% for the wheat (v. 7). Derrett, citing Billerbeck, declares that the latter percentage corresponds to the ‘traditional rate of interest on a genuine loan of wheat.’ It does not. Numerous loan documents from Egypt indicate that the standard rate for wheat and barley was 50%” (Kloppenborg, “Dishonoured Master,” 483).

¹² Scott, “Master’s Praise,” 177. We will argue below that while the other arguments advanced against the readings of Fitzmyer and Derrett are persuasive, this one is not.

¹³ Loader, “Jesus and the Rogue,” 523.

Crossan does not regard 16:8a as part of the original parable, so he sees it as a trickster tale with steps 4 and 5 missing.

Scott disputes Crossan's reading on two grounds. First, his exclusion of 16:8a leaves the story without a proper ending. As Via stated in reply to Crossan: "Without 16:8a the parable has no express closure, denouement, or statement about whether the *actantiel* subject attained his object."¹⁴ Second, Scott claims that Crossan has allowed his perception of a formal model in the parable unduly to influence his interpretation. "Crossan has confused the demands of a formal model with the actual story. . . . A formal model . . . indicates how most stories of this type operate. But a chief characteristic of art is to vary or play upon the model."¹⁵ Mary Ann Beavis, who insists that the steward of the parable is a slave, adds that there are insufficient ancient literary parallels for Crossan's classification of the parable: "Examples of the motif of the slave as *picaro* in ancient literature have not been adduced by parable interpreters."¹⁶

Scott himself proposes a literary solution that seems at least plausible until the end. Scott (following Dan Via) argues that the parable portrays a steward who is unjustly accused by his master and who "gets even" by cheating his master in the end. The steward is a "successful rogue," and the reader can appreciate his immoral behavior because the master has been portrayed in villainous terms. As Via says, the reader can go on a moral holiday at the master's expense.

Where Scott has problems (as have so many before him) is in explaining why the master would commend the steward for getting even with him. Scott claims that the implicit referent for the parable is the kingdom of God, and he further suggests that there is a sense of justice normally implied in the symbol "kingdom." Hence, "when the master's praise and the steward's behavior clash with the justice implied in the kingdom (i.e. when story and kingdom expectations collide), the reader must reconsider what justice in the kingdom can mean."¹⁷ The reader has had "fun at the master's expense," but the master's final comment forces the reader to discover that "the price for going on a moral holiday was sanctioning a rogue's behavior."¹⁸ The reader is forced to reconsider the judgments that led them to side with the rogue, and (Scott argues) also then to reconsider the way justice operates in the world. In the normal world, "power and justice are coordinates." However, the parable "breaks loose the bond between power and justice and instead equates justice and vulnerabil-

¹⁴ Dan O. Via, "Parable and Example Story: A Literary-Structuralist Approach," *Semeia* 1 (1974) 124.

¹⁵ Scott, "Master's Praise," 178–79.

¹⁶ Mary Ann 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) 44.

¹⁷ Scott, "Master's Praise," 187.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

ity.”¹⁹ The conclusion the reader should draw is that “kingdom is for the vulnerable; for masters and stewards who do not get even.”²⁰

The difficulties with this interpretation should be evident from the fact that for none of his claims about kingdom, justice, and vulnerability can Scott cite any textual support. As Dave L. Mathewson points out, “there is nothing in the parable itself that suggests that justice is its main thrust.”²¹ Scott’s interpretation as far as 16:7 has a great deal of merit, but when he arrives at 16:8a he loses sight of the text and engages in some fanciful interpretation.

Eschatological Solutions

Perhaps the most common interpretation since Adolf Jülicher popularized it is that the steward does act dishonestly, but that he is commended for quick thinking and action in the face of a crisis. The steward’s prudent use of material possessions is to be imitated—so the traditional interpretation goes—by Jesus’ disciples in the face of the coming eschatological kingdom.²² However, several scholars have raised problems with this interpretation, and its popularity has clearly waned in recent decades. First, John Donahue correctly notes that if the steward does act dishonestly, then it makes no sense for him to hope that he will obtain future employment even from the beneficiaries of his dishonesty, since they will have reason to fear that he will cheat them as well.²³ Second, it seems unlikely that Jesus (or Luke) would want or need to resort to an example of a person who acts immorally to make a point about resolve or decisiveness in the face of the kingdom. Indeed, Kloppenborg points out that the steward acts contrary to Jesus’ own teachings. “The steward’s ‘prudence’ is manifest in the blatant attempt to save himself. To argue that Jesus encouraged in his listeners such crass self-interest is difficult to reconcile with other arguably authentic sayings as Luke 6,27–28.29.30; 14,26.27 where self-interests are to be set aside.”²⁴ That the parable’s audience “would be able or even inclined to distin-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Mathewson, “Parable of the Unjust Steward,” 31.

²² Among the more noteworthy of those scholars who subscribe to this interpretation are Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 182; C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961) 17; A. Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1901) 380; J. M. Creed, *The Gospel according to St. Luke* (London: Macmillan, 1930) 201; and I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 616.

²³ John Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 164.

²⁴ Kloppenborg, “Dishonoured Master,” 478. Jülicher’s claim that the parable counsels “not the wise use of wealth, but resolute use of the present as a precondition for a happy future” (Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* II [Tübingen: Mohr, 1910] 511, translation by John S. Kloppenborg in “Dishonoured Master,” 474 n. 1) escapes this criticism, but it presents other problems. How can Jesus (or Luke) expect the audience to ignore the steward’s immorality and see some

guish between the virtue of prudence, considered abstractly, and the fraud in which it is embedded, is most unlikely.”²⁵ Moreover, Kloppenborg astutely points out that “nothing in this parable evokes an apocalyptic situation. The crisis experienced by the steward is not precipitated by a returning master and the rendering of accounts hardly requires any allegorizing to be intelligible.”²⁶ Crossan had earlier noted that the structure of this parable does not lend itself to an apocalyptic interpretation.²⁷

Sociological Solutions

The most persuasive recent interpretation of the parable of the Unjust Steward comes from John S. Kloppenborg. Kloppenborg agrees with the claim of Bruce Malina (and others) that fundamental to the proper understanding of ancient Mediterranean society is an appreciation for the importance of honor and shame. The world of the New Testament is one in which “honor ultimately counted more than wealth.”²⁸ In the parable of the Unjust Steward, the master’s honor has been threatened by the fact that word has leaked out to the public that he has in his household a steward who is at the very least incompetent, and perhaps even criminal. The *paterfamilias* was expected to exert complete control over his household (wives, children, slaves), and any dishonorable action by a member of the household reflected badly on its master. “This means that it is not the *steward* who is on trial, but the *master*, and the court is the court of the opinion of the public and his peers.”²⁹ To save face and recover a measure of his honor, the master resolves immediately to dismiss the steward. “Thereby he acquits himself of the charge of the inability to control his inferiors and recovers some of the loss of face.”³⁰

In Kloppenborg’s view, this insight exposes the parable’s “central problematic,” and it is true that he has made a strong case that the parable is as much about the master’s honor as it is about the character of the steward. The rest of the pieces of the puzzle, however, do not fall neatly into place for Kloppenborg. Having set the stage properly for the story to proceed, Kloppenborg is not able to make any more sense of the rest of the parable than his predecessors. He begins to go astray—at least in our view—when he interprets the steward’s actions in 16:3–7 as “outright fraud” and understands his motives as strictly self-ish. He looks to Crossan for support for his view that this action is ironic: “The

abstract principle behind his actions? Moreover, as we explain below, there is no compelling reason to think of this parable in eschatological terms.

²⁵ Kloppenborg, “Dishonoured Master,” 479.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 478–79.

²⁷ John Dominic Crossan, “The Servant Parables of Jesus,” *Semeia* 1 (1974) 46.

²⁸ Kloppenborg, “Dishonoured Master,” 488.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 489.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

cleverness of the steward consisted not only in solving his problem but in solving it by means of the very reason (low profits) that had created it in the first place.³¹ We will argue below that such an interpretation makes the steward's actions more than ironic, it makes them nonsensical. Moreover, Kloppenborg does not even attempt to make sense of the fact that the master "commends" the steward for having defrauded him. He is satisfied to claim that although the steward does not "act in the best interests of his employer" and his actions "reflect badly upon the master's competence and upon his honour," the master expected this to happen and hence sees the steward's actions as "prudent, almost predictable."³² Once again, however, Kloppenborg fails to show how the master's reaction in 16:8a makes sense, since the master does more than anticipate the steward's actions—he commends him for them. When the master commends the steward for acting prudently, it strains credibility to interpret this as saying that the master is commending the steward for acting so wisely in his own self-interest, even though it directly conflicts with the interests of the master himself.

It is our view that Kloppenborg missed a golden opportunity. Having argued that the parable is really about the master's honor, Kloppenborg fails to show how the master's honor (and a servant's obligation to preserve it) remain the central focus of the parable even after 16:1–2. We will argue below that Kloppenborg's central insight—combined with bits of support from other scholars—opens the door for an interpretation that allows one to understand perfectly the steward's actions in 16:3–7 as those of an employee who knows that his future depends on having a reputation as one who does not dishonor his master, and the master's response in 16:8a as that of a *paterfamilias* who appreciates having his honor restored by a demonstration of loyalty on the part of a previously disgraced employee.

II. A New Reading

The parable begins as follows: "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property." Scott correctly notes that the terms "rich man" and "manager" would have raised expectations on the part of the ancient reader about the nature of these characters and the probable course of the story. Indeed, there must be some reason for identifying the man as "rich," since this is already implied by his employment of a manager. The reason is probably to increase the hearer's³³

³¹ Kloppenborg, "Dishonoured Master," 490; citing Crossan, *In Parables*, 110.

³² Kloppenborg, "Dishonoured Master," 492.

³³ That fact that we use the term "hearer" is not meant to suggest that we are presuming the original, oral presentation of the parable as the key to its interpretation nor that we plan to isolate the parable from its Gospel context and construct a hypothetical context in the ministry of Jesus. As many studies have pointed out, most of those who experienced the parable as part of the Gospel of

antipathy toward this character. In most such stories the rich man is cast in the role of the villain.³⁴ Jeremias claims that “the *πλοῦσιος* is probably to be regarded as the owner of a large estate who lives abroad and is represented by a steward.”³⁵ Feelings among the peasant classes always ran high against absentee landlords. Martin Hengel argues that the pervasiveness of absentee landlords drew the people to the side of the Zealots.³⁶ The majority of people who heard the parable were peasants, slaves, or laborers³⁷ (an extrapolation from the sheer number of people in these groups), so naturally they would empathize with the manager rather than the rich man. One must also note the idea of “limited good” prevalent in peasant societies. It was believed that wealth, honor, status, love, and so on—the good things in life—existed in limited quantities. Thus a rich man is so at the expense of others.³⁸

The identity of the “steward” (*οἰκονόμος*) and the associations that this term brings are somewhat more difficult to determine. Mary Ann Beavis claims that “a Greco-Roman reader would probably assume that the *οἰκονόμος* of the parable was a slave.”³⁹ She notes Bailey’s argument that the steward is not a slave because he is dismissed rather than sold.⁴⁰ She maintains, however, that this is not conclusive, citing W. O. E. Oesterley to the effect that slaves were

Luke would still have “heard” it rather than reading it themselves. Hence, the interpretation here reads Luke 16:1–8a as a parable of the Gospel and not as a parable of Jesus. The term “hearer” is intended to signal that we are attempting to understand the parable as an ancient person would have, and attempting to utilize the knowledge that the story presumes such a person would have.

³⁴ Scott notes that “a stereotyped animosity between masters and servants is common in Jesus’ parables” (“Master’s Praise,” 180), citing the parables of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1–16) and the Wicked Husbandmen (Mark 12:1–9). DeSilva agrees: “The rich were stereotypically despots, treating their poorer dependents with an arbitrariness consummate with their power. A lexical study of Luke’s gospel affirms this hypothesis. *Ploustios* occurs in 6:24; 12:16; 14:12; 16:19,21,22; 18:23,25; 19:2; and 21:1. All those depicted as rich in the text are in one form or another excluded from the redeemed community or disapproved, with the single exception of Zaccheus . . .” (“Parable of the Steward in its Lucan Context,” 257).

³⁵ Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 181.

³⁶ Martin Hengel, *Die Zeloten* (Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Spätjudentums und Urchristentums 1; Leiden: Brill, 1961) 89.

³⁷ This also should not be taken as a signal that we are presuming a setting in the context of the ministry of Jesus. The social location of most of the “hearers” of the gospel would not have been significantly different in terms of power, privilege, and prestige than the original hearers of Jesus’ words (if indeed he told some version of this parable). Although the Gospel of Luke would have likely been heard by a somewhat more urban and affluent audience than a parable of Jesus, it remains the case that rural peasants would have made up a significant portion of the audience for the Christian message, and that the majority of its urban audience would have been poor people (day laborers, slaves, etc.) who would have sympathized with the steward in much the same way as rural peasants, since they too depended on the patronage of others.

³⁸ G. Foster, “Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good,” *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965) 293–315.

³⁹ Beavis, “Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 45.

⁴⁰ See Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 92.

sometimes dismissed rather than sold and that dismissal could actually be seen as the worse punishment. For a slave, dismissal “meant that he was cast out into the world, without home, without friends, without occupation, and in grave danger of dying of starvation.”⁴¹ It is also possible, Beavis notes, that the steward is not being dismissed at all, but demoted from a position of responsibility to the status of a common drudge. “The use of the verb *σκάπτειν* (‘to dig,’ v. 3) suggests that the slave is in danger of being sent off to hard labor in the quarries, a form of imprisonment—the worst fate imaginable for a slave.”⁴² The only alternative to such a demotion would be to run away and become a beggar, not an attractive option at all.⁴³

Against Beavis’s claim that the steward is a slave one could argue that the steward has not been informed by the master that he is to be dismissed or demoted, nor is there any indication that he has made up his mind to run away to avoid such punishments, and yet the steward *assumes* that he will have the freedom to seek employment or at least “room and board” in other households (v. 4). Although Beavis bases her entire interpretation on the claim that the steward is a slave, for the interpretation to follow it is not a decisive factor. In either case the steward’s plight elicits the sympathy of the reader. Either he is a slave who is to be dismissed, demoted to the quarries, and/or forced to run away and beg, or he is a free man who is losing his position in a way that will make it unlikely that he will be able to get another. As we will discuss shortly, unless the steward can change his situation somehow, the circumstances surrounding his dismissal will probably prevent him from finding future employment as a steward, since he will have acquired a reputation for dishonoring his master.

Whether or not the endangered steward is a sympathetic figure, however, depends to a large extent on whether the hearer sees his impending fate as just or unjust. The steward is accused of “squandering” (*διασκορπίζω*) his master’s property. There are three crucial literary questions raised here. First, is the audience likely to see this as a fair or an unfair accusation, given the information that they are provided in the story? Second, what kind of activity is implied by the verb *διασκορπίζω*, and how does this affect the audience’s evaluation of the steward’s character? Third, what is at stake for the rich man in the fact that his steward is “squandering” his property, and why does he find it necessary to dismiss him because of this?

The issue of the fairness of the rich man’s indictment of his steward is a

⁴¹ W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parallels in the Light of their Jewish Background* (London: SPCK, 1936) 194–95.

⁴² Beavis, “Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 49. She elaborates: “In Plautus’s *Captivi*, Tynardus, newly freed from wrongful consignment to the stone-pits, complains: ‘I’ve often seen pictures of the tortures of the damned in hell; but there’s no hell to equal the place where I’ve been, in those quarries. Down there they make a man work till he’s incapable of feeling tired any more.’”

⁴³ On this point, see Beavis, “Slavery as an Interpretive Context,” 49–50.

thorny one. Most interpreters hold that the steward is in fact guilty of the crime of which he is accused. Fitzmyer, for example, argues that the failure of the steward to defend himself proves his guilt.⁴⁴ Moreover, the narrator characterizes the steward as ἀδικίας (“unjust”) at the end of the story: “And his master commended the *dishonest* manager because he had acted shrewdly” (NRSV 16:8, emphasis added).

Beavis and Scott argue, however, that the steward is accused unjustly. First, the normal meaning of διαβάλλω in v. 1 is “to accuse falsely, slander, calumniate.”⁴⁵ The verb is related to διάβολος (“devil,” “accuser,” or even “false accuser,” as in 2 Tim 3:3, 12, or Titus 2:3). Walter Bauer says that it signifies to “bring charges with hostile intent.” Second, the rich man seems to have made up his mind before the facts are in. His accusation of the steward is based on hearsay; he requests an “accounting” of the steward’s management, but he has already resolved to dismiss him before he even sees it (v. 2). Third, the fact that the steward does not defend himself does not necessarily signal his guilt. Indeed, the fact that the master has resolved to dismiss his steward even before he has a chance to defend himself is perhaps a signal that a defense would be useless and a further sign of the master’s injustice. Finally, Beavis notes that in other servant parables and Greco-Roman slave stories, wrongful dismissal is a common motif. Still, none of the commentators who argue that the steward is unjustly accused has an answer for the fact that the steward is characterized as ἀδικίας in v. 8a.

Another issue on which there is little consensus is the question of the nature of the steward’s alleged offense. He is accused of “squandering” (διασκορπίζων) his master’s property. What exactly does this mean? Various theories have been proposed in this regard. We noted above Jeremias’s famous interpretation that the steward is engaged in usury, and the problems subsequent interpreters have had with this view. Most recent scholars (e.g., Crossan and Kloppenborg) adhere to one form or another of the theory that the steward has not brought a sufficient return or profit on the assets with which the master has entrusted him. However, the idea that the steward’s offense is “low profits” is undercut by two facts. First, if the master is angry with his steward for bringing an insufficient return on his investments, then it makes no sense whatsoever for the master to commend the steward in 16:8a for having slashed profits even further when he forgives sizable portions of the debts owed in 16:5–7. Second, διασκορπίζω is used in an adjacent text, and its meaning there helps illuminate its sense here. In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), the younger son also “squanders” (διεσκόρπισεν) his inheritance in loose liv-

⁴⁴ Fitzmyer also argues that the steward’s “subsequent conduct would be illogical if he had not been guilty” (“Dishonest Manager,” 31 n. 19).

⁴⁵ *Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (abridged ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, impression of 1977) 159.

ing. Here there is no question of usury or insufficient return on one's investments. It is clear that the younger son uses his inheritance money for selfish and immoral activities. Our view is that the steward of 16:1–8a probably is engaged in similar types of behavior. His crime might best be described as misappropriation of funds, much as a modern executive with a budget at his/her discretion might illicitly spend some of these funds on personal items.⁴⁶

Finally, the question of what is at stake for the master in a situation in which he is told by others that his steward is squandering his property is not as obvious as it might first appear. Most modern people simply assume that the owner is upset (at least primarily) by the decrease in the value of his assets, caused either by the failure of the steward to bring a sufficiently high return on his investments or by the steward's misappropriation of the master's funds for personal gain. However, a host of scholars have noted in recent years that in both the Jewish and Greco-Roman societies of New Testament times, honor was just as important as wealth—if not more so—to a man's social status, and honor for a male head of household (such as the "rich man" of 16:1) was tied together with power, understood in the ancient world as "the ability to exercise control over the behavior of others."⁴⁷

The fact that ancient audiences would have thought that honor was at stake if it was known that the master could not control his servants can be documented in a number of ancient sources.⁴⁸ In Dio Cassius's Roman history, for example, Marcenes advises Augustine that those in his household (slaves and freedmen) "should not . . . acquire excessive power, but should all be rigorously kept under discipline, so that you shall never be brought into discredit by them. For everything they do, whether good or ill, will be set to your account, and you will yourself be considered by the world to be of a character akin to the conduct which you do not object to in them" (Dio Cassius 52.37.5–6).⁴⁹ It was a com-

⁴⁶ This might account for the fact that the master dismisses the steward even before he receives the accounting of the man's stewardship. If the steward is accused of usury or a poor return on the master's investments, then presumably he could clear himself by showing the books to the master. However, if the master has heard that his steward has been, for example, gambling large amounts of money at the race track, or has been seen with high-priced prostitutes, then he has no need to wait for an accounting of the man's stewardship. The master can reasonably surmise that the steward has been using his employer's funds for selfish and immoral purposes.

⁴⁷ John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, eds., *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning: A Handbook* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1993) 139 (emphasis added).

⁴⁸ Evidence for this in primary sources is somewhat scattered, because as Gardner and Wiedemann note in their compilation of ancient sources on the subject, there are "few accounts telling the father of a private household how he ought to behave" (Jane F. Gardner and Thomas Wiedemann, *The Roman Household: A Sourcebook* [London: Routledge, 1991] 11). However, the evidence that does exist paints a fairly clear picture.

⁴⁹ Trans. Ernest Cary in *Dio's Roman History* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917) 177.

mon bit of wisdom in antiquity that superiors were judged by the behavior of their subordinates. In Xenophon's dialogue on being a householder, for example, Socrates suggests that a husband will be judged by the behavior of his wife, in the same way that "when a sheep is ailing, we generally blame the shepherd, and when a horse is vicious, we generally find fault with his rider" (*Oikonomikos* 3.11).⁵⁰ Indeed, it was even worse for the master's honor when the errant servant was a steward with monetary responsibilities. Seneca notes that "a man who entrusts his patrimony to someone whom a court has found guilty of business mismanagement will be considered a bad head of household [*malus paterfamilias*]" (*On Benefits* 4.27.5).⁵¹ It was not only a matter of controlling employees; it was also about being seen as an acute and thorough businessman. Having a steward who "squandered" his property would make the master "look like a fool in front of his peers."⁵²

The embarrassment thought to be caused to a master by the misbehavior of his slaves and servants is evident in a number of stories from antiquity where the punishment for such behavior clearly outweighs the crime and suggests that an affront to the master's honor has taken place. Claudius would force his subordinates into gladiatorial combat (or combat with wild beasts) for "trivial and hasty reasons" if any part of a public "show" sponsored by Claudius did not work well and Claudius's name were brought into disrepute (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 5.34). Once Augustus barely rescued a slave who was sentenced by his master to be ripped apart by man-eating fish (lampreys) for the great crime of breaking a crystal goblet at a banquet at which the emperor was present (see Dio Cassius 54.23; Seneca, *Dialogue* 5: *On Anger* 3.40). Along the same line, in Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira are killed for not contributing all of the proceeds of the sale of their property to the church. Although this hardly seems like a death-penalty offense, Peter suggests that their behavior is an affront to God's honor:⁵³ "How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us, but to God!" (Acts 5:4, NRSV). How much more of an affront would it be if a steward was found to be embezzling his master's

⁵⁰ Along the same line, Gardner and Wiedemann quote the *Rule of St. Benedict* to the effect that "the abbot must know that any lack of goodness which the *paterfamilias* finds in his flock is accounted the shepherd's fault." Although this source is much later and not applied directly to private households, "the Christian monastic communities of late antiquity were in essence households whose members inevitably shared many of the assumptions of secular society: and the advice which St Benedict gave to 'abbots' (a title derived from the Hebrew word for 'father') would not have caused surprise centuries earlier" (*Roman Household*, 11).

⁵¹ Trans. Jane Gardner and Thomas Wiedemann (*Roman Household*, 63).

⁵² Kloppenborg, "Dishonoured Master," 488.

⁵³ On the issue of God's honor and the ways in which it is possible to dishonor God, see Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (ed. Jerome H. Neyrey; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 59–60.

funds and using them for selfish and immoral purposes? How much more embarrassment would this cause, since it is clear that these misdeeds have become public knowledge (which is clear from the fact that the charges were brought to the master by others)? Hence the motive that ancient audiences would attribute to the master for his decision to fire the steward was just as likely to be to save his (the master's) honor as it was to be rid of a poor manager.

Having been dishonored and defrauded by his steward's misappropriation of his funds, the master resolves to dismiss the servant and commands him to turn in an account of his stewardship. At this point, all interpreters agree, the steward faces a crisis. "Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes'" (Luke 16:3–4, NRSV). Scott finds the steward's attitude here quite surprising, since he sees the story thus far as pitting a villainous rich man against an innocent steward. Now the steward appears to be not so innocent after all: "By admitting he lacks the strength to dig and is ashamed to beg, he distances himself from the reader—in his stewardship he has taken on the airs of the rich, forcing a reader to reflect upon the estimation of the steward."⁵⁴ Our view, however, is that the audience continues to identify with the steward even here. The steward's words in 16:4 do not necessarily mean that the steward is lazy or that he thinks he is too good to do the work of common peasants. Rather, they are a sober assessment of what he is and is not capable of doing. The focus of the steward's soliloquy is "his position." Since he is losing his position, he wonders what he will do in the future for employment. The purpose of including this speech is to help the hearer understand the steward's subsequent actions. He feels that he must do something that will allow him to keep his position as a steward—either with his present master or with another—since *he cannot do anything else*.⁵⁵

An ancient person would understand the desperation of the steward's predicament here. He is being dismissed because he dishonored his master. This would also mean that no other wealthy man would want to hire him as a steward, since they would fear that he would bring the same kind of shame upon their households and their personal reputations. The steward must do something to prove that he is not the kind of manager who dishonors his master. He develops a brilliant solution: "So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied,

⁵⁴ Scott, "Master's Praise," 183.

⁵⁵ Kloppenborg agrees that the steward's statement in 16:3 "evokes sympathy rather than contempt" ("Dishonoured Master," 491). Donahue concurs as well, arguing that the audience would not expect a person of the steward's social status to dig or beg (*Gospel in Parable*, 164).

‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, “Take your bill and make it eighty” (Luke 16:5–7, NRSV). The steward forgives part of the debt owed by each of his master’s debtors. But how can the audience make sense of the fact that this character seems to think this is going to help him keep his position (or acquire a new position) as a steward?

Derrett’s comments on the Jewish law of agency are relevant here. According to Derrett, the three great maxims of the Jewish law of agency are as follows:

1. A man’s agent is like himself.
2. There is no agency for wrongdoing.
3. It is presumed that an agent executes his commission.⁵⁶

Derrett’s interpretation focuses a great deal of attention on the second maxim. Our interpretation focuses on the first and third. The behavior of agents, in this case the behavior of the steward, directly reflects the employer or master. For good or ill, it is the master who is judged by the dealings of his agent, not the agent himself. This is precisely why the master wished to dismiss the steward in the first place, because a manager’s misappropriation of funds would reflect badly upon his master. Most commentators agree that whatever was loaned to the master’s debtors was loaned at interest, and that the interest was probably exorbitant.⁵⁷ We are in agreement with those scholars who have argued that the amount of the debt forgiven by the steward probably represented all or part of the interest charge (although the truth of this claim is not essential to the validity of our interpretation), rather than the steward’s own commission. Whether the steward is forgiving all or part of the interest, or even part of the principal, the main point is that the forgiveness of this debt will reflect well upon the master. The steward’s actions make his master appear generous, charitable, and law-abiding. The debtors, and anyone in the community who hears about this, will presume that this act of charity was done at the request of the master, since “it is presumed that an agent executes his commission.”

It is in this light that the brilliance of the steward’s plan emerges. He indicated in 16:4 that he wished to act in such a way that “people may welcome me into their homes.” Our view is that this must mean that he wants to be welcomed into people’s homes *as a steward*. We think it unlikely that the steward

⁵⁶ See Derrett, “Fresh Light,” 201.

⁵⁷ Here we will not enter into the debate as to whether this constitutes usury, whether this was seen as immoral and, if so, by whom, or whether the master is or is not aware of the steward’s usury. In our interpretation, these questions are not ultimately relevant. Moreover, the point here would not change if Kloppenborg and Bailey are right and the parable envisions not the situation of a loan but a situation in which tenants have rented a plot of land and owe their landlord a certain amount when the harvest is done. These “rents” were still seen as crushingly high, and anyone who was seen as responsible for lowering them would have been cheered.

could be thinking that forgiving these debts would oblige these people to support him gratis forever. The amounts mentioned in the parable (fifty jugs of olive oil, twenty containers of wheat) are large,⁵⁸ but not so large that one would think that the debtors would be grateful enough to provide him with a living indefinitely.⁵⁹ Moreover, why would the debtors want to hire or harbor a person who had proven himself dishonest and untrustworthy in his previous position? To have any hope of future employment as a manager, the steward needs to salvage his reputation as a good, loyal steward, and the only way he can do this is to take good care of his master, to restore his master's honor. His actions in 16:5-7 are designed to do just this.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Malina and Rohrbaugh admit that such measures are "difficult to pin down," but they suggest that they are probably equivalent to 900 gallons of oil and 150 bushels of wheat. The amount of the debt forgiven "is in both cases approximately 500 denarii" (*Social-Science Commentary*, 375).

⁵⁹ Kloppenborg disagrees: "The act of reducing the size of debts is an act of benefaction. In the moral and political economy of antiquity, this act imposed obligations on the recipients; he had in effect become a patron and they his clients. Under these circumstances, the expectation that he might be received into their households was a reasonable one" ("Dishonoured Master," 491). However, Kloppenborg never resolves the difficulty involved in assuming that anyone—even one who had been given part of the ill-gotten gains—would want to hire a servant who is known for squandering his master's property and then defrauding his master in an attempt to win friends for himself. Kloppenborg admits (p. 491 n. 58) that the steward is looking not for lodging but for employment in the households of these debtors; if he does in fact defraud his master (as Kloppenborg claims), all he is doing is confirming the rumor that he is not fit to be a steward. He is hardly increasing his chances for future employment. Moreover, as Donahue points out, it is unlikely that the beneficiaries of the steward's largesse would "jeopardize future relationships with the rich man in 16:1 on whom they are in their own way economically dependent" by hiring the steward (*Gospel in Parable*, 164).

⁶⁰ It is this aspect of the interpretation of the parable in this essay that marks it as "relatively novel." Some support can be found in the scholarly literature for most of the other elements of this reading, although no previous interpretation has combined them in quite this way. We have already noted the many points of agreement between the interpretation of 16:1-2 offered here and that found in Kloppenborg's 1989 article. There is also precedent for our view of 16:8a (offered in full below) in the work of Bailey and Malina and Rohrbaugh. In his 1976 book *Poet and Peasant*, Bailey writes that when the steward forgives the debts and then presents an accounting of his stewardship to the master in 16:8 that includes these acts of benefaction, the master faces a dilemma (we would say that the reader attempting to make sense of the story will imagine that the master faces a dilemma). "The master knows full well that in the local village there has already started a great round of celebration in praise of him, the master, as the most noble and most generous man that ever rented land in their district" (p. 101). The master has two choices. First, he can declare the steward's actions null and void, thus invoking the villagers' anger and acquiring for himself a reputation for stinginess. Second, he can keep silent and "accept the praise that is even now being showered on him." He chooses the latter path, honor over money, because "to be generous is a primary quality of a nobleman in the East" (p. 102). Bailey's insight has not gathered wide support (although it must be mentioned that Malina and Rohrbaugh's interpretation of 16:8 is almost identical to Bailey's, although they do not cite him), and indeed most articles and books written after his 1976 book fail to even mention him. This is perhaps partly attributable to oversight on the part of scholars, and partly attributable to the fact that this fine bit of insight is embedded in an interpretation that is

Hence, when the steward decides to forgive a portion of the amount owed by his master's debtors, he is not trying to "get even" or to defraud his master to win favor for himself; he is trying desperately to get out of trouble any way that he can. While this seems at odds with appearances, and certainly with the standard scholarly interpretations of the parable, it squares with what we know about human behavior. The first impulse for many people when they discover that they are in deep trouble is to try to "make up" for the misdeed and thereby get themselves out of trouble. Audiences—ancient and modern—who are left by a story to determine characters' motives or interior thoughts for themselves are likely to attribute to them motives that (1) allow the story to make sense and (2) are similar to their own motives in similar circumstances, or at least understandable to them.

The parable concludes with the master's judgment in 16:8a: "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." While most interpreters see this statement as either shocking or incomprehensible, our view of the preceding events leads us to think that this development is quite logical and even expected.⁶¹ The logic here is well stated by Malina and Rohrbaugh (although the point seems to have originated with Bailey):⁶²

Having discovered the mercy of the landowner in not putting him in prison or demanding repayment, the manager depends on a similar reaction in the

highly complex and not persuasive in all of its parts. In particular, crucial to Bailey's interpretation is the observation that the steward was not thrown into jail right away by the master. Several scholars have disputed this claim (Beavis, for example, argues that the steward may be faced with a lifetime in the quarries, which she describes as a horrible fate and "a form of imprisonment") or argued that Bailey places too much importance on such a minor detail (Loader makes this argument in "Jesus and the Rogue," 524–25). To Bailey, however, this shows a predisposition to generosity on the part of the master, which the steward then capitalizes upon. But even if the master is forgoing the penalty of imprisonment, it is not necessarily a sign of generosity. Kloppenborg argues that the master's main concern is his honor and reputation, and the fact that he does not take his steward to court is likely an effort to avoid prolonging the shame associated with having such an unruly and incompetent employee. Although Bailey's interpretation bears some similarity to ours on this one point, there are more differences than similarities. In addition to the (implicit or explicit) criticisms cited by Beavis, Loader, and Kloppenborg—with which we agree—there are numerous other features that separate Bailey's interpretation from our own, especially the fact that the steward's motives in forgiving the debts have primarily to do with restoring his master's honor and his own reputation as a good, loyal steward so that he could hope for future employment as a manager. Nonetheless, there is in Bailey a hint of a precedent for the interpretation offered here.

⁶¹ Some interpreters argue that any interpretation that tames the "shocking" ending of the parable must be invalid, since a surprising ending is an essential feature of the parable form as used by Jesus. Our view is that these scholars overstate the matter considerably. Some of Jesus' parables have a surprising plot twist (most notably the Good Samaritan), but many do not. Indeed, the attempt to find a surprising plot twist in every parable has led to some strange and forced interpretations.

⁶² See n. 60 above.

scheme he cooks up. It is a scheme that places the landowner in a peculiar bind. If he retracts the actions of the manager, he risks serious alienation in the village, where they would have already been celebrating his astonishing generosity. If he allows the reductions to stand, he will be praised far and wide (as will the manager for having “arranged” them) as a noble and generous man. It is the latter reaction on which the manager counts.⁶³

Several additional points must be made in this regard. First, the use of ἀδικίας in v. 8a does not necessarily mean that the steward has acted unjustly in forgiving the master’s debtors a portion of what they owe. As Derrett points out, many scholars have “rightly observed that the unrighteousness or untrustworthiness of the Unjust Steward was his characteristic *before* the last dealings with the Debtors. The case is paralleled by that of the Unjust Judge, Luke xviii. 6, whose act upon which Jesus places emphasis was in fact as righteous as was our steward’s.”⁶⁴

Second, the use of the verb ἐπαινέω is instructive. While it is true that it is presumed that an agent executes his commission, it is also true that a master can then either approve or disapprove of what an agent has done on his behalf. The verb here is best translated as “approve of,”⁶⁵ and its use makes it clear that the master is aware of what the steward has done and approves of the action precisely because it makes him look good. While some modern people might see it as unbelievable that a rich man would praise an employee for giving away his money, almost every scholar who employs the honor-shame paradigm would dispute this. Many sociologically oriented critics have pointed to the frequency with which the rich engaged in benefactions and the spectacular amounts often involved as proof of their claim that honor is more important than money.⁶⁶ The fact that the master is in a position to loan the large amounts mentioned in the parable—a hundred jugs of oil and a hundred containers of wheat—indicates that he is extremely rich and can afford to be generous.⁶⁷

Third, the translation of φρονίμως is not as difficult as some have suggested. As Scott points out, φρονίμως is a normal adjective “describing a steward’s expected activity (Luke 12,42), *loyalty* and shrewdness in his master’s

⁶³ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary*, 375.

⁶⁴ Derrett, “Fresh Light,” 204 n. 1. Derrett also cites L. Fonck, *Die Parabeln des Herrn im Evangelium* (Innsbruck: F. Rauch, 1909) in support of this position.

⁶⁵ See BAG, 281; and Liddell and Scott, *Greek English Lexicon*, 240, for support for this translation.

⁶⁶ See Kloppenborg, “Dishonoured Master,” 488; and Frederick Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1982).

⁶⁷ See Kloppenborg, “Dishonoured Master,” 482; and Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 93, on this point. The amount of the “loans” indicates that the master is dealing with large-scale renters or wholesale merchants, not with smallholders. This suggests that the master is on the very high end of the social and economic class scale.

behalf.”⁶⁸ The master commends the steward because he knows how well the manager’s recent actions will reflect on him. The audience is aware of the steward’s selfish motive, but the master is either unaware of this fact or unconcerned about it. Perhaps he sees that even though the steward may have acted in his own self-interest, he also has remained loyal to his master. The steward is clever enough to have found a way to benefit both himself and his master. Indeed, it would have been impossible for him to benefit himself—at least in the sense of keeping his job as steward or acquiring another position elsewhere—without also benefitting his master.

III. The Parable in its Lukan Context

While it is not our main goal in this essay to explore the possible theological implications of our reading, or the relation of this parable to its surrounding literary context, some comments can be offered. It is clear that telling a story about the redemption of a sinner is hardly out of character for Luke’s Jesus. In fact, this understanding of the parable would allow it to fit perfectly with the immediately preceding parable in Luke 15, the parable of the Prodigal Son. Most commentators see the Prodigal Son as the third in a trio of parables in Luke 15, following the Lost Sheep (15:4–7) and the Lost Coin (15:8–10). However, the similarities between the Prodigal Son and the preceding parables have been overstated, and the similarities between the Unjust Steward and the Prodigal Son underappreciated. Rather than a trio of parables in Luke 15, followed by an unrelated parable in Luke 16:1–8, there is in this section a pair of doublets: the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin form the first pair, and the Prodigal Son and the Unjust Steward form the second pair.

This claim has been made previously by Michael Austin, and it is useful to review his arguments here, since they have not received the attention they deserve in Lukan scholarship.⁶⁹ Austin begins by pointing out the weaknesses in the theory that “chapter 15 forms one self-contained and artistically constructed unit on a single theme.”⁷⁰ Both the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin begin with a question (“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” and “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?”). The Prodigal Son, however, does not begin with a sim-

⁶⁸ Scott, “Master’s Praise,” 184 n. 41 (emphasis added). While “loyalty” is not ordinarily connoted by φρονίμως, Scott’s intuition in this case is supported by a wealth of evidence from ancient sources, all of which list loyalty as the paramount virtue of a slave or servant (at least from the point of view of the head of the household). See, e.g., Xenophon, *Oikonomikos* 12.1–8.

⁶⁹ Michael R. Austin, “The Hypocritical Son,” *EvQ* 57 (1985) 307–15.

⁷⁰ Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 597.

ilar question. "Jesus does *not* say, 'Or what father, having two sons, if one leaves home and falls into bad company, does not leave the other at home and go after his boy until he finds him?'"⁷¹ Of course, this would not be appropriate in the parable of the Prodigal Son, because the father in that story does not take the initiative to find and rescue his lost son as does the owner of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Austin also notes that the first two parables in Luke 15 conclude with a similar refrain, one that is not found at the end of the Prodigal Son. Furthermore, there is a break between the Lost Coin and the Prodigal Son, signaled by the presence of εἶπεν δέ ("and he said").⁷² Finally, Austin points out that the common labeling of the parable in Luke 15:11–32 as the parable of the "Lost Son" (so that it completes the pattern of "Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Son") is accurate only if one ignores the second half of the parable about the father and the resentful older son.

Austin then advances a series of arguments in favor of seeing the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Unjust Steward as a pair. First, both stories begin with a character "squandering" property that properly belongs to another.⁷³ Second, in each story a turning point is reached when the protagonist has a moment of self-awareness. In the Prodigal Son, the younger son "came to himself and said . . ." (15:17) and in the Unjust Steward the servant "said to himself . . ." (16:3).⁷⁴ Third, each protagonist "poses to himself a crucial question and each lays down a course of action which he then carried out." Austin demonstrates the similarities in this respect with the following set of parallel columns:

Lk. 15:17ff (RSV)

17 But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish with hunger!

18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have

Lk. 16:3ff (RSV)

3 And the steward said to himself, "What shall I do since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.

4 I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their

⁷¹ Austin, "Hypocritical Son," 308.

⁷² "[T]he first words of 15:11 'And he said' [*eipen de*] indicate a break from what precedes" (Austin, "Hypocritical Son," 309).

⁷³ "In both stories there has been reckless waste by one man of another man's property: the younger son of his father's wealth (his 'living,' 15:12) and the servant of the rich man's wealth (his 'goods,' 16:1). It is very instructive that only twice in the N.T. is the verb *diaskorpizein* ('to scatter' or 'to disperse') used metaphorically in the sense of 'to squander' or 'to waste': once in the parable of *The Prodigal Son* (Lk. 15:13) and once in the parable of *The Unjust Steward* (Lk. 16:1). One might say that we have here two stories about prodigality—*The Prodigal Son* and *The Prodigal Servant*" (Austin, "Hypocritical Son," 311).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

sinned against heaven and before you; houses when I am put out of the
 19 I am no longer worthy to be called stewardship.”
 your son; treat me as one of your hired
 servants.”

20 And he arose and came to his
 father And the son said

5 So, summoning his master’s debtors,
 one by one, he said⁷⁵

Austin finds it interesting that both the son and the servant act from motives of self-interest, although he concurs with the judgment noted above that this does not preclude either of them from having other motives.⁷⁶ Finally, he points out that in each story the “prodigal” is received back into fellowship, and in neither case is this acceptance dependent on the contrition of the sinner.⁷⁷ He concludes:

That a similar moment of self-awareness following an identical action should be described in such similar ways within an almost identical grammatical and syntactical construction in parables which stand together and which occur in only one Gospel cannot possibly be explained as a chance occurrence, and very strongly suggests that we should view these two parables as a pair and interpret them accordingly. We should read them together and allow them to resonate together.⁷⁸

The reading we have proposed supports Austin’s thesis that the primary interpretive context for the parable of the Unjust Steward is the immediately preceding parable. We might add that if we allow the two parables to “resonate together” then there is further reason to believe that (1) the steward’s actions in vv. 4–7 are not immoral or criminal (there is certainly no suggestion of this in the parable of the Prodigal Son) and (2) the master’s approval of the steward is no more irrational or incomprehensible than are the father’s forgiveness and acceptance of his son. It is not the case for either the prodigal son or the steward that their acceptance or forgiveness is completely unmerited. Although the father has not heard the prodigal son’s repentance speech, the son *has* returned

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 311–12.

⁷⁶ “Of course no man’s self-interest is all-consuming any more than any man’s change of heart is totally self-less. The Prodigal Son returns to his father for a mix of reasons. No doubt he *was* penitent, but no doubt also he knew where his best material interests lay” (Austin, “Hypocritical Son,” 311–12). We noted above our view that the steward in Luke 16:1–8a also has a variety of likely motives for his actions in vv. 4–7.

⁷⁷ “The father in the first story welcomes his son back because his son is *there* and not on the basis of his son’s prior repentance (the welcome—the forgiveness—precedes the repentance, Lk. 15:20–21). The rich man welcomes his servant back because of the servant’s prudence, and certainly not because he has expressed any sorrow for his action. Father and rich man are equally prodigal, the one with compassion, the other with praise” (Austin, “Hypocritical Son,” 313).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 312.

home. In the same way the master does not need a statement of repentance or an apology from the steward. The fact that he has acted to restore his master's honor is sufficient. What we really have in each story is a character who has acted immorally and who then tries to make up for the wrong. In both stories the "prodigals" are met more than halfway by the parties they initially offended. If the different characters represent humans (the two sons, the steward) and God (the father, the master)—as is often supposed—then the theological implications of the two stories are rather clear.

The question of how 16:1–8a fits with what follows in 16:8b–15 is more difficult. The various comments in 16:8b–15 do not seem to cohere perfectly either with the preceding parable(s) or with each other, and it seems that Luke's skill as an editor and storyteller is not as evident here as it is elsewhere in the Gospel. With a different understanding of the parable, however, the following verses are not as problematic as some commentators have suggested. Luke 16:8b–9 clearly shows Jesus urging his listeners to follow the example of the prudent steward, who has taken "dishonest wealth" or "ill-gotten gains" (the interest on loans offered by a very rich man) and used it shrewdly—restoring his reputation, earning his master a reputation for nobility and generosity, and (coincidentally, perhaps, but no less welcome) bringing relief to his master's debtors. It is indeed a shrewd use of wealth where everyone wins, and Luke has no problem showing Jesus enjoining his followers to be so clever.

Verses 10–12 seem to show Luke's Jesus anticipating an objection to his previous line of argument: Why is he using an example like this at all? Why would he commend anyone who had anything to do with "ill-gotten gains," whether they had finally used them shrewdly or not? Jesus' answer is that one's use of dishonest wealth (*μαμωνᾶς τῆς ἀδικίας*) is a kind of "test case" that reveals how one would handle "real" things (*τὸ ἀληθινόν*). Only those who—like the steward in 16:1–8a—have proven themselves trustworthy and reliable (*πιστός*) in lesser matters will be entrusted with things of greater significance. Jesus suggests here that his followers should not ignore or separate themselves from the "messy" things of this world in favor of more pure and lofty pursuits. On the contrary, it is precisely in how we handle the difficult and morally ambiguous situations presented to us in real life that we reveal our true character, just as the true character of the steward is revealed by the crisis he faces. In 16:13 Jesus continues with a comment about the impossibility of dividing one's loyalty, although by this point the lesson of the parable is really over and Jesus has moved on to other subjects. The unit concludes with a general trading of insults between Jesus and the Pharisees (16:14–15) that serves as a transition to additional teachings by Jesus in 16:16–18.

IV. Conclusion

If this interpretation has any virtues, high on that list must be its simplicity. The new reading offered above slowed down the reading process so greatly that

this feature of the interpretation may have been obscured. Let us rehearse its main points:

1. A master hears that his steward has been misappropriating funds. His honor and status in the community are threatened by the public perception that he cannot control his employees, so he resolves to save face by immediately dismissing the employee.

2. The steward faces a crisis. Being a steward is the only thing that he knows how to do, but the fact that he now has a reputation for dishonoring his master means that he will not be able to secure employment anywhere else as a steward. He tries to get himself out of trouble by restoring his master's honor and salvaging his reputation as a good, loyal steward. He forgives a portion of the amount owed by his master's debtors. People would assume that the steward was acting on the master's orders, so these gestures would make the master look generous and charitable in the eyes of society. The prestige and honor gained by such benefaction would far outweigh the monetary loss to the master.

3. The master hears what the steward has done and praises him for his actions since his honor has been restored. Moreover, the steward is now in a position either to keep his position with this master or to secure one elsewhere, since his reputation for loyalty and good service has been recovered.

Some scholars might dismiss this reading because it “tames” a parable that they enjoy seeing run wild and free. However, not every parable or saying of Jesus shatters the “world” of its hearers and compels them to think “outside the boundaries” of rational discourse. Indeed, we are not convinced that any of Jesus’ sayings or parables have the kind of awesome power that some interpreters of recent decades have attributed to them. Some of Jesus’ parables (at least) are more mundane, sometimes clever and sometimes ordinary illustrations of points and ideas that were not beyond the capacity of average, uneducated, ancient persons to understand. The parable of the Prudent Steward—we believe—is one such illustration.