

I. INTRODUCTION

“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations” (*Luke* 16:9 [RSV]).¹ The so-called parable of the Unjust Steward is one of the most troublesome, most debated of all of Christ’s parables.² The difficulties of the passage are rife, and they include: the question of which verses constitute the extent of the appropriate segment; exactly what analogs the characters of the story represent; and whether the commentary offered is given by a character in the parable, by Jesus, by the narrator, or by all three in turn? Finally, when other issues have been decided, commentators are left with the challenge of explaining the meaning of the parable and its relevance for readers past, present, and future. A justification for one suggested interpretation is outlined in this paper, and a brief essay given toward the pastoral significance of this puzzling pericope.

II. DELINEATING THE TEXT: “κύριος” OR “Κύριος”?

The delineation of the verses pertaining to the Unjust Steward involves two quandaries: what expanse of verses forms the true pericope (the

¹ Except where otherwise noted as here, all citations from Scripture refer to the New American Bible. Greek version used is *Congregatio pro Clericis*, “Texte biblique grec analysé,” in *Biblia Clerus* (<http://www.clerus.org> – 2008).

² Dennis 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* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1992), 1. Ireland’s naming of the parable has also been adopted for use in this instance as a standard nomenclature; the matter of the implicit value-judgment bound up with this title (translating from verse eight, “ὁ οἰκονόμος ὁ ἀδικία”) will be dealt with further down.

determination of which establishes the immediate *context* of the teaching); and, which verses constitute *parable* and which ones *commentary*?³ First, let us take the prior question, which is the easier to answer. Ordinarily, all of the verses from 16:1 through 16:13 are viewed as a single pericope, all together pertaining either to the matter or to the meaning of the Unjust Steward story. Many commentators, however, see a break between the first eight verses and the final four (16:10-13), with verse 9 forming a tenuous bridge at best between the obviously coherent former grouping and the allegedly inchoate collection of sayings in the latter.⁴ However, as Mathewson observes, there are more arguments in favor of unity in the lesson than there are for bifurcation; for example, he points to strong continuity formed by the use of $\mu\alpha\mu\omega\nu\hat{\alpha}\varsigma$ in verses 9, 11, and 13.⁵ Thus, while there might be something to the debate about whether Christ's original parable was explicitly a teaching about wealth, it seems clear that the Evangelist intends for the Steward story and the subsequent sayings to be read and interpreted together.⁶

³ David T. Landry and Ben May, "Honor restored: new light on the parable of the prudent steward (Luke 16:1-8a)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 2 (Summer 2000), in *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials* [database online], EBSCOhost, (accessed March 30, 2009); 288.

⁴ See Landry/May, 308. See also David Mathewson, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13): A Reexamination of the Traditional View in Light of Recent Challenges," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38, no. 1 (March 1995) in *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials* [database online], EBSCOhost, (accessed March 30, 2009); 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ See Mathewson, 34-35. Mathewson even goes so far as to suggest (35, especially n. 37) that "there is no good reason Jesus himself could not have appended these sayings to the parable."

The second question regards where the parable properly ends and the “sayings” begin. The key verse for this discussion is Luke 16:8:

And the master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently. For the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. (καὶ ἐπῆνεσεν ὁ κύριος τὸν οἰκονόμον τῆς ἀδικίας ὅτι φρονίμως ἐποίησεν· ὅτι οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου φρονιμώτεροι ὑπὲρ τοὺς υἱοὺς τοῦ φωτός εἰς τὴν γενεὰν τὴν ἑαυτῶν εἰσιν.)

Landry and May summarize the problem succinctly: “The debate concerns whether to include 16:8a as part of the parable or part of its interpretation.”⁷ If the verse falls inside the parable, then “the master” (ὁ κύριος) is the rich man; this reading bears exegetical implications, as the moral authority of approbations given by the master would be obviously less weighty than if Jesus were giving the accolades. If, however, the parable ends with verse 7, then the only sensible reading is that Luke is narrating here and not quoting; thus, ἐπῆνεσεν would be Our Lord’s own commendation of the steward’s actions – a reading which would significantly constrain interpretation of the passage! The more likely view, however, and the one held by the majority of commentators, is that verse 8a is indeed part of the parable, the speaker being a model used by Christ but not necessarily the Lord Himself.⁸

⁷ Landry/May, 288.

⁸ *Ibid.* According to my own search, there appear to be only 8 instances in Luke’s Gospel where Luke, as narrator, refers to the Jesus as *acting subject* of a sentence with the term ὁ κύριος: (10:1; 10:41; 11:39; 12:42; 13:15; 17:6; 18:6; 22:61). Of these, 6 are standard uses of the verb

III. INTERPRETATION: CONTENT VERSUS CONTEXT

Over the centuries, and especially recently, myriad interpretations have been suggested for this pericope. The tedious work of sorting out the many schools of thought far exceeds the scope of this paper. The excellent study by Dennis J. Ireland seems to be the most complete survey of interpretations; but even this is not exhaustive.⁹ Here, consideration will be made only of the so-called “traditional” interpretation which Ireland concludes by favoring, as well as some more recent views not treated in Ireland’s work. First, the more recent.¹⁰

Mathewson categorizes three general kinds of interpretation propounded since Ireland’s study: those which “deny an emphasis on use of wealth”; those which “attempt to emend the present text”; and, those which “reinterpret the nature of the lesson... concerning material possessions.”¹¹ Scholars of the first persuasion, one way or another, assert that the meaning of the parable has been confused. Luke or a redactor, they maintain, has obscured the meaning by connecting Jesus’s story with the subsequent “sayings” on wealth. In its original

εἶπον; only 10:1 and 22:61 attest usages by the narrator of ὁ κύριος referring to Our Lord as subject of other verbs. This rarity of usage, while not sufficient evidence in itself, at least bolsters the argument in favor of reading 8a within the parable.

⁹ See Mathewson, 29. Shortcomings are noted by William S. Kurz, “Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: An Historical, Exegetical and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1-13 [Review],” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (January 1994), in *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials* [database online], EBSCOhost, (accessed March 30, 2009); 140.

¹⁰ Such a survey, in direct reaction to Ireland, is the precise scope of Mathewson’s study; as such, he will be relied upon heavily in this section.

¹¹ Respectively, Mathewson 30-35; 35-37; 37-39.

historical context, the argument proceeds, the parable was not about the use of wealth at all but some other theme, such as honor.¹² Mathewson, however, agrees with Ireland and others that this methodology has “a common flaw,” which is “to isolate individual parables and then to analyse them acontextually.”¹³ Far from obscuring the meaning of the passage, the sayings on wealth provide perhaps the most plausible interpretive key.¹⁴

In the second school, Mathewson draws attention to two scholarly attempts at textual reconstruction. The first attempt seeks to reread (rather bizarrely) the praise or commendation in verse 8 as instead a rhetorical question, the effect of which is not to praise the Steward, but to condemn him! The other reconstruction attempts exactly an opposite reading in order to “rehabilitate” the maligned Steward. Here, the word “unjust” (ἀδικίας) in verse 8 is alleged to have been mis-transcribed from the original ἀλικίας, which would change the parable to that of the Expert Steward rather than the Unjust Steward.¹⁵ However, both these interpretations are difficult for the same reason as the former; namely, they dislocate the parable from the context in which Luke gives it (where use of “dishonest” wealth [μαμωνᾶς] is clearly extolled in the following verse).

¹² Thus, Landry/ May, 294 *ff.* Kloppenborg and Beavis are the two most prominent examples noted by both Mathewson and Landry/May.

¹³ See Mathewson, 32 (quoting Porter); see also, 34-35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* It is worth recalling here Mathewson’s contention (above) that Christ Himself may have made this connection even prior to the written transmission.

¹⁵ Mathewson, 36.

Finally, Mathewson looks at two recent theories which read *irony* as the crucial element for understanding the passage. Epitomizing this school is the rendering of verse 9 which Mathewson quotes from I. J. du Plessis (which should be pronounced with a tone of sarcasm upon the highlighted words): “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’.”¹⁶ Neither is this interpretation compelling, however. A key reason for this is the *a fortiori* nature of the sayings in the verses following the parable, which indicate that something of the steward’s example is at least a seminal form of a virtue necessary for inheriting the kingdom: for the steward is *not* condemned, but *commended* – an image of one whose trustworthiness in one matter gains him trust in greater ones.¹⁷

Let us, then, turn to the traditional interpretation, that favored by Ireland and Mathewson following him.¹⁸ Ireland summarizes this interpretation as follows:

According to the traditional interpretation of our parable a dishonest steward’s wise or prudent response to the crisis of his impending dismissal is the basis for teaching on Christian

¹⁶ Quoted by Mathewson, 38.

¹⁷ See verses 10-12 especially; *cf.* Mathewson, 38-39.

¹⁸ See Mathewson, 39; Ireland, 47. Notably, Kurz (page 140) takes the opposing view to Mathewson as to the worthiness of post-Ireland interpretations. However, in his review he does not elucidate, and I was unable to find a source in which he does specifically.

stewardship of material possessions, especially for the benefit of the poor.¹⁹

The chief benefit of this interpretation is that it provides better a *contextual* reading of the parable. The importance of this point is paramount. While the particular tendencies in redaction criticism offered by modern exegetes may make the parable “easier” or clearer in itself to understand, nevertheless their methodology would call into question the Sacred Evangelists’ integrity and reliability as interpreters and transmitters of the kerygma. This is especially true with regard to Luke’s Gospel, where the deliberate *ordering* of things is such an essential part of the author’s intention and theological program; to throw this aside because it poses a difficulty in interpretation in one instance sets a dangerous precedent for wider application.

What, then, are the contextual data that make the traditional interpretation most compelling? In the space here, it seems best simply to summarize Ireland’s survey which deals with the literary and the theological milieu of the parable. First, Ireland devotes an entire section²⁰ to the surrounding literary material. In his conclusion on this data, Ireland notes the pervasive theme of material stewardship which runs from Chapter 15 (especially the parable of The Prodigal or Two Sons) through the end of Chapter 16 (the Rich Man and Lazarus). This theme, with its dual-pronged teaching against the Pharisees’ greed and in favor of

¹⁹ Ireland, 12; the notes of the NAB (Study Bible) agree with this interpretation.

²⁰ Ireland, 115-160.

Christian charity, indicates not only that Luke 16:1-8a *must* be interpreted in light of the immediate context of 9-13, but also that the whole section from verse 1 through 13 is part of a larger section with its own integral unity and thrust.²¹

Secondly, Ireland points out that there is a broader theological context throughout the whole of Luke which frequently treats topically of wealth and riches with the concern of how prudently to put them to use. Furthermore, the motivation or impetus behind Christian charity is the “coming eschatological kingdom” which represents a “crisis” in the world of which Luke is writing.²² Ireland summarizes, “the... eschatological thread provides both the incentive and dynamic for [charitable] actions.”²³ Synthesizing the theological context into the former literary schema of Chapters 15 and 16, we can see that the “crisis” faced by the Prodigal Son after squandering his wealth is parallel to the “crisis” faced by the Steward following the master’s call for an audit. But whereas both of these characters have an opportunity to reconcile with their benefactors, the “crisis” of the Rich Man in the Lazarus story comes too late. Thus, the great biblical scholar Monsignor Knox seems right on course with his analysis (in the “traditional” school) that “[t]he chief lesson of [the Parable of the Unjust Steward] seems to be

²¹ Ireland, 159-160.

²² Mathewson, 39. See also, Ireland, 161-216.

²³ Ireland, 216.

that we should do service to God by giving alms to the poor, while we still have time for it.”²⁴

IV. CONCLUSION

“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations” (*Luke* 16:9 [RSV]). Clearly, much ink has been spilt in debate over what Jesus meant to teach his historical audience by the mysterious sayings at the beginning of *Luke*’s sixteenth chapter, or indeed what Saint Luke intended by his own presentation of this matter in his evangelistic message. But, “the word of God is living and effective” (*Hebrews* 4:12), and speaks to us today. A contemporary sermon on the parable by Thomas Long evocatively captures the meaning of Jesus’ teaching for our modern world; the passage is worth quoting at length:

[Jesus is saying]: “I wish the children of light were as shrewd at investments in the coming world as the wheeler-dealers are at investing in this world. Make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of this dying age, so that when this present age passes away, you will have invested in that which truly endures.” All the money we have – the money in our wallets and purses, in our checking accounts, that money that fuels the stock market – all money – is like Confederate money in 1863; it is still negotiable, but it is the currency of a

²⁴ Ronald Knox, *The Holy Bible: A Translation from the Latin Vulgate in the Light of the Hebrew and Greek Originals* (New York: Sheed & Ward, Inc., 1950); note on *Luke* 16:1-9.

doomed sovereignty. If we continue to invest in the doomed sovereignty, woe are we.²⁵

Long's analysis cuts sharply to the heart of the matter - especially in the midst of our present economic uncertainty. But his exegesis is not a mere opportunistic reading-into-Scripture; in fact, his message is very much in line with the reading of the Fathers of the Church.

Ephraim the Syrian saw the ephemeral quality of worldly wealth in contrast to heavenly riches as the key to the parable of the Unjust Steward: "He [i.e., the Steward] was praised because he acquired what was to be his by what was not his, namely, his friends and supporters.... [B]uy for yourselves those things that do not pass away, by means of those temporary things that are not yours!"²⁶ Similarly, Chrysostom read the passage in light of a loan situation. All of our riches are a loan from God which we are to "invest" in this life (through charitable actions) in order not to renege in our return when we are called to account. Similarly, the charity we give to others is like a loan which assures us we will find support when we need it (*cf.*, the "golden rule"). Finally, by this reading, God's eternal reward to us can be seen in some sense as a "repayment" to us of that which we elect to forsake in this life.²⁷

²⁵ Thomas G. Long, "Making friends," *Journal for Preachers* 30, no. 4 (2007), *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost*, (accessed March 30, 2009); 54-55.

²⁶ In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament III: Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just, Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 155.

²⁷ See Chrysostom, in *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 155-156; *cf.* Mark 10:30.

The parable of the Unjust Steward is a valuable one for our world today. When each day we wake wondering whether the dollar will outlast the yen or the loonie, and so much energy and worry is wasted over the security of our earthly investments – we should be reminded often that only one kind of currency will outlast the clearing-house of final judgment, that mortgages in eternal dwellings can never be foreclosed upon.

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