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Don Fahrenbrink

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir_fahrenbrinkd@csl.edu

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SOME INVESTIGATIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS
OF THE PARABLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD

A Research Paper Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for elective
EN-199

by

Don W. Fahrenbrink

November 1969

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Victor Baileg

Advisor

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.

The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13) certainly fits this short definition of C.H. Dodd in that its strangeness has arrested untold hearers and by the fact that countless minds have been left in sufficient doubt and thereby teased into active thought. This parable is reckoned to be one of the most, if not the most difficult parable recorded in the Gospels. Many, including the present writer, have been embarrassed to read such a story to a congregation as the Gospel Lesson for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity and have found occasion to preach on the Epistle Lesson, a free text, or to present a topical sermon. The Emperor Julian² in his bitter hypostacy, made great play with the parable: he said that of course Jesus told it, and that it of course proved Jesus to be a mere man and hardly a worthy man.

How could anyone commend such a rascal? Why did Jesus choose such an unscrupulous person to make a point about behavior required from his followers? Who are the "sons of this world" and "the children of light" in verse eight? Who is "the master" of the same verse? Are verses ten through thirteen to be taken as a series of applications of the parable? These and other similarly pressing questions have

plagued efforts to interpret this parable.

The purpose of this paper will be to present a brief and comparative overview of the most significant previous investigations and interpretations of the Parable of the Unjust Steward. This study is not an attempt to draw up a chronological history of how the parable has been interpreted in past eras. When older interpretations are incorporated it is for the sake of historical perspective or because they are significant. The life situations which may have prompted a certain view have largely been omitted. Neither has a conscious effort been made to include a study of hermeneutical principles. The present paper is intended to be practical for the reader in that it holds forth for comparison the end results of the major and most significant exegetical procedure which has been applied to the Parable of the Unjust Steward.

The method of presentation is by means of progressive comparison of specific problems; e.g. concerning problem "X" the following solutions have been offered, concerning problem "Y" the following If the reader is specifically interested in the sum total of the views of a particular scholar, he is referred to the bibliography.

Chapter II is concerned with how and why Luke 16:1-13 fits into the category of parable. A presentation of various views concerning the audience and context of this section is then carried out. In recent years higher textual criticism (especially source criticism) has had a great influence upon

interpretations of this parable. This will be the topic of Chapter IV. The identification of the steward, *οἰκονόμον*, and the lord, *ὁ κύριος* (verse eight), will be the topic of Chapters V and VI. Chapter VII will deal with the intriguing phrases "sons of this world", *οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος*, and "children of light", *τοὺς υἱοὺς τοῦ φωτός*, also in verse eight. It will also take up the problem of "the friends", *φίλους*, and the "unrighteous mammon", *μαμωνά τῆς ἀδικίας*, in verse nine. Chapter VII is a comparative study of representative views which have been offered as to why the steward's conduct was commended by the lord of verse eight. Chapter IX will contain some concluding remarks.

CHAPTER II

PARABLES

Any attempt to reach an understanding of the Parable of the Unjust Steward, or most other parables, is doomed to failure unless one has a basic understanding of parables. Much of the material on the subject of parables is outdated, and the real breakthroughs have been made in the past twenty-five years. One of the most recent, concise, and practical sources of help in understanding parables is contained in a small volume by Dr. Martin H. Scharlemann.¹ The reader will here find a good, brief, etymological study of the term "parable" as used in both the Old and the New Testament. This is followed by a short article on the proper interpretation of parables and the major abuses which their interpretations have suffered.

Dr. Scharlemann notes that within the Greek New Testament parabolē occurs only in the first three Gospels (fourty-eight times) and twice in Hebrews (9:9 and 11:19). It takes the form of short sayings or mere comparisons without a narrative, but is also employed of comparisons extended into narratives, the common present day usage of the term "parable".

The term is used in the New Testament as part of the terminology applied to the instructional and revelatory activity of Jesus. He had come as priest and king, to be sure, but also as God's prophet, proclaiming the mystery of the kingdom. It is in this kind of context that the word parabolē comes to life in the New Testament.²

Approximately one third of the recorded teaching of Jesus consists of parables.

In the Old Testament the term is used of short proverbs, mysterious utterances, riddles, or even of allegory, and includes that miraculous process known as God's revelation of Himself.

THE INTERPRETATION OF PARABLES

Dr. Scharlemann³ notes that the interpretive methodologies applied to parables can usually be grouped into five categories: (1) The principle of analogy holds that parables are to be interpreted in the light of the conviction that the earthly story of a parable imperfectly reflects some heavenly counterpoint. This method is neo-Platonic in conception. (2) The principle of generalization is represented chiefly by Adolph Juelicher's Die Gleichnisreden Jesu, but goes too far in reducing the parables into little more than general truisms (although it provided a needed counterpart to the long abused uses of analogy). (3) Form critics are responsible for the "setting in life" approach which claims that if a parable is to be properly understood one must thoroughly understand the original life situation in which the parable was spoken. This approach has the chief virtue of insisting on careful literary and theological analysis and is espoused by such scholars as Joachim Jeremias and C.H. Dodd.

The task of the interpreter of the parables is to find out, if he can, the setting of a parable in the situation contemplated by the Gospels, and hence the application which would suggest itself to one who stood in that situation.⁴

This method is often criticized because form critics frequently differ significantly in their conclusions. (4) The prophetic method is represented by Vitringa's Erklärung der Parabolen. It is closely related to the allegorical method in that it directly relates the events in the parable to later happenings in the history of the world. As Scharlemann notes, "Not much can be said for this approach . . . it is controlled and guided by little except the vagaries of the interpreter."⁵ (5) Scharlemann favors relating the parables of Jesus to the whole story of God's redemptive concern.

This method recognized the parables as being kerygmatic, as being told to call forth the recognition of Jesus as embodying in his person and ministry the powers of the kingdom of God."⁶

By this method the parables demand of the hearer a rejection or acceptance of Jesus Christ as the link holding together the heavenly and earthly realms.

Erich Kiehl is of the same persuasion.⁷ He notes that the use of analogy began already at the time of the early church and quickly led to the full-fledged allegorical method. He is very critical of the "setting in life" methodology and claims that it " . . . destroys every feeling of certainty as to what part Jesus Himself spoke . . . " and causes the parables to yield little more than historical information. He also favors the methodology of "redemptive concern".

C.H. Dodd has written one of the most reputable works on the subject of New Testament parables.⁸ He believes that parables have the character of an argument requiring a judgement to be applied to the matter at hand by the hearer. The

typical parable has one single point of comparison and the details are not intended to have independent significance, although this should not be stretched too far.

THE NATURE OF THE PARABLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD

Scharlemann devotes a number of pages⁹ to the concept "kingdom of God", basically concluding that it is God's redemptive activity among men in the person of Jesus Christ, God making himself king in the lives of men. He then states that there can be little doubt that this is a "parable of the kingdom" and that it is intended to present a truth of the kingdom. This is the same category under which Kiehl would place the parable:

Whereas the Jews and especially the Pharisees and scribes felt that the kingdom of God was yet to come, Jesus declared "the kingdom of God is at hand" in his person (Mark 1:15). Those to whom God in his grace had given "the secret of the kingdom", in whose hearts God's will was supreme, they were the members of the kingdom. It was for their benefit that Jesus spoke this parable. ¹⁰

Although categorizing parables by means of their ethical content is not generally recognized by New Testament scholars today, in the late nineteenth century Alexander Bruce placed the parable under the heading of "Grace" because of the ethics taught:

If kindness to the poor has such value in the sight of God, it must be because God Himself is a being who delights in loving kindness. In teaching a morality of love Jesus verbally teaches a theology of grace. The two go together. Therefore, though the parable before us is ethical in its tendency rather than doctrinal, it may legitimately be reckoned among the parables of Grace. ¹¹

John Calvin, although probably not consciously attempting

to classify this parable under this or that category, also felt that the chief and overriding concern of this parable was God's grace rather than the demand of a decision for or against Jesus:

The sum of this parable is that we should deal harmoniously and benignantly with our neighbors, that when we come to the tribunal of God the fruit of our liberality may return to us.¹²

J.M. Creed, in what is perhaps one of the best commentaries on the Gospel of Luke, will go no farther than to call this a parable in the strict sense:

i.e. it is not, like the stories of the Good Samaritan, or the Pharisee and the Publican, a picture of conduct which is directly commended or reprobated, but it is a story from ordinary life in the world which is shewn to have a counterpart in the spiritual world.¹³

CHAPTER III

THE CONTEXT

J.A. Fitzmyer notes:

The story of the Dishonest Manager forms part of the Lucan narrative of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27). It is found in the specifically Lucan "travel account", that extended insertion of additional material (9:51-18:14) which the Evangelist had made into what he has otherwise taken over from Mark.¹

Alexander Eagar argues that the context of the parable is the same as that of the three preceding parables and the one immediately following; Jesus is arguing against the political activities of the scribes and Pharisees who were courting the favor of the Roman government.²

J.D.M. Derrett believes the parable to be a combination of the themes stated in the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Prodigal Son.³

THE AUDIENCE

B.A. Hooley and A.J. Mason argue that the parable was addressed to the disciples of Jesus with the Pharisees in the background.⁴ J.M. Creed agrees with Hooley and Mason and says that the words *τοὺς μαθητὰς* indicate that the scene remains the same as that of the previous parables, which had been addressed to the Pharisees. Jesus is now however addressing the disciples with the Pharisees in the background where they can overhear, as witnessed by their rebuke in verse fourteen.⁵

C.H. Dodd argues that if the clause, ". . . the lord

commended the unjust steward . . . " (verse eight), is actually part of the original parable (something which will be discussed in Chapter IV), the "lord", *ὁ κύριος*, of verse eight is then the steward's master and the statement of praise is meant to be so palpably absurd that it would provoke the hearers to deny it vigorously and cause them to ask themselves what they thought about the praise bestowed. Here was a man who actually expected to be commended for feathering his nest by unjust practice! Dodd says that two categories of people were comparable to the unjust steward: (1) the Sadduceic priesthood, which used its religion to gain the favor of the Romans, and (2) the Pharisees, who thought that a little almsgiving of their ill-gotten riches would win divine favor.⁶

R.G. Lunz believes the parable to be directed against the rigorism of the leaders of Israel.⁷ Tertullian went so far as to declare that the parable was not merely aimed at the Pharisees, but at the whole Jewish nation.⁸ Marcus Dods says that the parable is addressed to the publicans so that they would learn how to use their ill-gotten goods,⁹ and Scharlemann is no more specific than to say that it was addressed " . . . to the followers of Jesus . . . ".¹⁰

CHAPTER IV

FORM CRITICISM AS APPLIED TO LUKE 16:1-13

Most contemporary Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars feel that Luke 16:1-13 contains a parable to which several concluding verses of diverse origin have been added.

G.H. Dodd states that although the Gospels were at first transmitted in the form of independent units, the framework being supplied by the evangelist who wrote not less than a generation after the time of Jesus, it is clear that we cannot without question assume that the setting of a parable is its original in history.

It is only where something in the parable itself seems to link it with some special phase of the ministry that we dare press the connection. More often we shall have to be content with relating it to the situation as a whole.

Sometimes the evangelists give an indication of the application. How far are such applications original? The tendency of recent writers from Jülicher to Bultmann is to discount them heavily.¹

Dodd, however, is certain that the primitive tradition underlying the various differentiated traditions from which our Gospels are derived, was certainly acquainted with applied parables, i.e. the application may have come down with the parable.²

In many cases however, it seems that the application was not part of the earlier tradition, but supplied by the evangelist. A comparison of the Gospel parables shows this. Dodd claims this is true of the Parable of the Unjust Steward:

Sometimes different applications are supplied even by

the same evangelist. Thus to the very difficult parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke xvi, 1-7) the evangelist has appended a whole series of "morals": (i) "The sons of this age . . . ", (ii) "Make friends by means of . . . ", (iii) "If you had not been honest with unrighteous wealth . . . ". We can almost see here the notes for three separate sermons on the parable as text.

It is clear that in this case there was no certain clue to the application of the parable even when it reached the evangelist Luke, and that it was given a variety of current interpretations.³

Joachim Jeremias claims that this portion of Luke is an example of an eschatological parable being shifted to the hortatory type. Standing between the Cross and the Parusia church the/was forced to change parables originally intended to arouse the crowd to a sense of the gravity of the moment to directions for the conduct of the Christian community.⁴

M. Krämer⁵ and F.J. Moore⁶ are no more explicit than to say that the original parable and Luke's original interpretation ended with verse nine.

J.A. Fitzmyer has done a service by grouping the various scholars under three basic headings according to their viewpoints:⁷ (1) The first group of scholars are those who maintain that verses one through seven are the original parable and that verses eight through thirteen are further commentary. This group contains R. Bultmann, W. Grundmann, J. Jeremias, A.R.C. Leaney, W. Michaelis, and H. Preisker. (2) The second group is composed of those who believe the parable to have originally ended with verse eight. Here we find D. Buzy, J.M. Creed, A. Descamps, J. Dupont, A. Loisy, T.W. Manson, L. Marchal, K.H. Rengstorf, and J. Schmid. (3) Finally, several extend the original parable through verse nine.

These are D.R. Fletcher, P. Gaechter, J. Knabenbauer, M.J. Lagrange, W. Manson, R. Rucker, and many of the earlier Roman Catholic commentators.⁸

Fitzmyer includes himself with L. Friedel, W. Oesterley, P. Samain, F. Tillman, B. Weiss, and J. Volckaert, who say that the original parable ended at verse eight a, and that the original application was verse eight b, feeling that without eight b the parable has no real ending.⁹

FORM CRITICISM AS APPLIED TO VERSES EIGHT THROUGH THIRTEEN

Most scholars who make use of the form critical methods are agreed in their opinion that the Parable of the Unjust Steward has appended at least three additional applications or interpretations which were not originally part of the parable or its context. These are: (1) verses eight and/or nine or some combination thereof, (2) verses ten through twelve, and (3) verse thirteen.

Verses Eight and Nine

In verse eight a Jeremias sees Jesus' application of the parable (the steward's cleverness should be an example for his followers) and in eight b finds someone's explanation of Jesus' commendation as pertaining to the prudence of children of this world in dialogue with one another (and not with God). In verse nine he sees an independent logion probably originally addressed to tax farmers and dishonest people in which the steward's wise use of money is the example

(and not his prudent resolution of a fresh start).¹⁰

Fitzmyer believes verses eight b through nine to be the first of three sermon outlines (the others - as we shall see - being ten through twelve and thirteen) and claims that it draws a further eschatological lesson on prudence from the parable.¹¹

Verses Ten through Twelve

A. Descamps states that the writer, contrasting in verse ten the ideal and the unjust steward, formulates a lesson in fidelity (from Christ's teachings) which he relates to the parable to establish the proper Christian attitude toward the steward's embezzlement. The lesson of verses eleven and twelve is further removed from the parable and nowhere found in the words of Christ. The de-eschatologization begun in verse ten is complete here: spiritual and temporal goods, and the significant management of them are considered in the same temporal perspective.¹²

Jeremias terms verses ten through twelve a logion composed of two antithetic members (verse 10), which deal with faithfulness and unfaithfulness in unimportant things, which in verses eleven through twelve was applied to mammon and everlasting riches. Here the steward is not an example but a warning.¹³

F.E. Williams is especially specific about verse ten and claims that it is so similar to Matthew 25:21-23 (= Luke 19:17) that it is difficult not to see ten a as a floating

saying, which early interpreters felt would provide the key to the parable. This would then explain the awkwardness with which it is attached - since surely unfaithfulness should be mentioned first. Perhaps then in order to render the saying more relevant to the parable, Luke coined ten b on the grounds that the converse of ten a must also be true. Verses ten and following would then be the interpreter's amplification of verse ten, applying the principle specifically to money matters, and deliberately employing terminology drawn from the parables.¹⁴

Fitzmyer thinks verse ten to be a "Q" material (assuming the four source hypothesis) and a development of Luke 19:17 or at least a reflection of it.¹⁵

Verse Thirteen

Concerning verse thirteen, Descamps,¹⁶ Fitzmyer,¹⁷ Jeremias,¹⁸ Manson,¹⁹ and Streeter,²⁰ equate this with Matthew 6:24. They speak of it as a floating saying from the source "Q" (again assuming the four source hypothesis) which originally had nothing at all to do with the parable.

NEGATIVE REACTION TO THE APPLICATION OF FORM CRITICISM

Erich Kiehl and Martin Scharlemann take a dim view of all this. Kiehl remarks that form criticism ". . . destroys every feeling of certainty as to what part Jesus Himself spoke . . ." and causes parables to yield little more than historical information.²¹ "Evaluating the various views on Luke 16:9-13 . . . results in the conclusion that these verses

were part of the original parable of Jesus and were spoken by Him."²²

Scharlemann notes,

Certainly the parable expresses an important fact of the kingdom rather forcibly; there is no need of resorting to the subtleties of Weiss (in Meyer's commentary), who suggests that there are three distinct applications in vv. 8-13; one by Jesus (v. 8); one by the compiler of precanonical Luke (v. 9); and another by Luke himself (vv. 10-13). It is such misguided ingenuity that has distorted this parable and made it seem more difficult than it really is.

This is a favorite pastime of those who look for the "Sitz im Leben" for each parable. They usually concur with the view of Weiss that three applications are made of this parable, not by the Lord but by the church in its later requirements. Much of this approach is very speculative and fails to reckon with the fact that Jesus is, after all, the Lord of the church and could anticipate its problems and its needs²³

In the face of the evidence presented the decision for or against the application of form criticism and/or to what degree is left to the reader.

CHAPTER V

THE IDENTITY OF THE STEWARD

Some interpreters have given great amounts of effort and attention in attempts to give specific meanings to the details of parables; usually because they have been influenced by the allegorical method prevalent in their day, or because (in the case of more recent interpreters) they have failed to take cognizance of the relatively recent efforts of such men as C.H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias. The parable of the unjust steward is a case in point. The steward has been given an extremely wide range of interpretation. St. Claudentius, Bishop of Brescia (died 410 or 427 a.d.) is on the negative end of the spectrum. In his eighteenth discourse, which strictly speaking is the Bishop's reply to a certain Serminius, he lays great stress on the use of wealth; but then he interprets the parable in a somewhat strange manner. He considers the unjust steward to be the devil, and applies the various features of the simile to his temptations. We are not told whether this explanation solved all the doubts of his friend Serminius.¹

St. Basil offered slight improvement on the steward's character by saying that this cunning steward, in contrast to the wise virgins, is to be regarded as an example of false and ruinous wisdom.²

R.G. Lunt claims that the steward represents the leaders of Israel and that the story is directed against the rigorism

which they exercised in their positions of spiritual leadership.³

The steward is placed in a positive light by Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch. Although the Commentaries of Theophilus may not be genuine, they interpret the unjust steward as the Apostle Paul, who being forcibly thrust out by God from his Judaism, afterwards made himself a place in many hearts through declaring the remission of sins and the Gospel of the Grace of God, and for this was praised, being "changed from the austerity of the Law to the clemency of the Gospel."⁴

Finally, the steward is given the epitomy of honor by Unger who likens him to Jesus.⁵

Attempts to identify the rich man are not of enough significance to warrant comment.

CHAPTER VI

THE IDENTIFICATION OF Ο ΚΥΡΙΟΣ

It is quite easy for the casual reader of the Parable of the Unjust Steward to pass over a perplexing problem of the parable without ever being aware of it. This is the problem of the identity of ὁ κύριος in verse eight a. Most English translations read "the master" and tend to infer that this is in reference to the master of the steward (as opposed to Jesus), a view shared by many.

J.M. Creed has explained the problem thusly;

If it is the lord of the steward (v. 3) it is at least remarkable that he should "praise" his dishonest servant's "prudence" and further, a very awkward transition is involved in the remaining half of the verse which cannot possibly represent the sentiments of the steward's master but must be intended for the comment of Jesus. These difficulties are avoided if we interpret ο κύριος v. 8 of Jesus; cf. xviii. 6. But it is hard to suppose that the evangelist himself intended this, in view of the sudden transition to the first person in v. 9.¹

The problem is intricately linked with the form critical question of just where the parable ends. As J.D.M. Derrett,² C.H. Dodd,³ and J.A. Fitzmyer⁴ have explained, those who believe that the parable ends with verse seven hold that the κύριος may well be Jesus as he applies the parable he has just told. On the other hand, if the parable includes verse eight, the κύριος could be the steward's master, whose praise of the steward was an intrinsic part of the parable.

There are reputable scholars on both sides of the fence. The following tables are a sample listing of who favors which identification:⁵

ὁ κύριος = Jesus

ὁ κύριος = the steward's master

R. Bultmann
J. Fitzmyer
J. Jeremias
W. Michaelis
Nicoll
S. Paul
H. Preisker
C. Williams

D. Buzy
H. Descamps
J. Dupont
B. Hooley
Jülicher
A. Loisy
Marchal
R. Trench
St Augustine
J. Weiss

Still others, J.M. Creed, W. Grundmann, E. Klostermann, A. Leaney, T. Manson, K. Rengstorf, and J. Schmid are peculiar in that while they include verse eight as part of the parable, contrary to most others of this opinion, they say that o kurios must nevertheless be identified with Jesus.⁶

Others, J. Derrett,⁷ and C.H. Dodd⁸ haven't made up their minds.

An attempt has recently been made by I. H. Marshall to eliminate the grammatical problem of the abruptness of transition in verse nine. He admits to serious difficulty in understanding o kurios as the steward's master, but also acknowledges serious difficulty in understanding this to be Jesus because of the abruptness of transition to the first person in verse nine. Marshall argues that this difficulty is removed by the recognition that Luke frequently moves from indirect to direct discourse, sometimes without explicit indication of the change; 5:14 is a good example. Marshall does not attempt to solve the identity problem, but only to eliminate the grammatical argument.⁹

M. Krämer holds that verse eight is a comment made by

the evangelist in his own person, and that o kurios refers to Jesus. To explain how on this supposition verse nine is related to verse eight, Krämer suggests that the words ". . . and he said . . ." have fallen out before verse nine. The text would then read: "The Lord commended the unjust steward for his prudence . . . ; and he said: and I tell you, make friends for yourselves . . ." ¹⁰

W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich ¹¹ do not list Luke 16:8 as an instance of where kurios may be identified with Jesus. W.F. Moulton and A.F. Geden ¹² do not classify this instance of kurios under any particular usage. Neither does Werner Foerster ¹³ identify this usage of kurios with Jesus.

Erich Kiehl acknowledges the consensus of the foregoing scholarly opinion (as represented by footnotes 11-13), but claims that this viewpoint is a result of "traditional Occidental interpretation." ¹⁴

Martin Scharlemann identifies o kurios with Jesus and appeals to the analogy of Luke 18:6 and Matthew 10:16 where Jesus instructs his disciples to be "shrewd". ¹⁵

CHAPTER VII

"THE SONS OF THIS WORLD" AND "THE SONS OF LIGHT"

Recent studies have revealed an apparent link between the phrases *οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος* and *τοὺς υἱοὺς τοῦ φωτός* and the much discussed Essene community at Qumran of the New Testament era. J.A. Fitzmyer says in essence that the expression "sons of this world" may be a reflection the Qumran expression kl bny tbl (CD 20:34), and the "sons of light" (which is paralleled in the New Testament by John 12:36; I Thessalonians 5:5; and Ephesians 5:8) seems to be a favorite Essene designation for their community of the New Covenant.¹

Erich Kiehl reads,

. . . the Qumran community used the term "sons of light" as a synonym for the community and used various terms similar to "sons of this age" for those who were non-members of the community.²

The parable would then speak of the possibility of losing the status of a son of light, a member of the kingdom, and becoming again a son of this age.

Most others (not mentioning Qumran connections) have identified the "sons of this world" in one way or another with crafty or "wise" persons of secular society and have identified the "children of light" with Jesus' followers. Men of this world do more good with money in their dealings with one another than do the children of God on earth between one another - to whom a considerable amount of the world's goods have been entrusted.

Cardinal Cajetan (early sixteenth century) however,

was quick to point out that the children of this world are wiser - certainly, but only as owls see better than eagles - in the dark.³

THE "FRIENDS"

The *φίλους* (verse nine) who will do the "receiving" have not been so consistently identified. The most popular identification has been that espoused by St. Ambrose who simply identified the "friends" made with "unrighteous mammon" as the poor and needy.⁴

F.E. Williams says (as will be discussed more fully in the following chapter) that the analogy of certain Jewish metaphors suggests that these friends are a personification of the almsdeeds performed with the mammon of iniquity.⁵

Leopold Fonck also suggests the poor and needy, but thinks that God or Christ may also be inferred. His bias toward Roman Catholic theology is evident.

. . . we may also look to the Saints to whom we promote devotion, and the guardian angels of the poor and needy whom we assist, as friends who help us by their intercession to obtain eternal happiness. We may justly with the Fathers of the Church, regard these words as confirming the meritoriousness of our works and the efficacious intercession of the Saints.⁶

Scharlemann would also entertain the identification of angels who will receive the "do gooders" (but not because of any meritorious intercession or work righteousness).⁷

Erich Kiehl⁸ and J.M. Creed⁹ argue that the words *φίλους* and *δούλους* constitute a construction designed to circumvent the pronunciation of God's name, a frequent occurrence in

the rabbinical writings.

Martin Luther has made good sense of the "friends" in the following manner:

. . . we must not understand this reception into the eternal tabernacles as being done by man; however, men will be the instruments and witness to our faith, exercised and shown in their behalf, on account of which God receives us into the eternal tabernacles . . . thus our friends receive us into heaven, when they are the cause, through our faith shown to them, of entering heaven.

THE "UNRIGHTEOUS MAMMON"

F.E. Williams reminds us that the negative aspect of wealth stressed in verse nine is an extreme expression of that suspicious attitude toward wealth which is found in all of the synoptic gospels, particularly of Luke (1:25f; 6:20,24; 12:16-21; 16:19-31; 19:8f).¹¹

Most commentators agree, however, that in verse nine wealth is referred as *μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας* because it is thought of as the great impediment to salvation and that these verses and chapter are not purposed to show that great riches come only with dishonesty. Riches become unjust and evil only if they are not communicated to the needy.¹²

G.M. Camps and B.M. Ubach went to great pains and carried out a very scholarly and comprehensive word study in both the Septuagint and New Testament to point out that adikos is here being used in the sense of "false" or "deceitful" and that the principle point of the parable is that riches, which seem to offer security, are in reality unreliable and deceitful and those who possess them should become "unfaithful"

to their master in order to serve God and acquire true wealth.¹³

Other less significant interpretations have been submitted.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CENTRAL THOUGHT

Practically all commentators believe that the central idea lies in one of two themes: the cleverness of the steward in providing for his own future or the generosity of the steward in providing for the needs of others. Basic to the central thought is whether or not the steward committed a second evil deed by reducing the debts, or if this action may somehow be explained as legitimate.

The majority of scholars believe that the steward committed evil twice: first of all in the form of some action which caused his dismissal by his master, and secondly by reducing - out of selfish, albeit clever motives - the amounts owed to his master by the debtors.

Recent studies of the financial and economic practices of Palestine in New Testament time have, however, seriously questioned the illegitimacy of the steward's action in reducing the debts.

Due to the large number of scholars involved and the fact that viewpoints often differ only slightly, it seems impractical and trivial to attempt any sort of an exhaustive compilation of scholarly opinions of the central thought of this parable. The following four categorized groups are therefore presented to give the reader at least a concise and brief survey of how most thought on the matter is divided. Representative scholars from these groups can then be studied

in greater detail.

Group A

This group considers the central thought to be that just as the steward was benevolent and generous to the debtors, so the followers of Jesus should practice benevolence and generosity in this world being mindful of the world to come. By reducing the debts the steward cheated his master, and the steward's good will should not be confused with his means to accomplish this good will.

Included in this group are: A. Bruce, R. Caemmerer, the early church fathers in general, J. Calvin, and A. Descamps.

Bruce says, "A factor on the point of being deprived of his stewardship is a suitable emblem of a man about to be removed from this world by death."¹ Man is so helpless with regard to eternity; unable either to work for heaven or to beg for it, i.e. too sinful and too proud to depend on the righteousness of another. The solution . . .

. . . involves knavery as towards the creditor, but it involves benefices as towards his debtors . . . the speaker of the parable has it in view to teach a lesson of the worth of benefice as a provision against the evil day.

. . . the summum bonum is conceived of eschatologically as a state of felicity entered upon at death corresponding to the provision made for his well-being by the steward after his dismissal from office.

The doctrine taught here is therefore essentially identical with that set forth in the parabolic representation of the last judgement . . . ,"

i.e. those who have done acts of kindness are recognized by Christ.²

Bruce also finds much of God's grace in the parable:

If kindness to the poor has such value in the sight of God, it must be because God Himself is a being who delights in loving kindness. In teaching a morality of love Jesus virtually teaches a theology of grace. The two go together. Therefore, though the parable before us is ethical in its tendency rather than doctrinal, it may legitimately be reckoned among the parable of Grace. The graciousness of the parable comes out in the quality of the ethics taught.³

Gaemmer⁴ notes, "The record takes pains to distinguish between the judgement of the employer of the steward (v. 8) and the application of the story by Jesus (v. 9) by a shift in person."⁴ The point of Jesus is clear, "What is good about using money is the achieving of a long-term gain, a continuing influence on people rather than squandering it quickly."⁵ "Jesus says that we are to invest our cash and property in such a way that a relation to the brethren which has everlasting quality be assured."⁶

Group B

This group does not believe the steward cheated his master by reducing the debts, but that the action may be explained in one way or another as legitimate. The central thought (as Group A) is the steward's generosity, which is to be imitated by the followers of Jesus.

This group includes: W. Arnott, J. Derrett, B. Fischer, P. Gaechter, M. Gibson, Hampden, and F. Williams.

Two scholars within this group have presented exceptionally well written and convincing journal articles on the subject of the Parable of the Unjust Steward, J.D.M. Derrett and F.E. Williams. Derrett has written what is to the present

writer the most scholarly and well documented article in this area. He argues that the key to the problem lies in the Jewish law of agency and in relation to usury.

The story is based on Jewish economic practice, partly upon the Jewish law, partly upon juridical theory, and partly upon normal public reactions to behavior which takes into account these factual data.⁷

It is useless to look to Roman or Greek law in this connection. "The steward was not a paid factor or broker, and his position was not contractual in the strict sense. Even if he swindled his master he could only be punished by reproaches."⁸ As steward he could legally release debts owed his master. He had been lending at interest to fellow Jews - something forbidden.

The original contracts were usurious, but saved from this charge by a rabbinic subtlety, i.e. he restated the great debts in terms of natural products - a common Jewish practice. The amount of release equaled the amount of interest plus insurance. This is the oppressive and illegal amount.

The steward ceased to take usury and did what God's law demanded. He thereby gained favorable public opinion. The debtors were safe, the master was pleased with the change in behavior on the part of the steward and gained good public opinion for himself. This good will is likened to the favor which will enable the Jew to enter the eternal tabernacles.⁹

Williams presents a convincing case that the point of the parable is almsgiving. In summary: The parable may be an appeal to "eschatological self interest", i.e. do without something now and thereby have a reward in the future. The

synoptic traditon is full of such appeals: Mark 10:30, which promises "eternal life in the world to come" to those who abandon worldly possessions; Mark 9:43-48, which says that the loss of an organ of the body is better than an eternity of hell-fire.

Other synoptic passages make frequent and unmistakable use of this type of motivation: Matthew 6:19ff (= Luke 12:33ff.) - "treasure in heaven"; Mark 10:21 (= Matthew 19:21 = Luke 18:22) - "the rich young man"; Luke 14:13f., where resurrection is repayment for helping the poor; so Luke 6:38; the idea is also present incidentally in the parables of Dives and Lazarus, and in the pericope of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31-46); so John 5:36.

Behind almsgiving was the idea of giving away not our own, but God's (cf. I Chronicles 29:14), and we should not be surprised that the master commended the unjust steward. The point is argued by means of a fortiori reasoning as in Luke 11:13 (= Matthew 7:11); and Luke 18:6f.

Rabbinic sayings attributed to authorities of the second century A.D. can be cited, which term almsdeeds, or other good works יְצוּרֵי שָׂרָף - an Hebraized form of προσάκλῆτοι , meaning "advocate" or "intercessors". From "advocates" or "intercessors" to "friends" seems only a short step; and to speak of one's personified works as "receiving him into eternal habitations" would appear to be a deliberate extension of the metaphor. Or alternately, the third person plural δὲ βούται of verse nine b might be treated as equivalent to the passive

"that you may be received" (cf. *δοθησεται* and *σωσιν* in Luke 6:38) without disturbing the identification of "friends" with the almsdeeds themselves.¹⁰

Group C

This group believes (as Group A) that by reducing the debts the steward was cheating his master, but that the emphasis of the application should be on the steward's cleverness and shrewdness in looking out for his own future - something which should be emulated by every follower of Jesus as regards this world and the next (never confusing the means with the end).

This group includes: W. Bowie, P. Bretcher, G. Buttrick, M. Dods, H. Drexler, L. Fonck, J. Fyot, J. Glen, M. Krämer, M. Luther, F. Lisco, T. Manson, and R. Trench.

Martin Luther's extraordinary ability as a biblical expositor is all the more remarkable in light of the fact that he did not have at his disposal the modern tools of critical textual study. Luther took notice of how easily the Parable of the Unjust Steward is misunderstood when he said, "This is truly a Gospel for priests and monks, and will bring them money, unless we prevent it."¹¹

We take the parable in a common sense way, without seeking any subtleties in it, as Jerome has done, for it is not necessary to seek a subtle meaning, the pure milk is sufficient.

This however the Lord commends, namely, that he does not forget himself, praising nought but his cunning and shrewdness. Just as when a flirt draws the whole world after her, and I say: she is a clever flirt, she

knows her business. The Lord further concludes that just as the steward is wise and shrewd in his transactions, so should we also be in obtaining eternal life.¹²

It should be noted that Luther had in the back of his mind the misconceptions of the papists of his day who used this parable to promote work righteousness and the intercession of saints. He therefore adds, "Therefore, mark well, that you do not take what follows (works) for what goes before (faith), and keep yourself free from the merit of works."¹³

Group D

The following group believes that the steward's reduction of the debts may be legitimately explained (as Group B), and that the emphasis of the parable is upon the steward's cleverness and shrewdness in looking out for his own self-interest.

This group contains J. Fitzmyer, E. Kiehl, W. Miller, and M. Scharlemann.

Erich Kiehl says, "The key to the problem of the parable lies in the provisions of the contract between manager and master."¹⁴ The central thought is, "Use your earthly means wisely and sacrificially in order to provide benefits for yourselves in the life to come."¹⁵

As with Derrett,¹⁶ Kiehl believes that the steward's action may be legitimately explained in terms of current economic practice. But whereas Derrett says that the contracts of the debtors must be viewed in the light of Jewish economic practice, even to the exclusion of Roman influence, Kiehl would explain the contracts in terms of Roman law.

. . . Jesus' parables give an idea of the life and manners of a small estate on the confines of the Roman Empire, as they appeared to persons living in that society.¹⁷

The great landowners lived on terms with the Roman government, which favored the large estates.

The landowner of this parable was absentee.

It was simply taken for granted that the manager would look out for himself. Whatever he could get from the estate over and above the amount fixed in the contract for the landowners would be his gain. We recall that certain forms of tax collection were farmed out by the Roman government on this basis. This system of tax collection was also used by the Ptolemies in Palestine.¹⁸

The steward has been "squeezing" his tenants. He had allowed the estate to fall into disrepair and had squandered the master's property. The steward had no fear of prosecution by the master or the authorities, but was only concerned about his own welfare.

The steward's prudence consisted of his obligating to himself (here one must consider the Oriental nature of favors) those whom he had only recently "squeezed" to provide additional income. "His erstwhile lessees would take care of him until such time that he might find a suitable position."¹⁹ In reducing the debts, the steward cut his own share of profit. The debtors were given a degree of protection against further "squeezes" for some time.

Other Solutions

Others have offered much more novel solutions. Frederick Beames has suggested that the steward was a poor bookkeeper and had apparently lent stock without getting bills for it,

possibly to well known clients or well accredited persons. Called to account by his master, he scrounged up the debtors and collected the documents. His master then praised him for just the ability to show the books in good order (even though the master was unknowingly cheated in the process). The central thought would then be that disciples of Jesus should be as energetic in the pursuit of righteousness as a trader in pursuit of gain.

Beames' thesis is offered in all seriousness, as he presents a considerable amount of evidence from the study of Semetic and Near Eastern legal and financial bills.²⁰

Alexander Eagar,²¹ and D.R. Fletcher²² have come forth and suggested that the answer to the question of why the steward was praised can only lie in sarcasm on the part of Jesus. Eagar claims that Jesus was describing the Jews of his time: the Saducees who courted the Romans and thereby broke the Law, and the Pharisees who were covetous to the point of sacrificing Christ. The main point is "you cannot serve God and mammon". Single-minded faithfulness is called for.²³

Last (and perhaps in this instance also least) are those who have simply surrendered at an attempt to make any sense of the parable. Serminius (previously mentioned on page 17) described the parable as "valde difficilis" and "capitulum obscurissimum".²⁴ A layman by the name of Julius Weinholz was recently even more frank. He felt that the only thing that could be done was to either omit or pass over in silence

" . . . this strange part in the rich treasure of the Bible .
 . . " which on account of the praise bestowed on " . . . an
unscrupulous swindler must be very painful to every pious
person."²⁵

CHAPTER IX

SUMMARY

The purpose of this research paper has been to present a brief and comparative overview of the most significant previous investigations and interpretations of the Parable of the Unjust Steward. Having accomplished this, what can be said in summary? Several items come to mind.

It is evident that an uncomfortable amount of the thought of the various contributors is nothing more than pious speculation which has little supportive evidence. For example, how much serious consideration can be given to the identification of the steward with St. Paul (page 18)? Such poorly supported theories may shed light on the biblical hermeneutics and exegesis of an era or individual, but they contribute little to the practical solution of the parable. Unfortunately, such instances of unsupported speculation are not limited to the past - as is evidenced from the present paper.

On the other extreme, some opinions and theories are so overly burdened with facts and figures, especially from the world of higher textual criticism, that they tend to accomplish little more than the presentation of a well documented history lesson and do not devote enough effort (granted, sometimes knowingly or purposely) in the direction of bringing out the central message of the evangelist. For example, few scholars can compare with the solidly based documenta-

tion and scholarship of J.D.M Derrett (pages 28,29), but many of them could bring out and develop an important message from the recorder of this difficult parable.

The present writer argues for a balanced approach to the Parable of the Unjust Steward and would hold that one of the values of a research paper such as this is the opportunity to "spread things out on the table" in order to gain proper and valuable interpretive perspective. When one reads through the various well argued theories offered on the Parable of the Unjust Steward the temptation is to say after each reading, "Yes, this must be the answer." The procedure of comparison tends to quickly eliminate such one sided solutions without due consideration of others.

In light of the preceding statements, the present writer is hesitant to opt for one particular view as opposed to another. Nevertheless, some arguments are certainly more convincing than others.

Many of the theories and solutions were impressive. Especially impressive were the works represented by J.D.M. Derrett, J.A. Fitzmyer, E.H. Kiehl, M. Luther, and F.E. Williams. It is evident that the text of Luke 16:1-13 does not adequately explain for the modern reader the economic background of the parable. With the exception of Martin Luther (whose day did not of course have the tools of modern biblical research), these scholars offer plausible explanations. Kiehl and Luther do the best job of emphasizing a message for the Christians of their day.

If such a hybrid is possible - and the present writer believes it is possible - a combination of such qualities as are exemplified by J.D.M Derrett and Martin Luther would be most satisfactory, and in fact, a needed item in this area of interpretation. The Parable of the Unjust Steward is not a closed area of study.

FOOTNOTES

Chapter I

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³Ibid., pp.21-30.

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⁵Scharlemann, p. 26.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Erich Kiehl, The Parable of the Unjust Manager in the Light of Contemporary Economic Life (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.: Doctor of Theology Thesis, 1959).

⁸Dodd.

⁹Scharlemann, pp. 31-46.

¹⁰Kiehl, p. 51.

¹¹Alexander Bruce, The Parabolic Teaching of Christ, A Systematic and Critical Study of the Parables of our Lord, third revised edition (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Sons, c.1890), p. 375.

¹²Ibid., p. 367.

¹³J.M. Creed, The Gospel According to St. Luke (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., c.1965), p. 201.

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²Alexander Eagar, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward," The Expositor, Series 5 (1895, v.2), 457-470.

³J.D.M. Derrett, "Fresh Light on St. Luke xvi. I. The Parable of the Unjust Steward," New Testament Studies, VII (March 1961), 198-219.

⁴B.A. Hooley and A.J. Mason, "Some Thought on the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-9)," Australian Biblical Review, VI (January-April 1958), 47-59.

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⁶C.H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom, revised (London: Nisbet and Co. Ltd., c.1950), p. 31.

⁷R.G. Lunt, "Expounding the Parables: III. The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-15)," The Expository Times, 77 (May 1966), 132-136.

⁸George Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus (1931), p. 117.

⁹Marcus Dods, The Parables of Our Lord (n.d.), p. 365.

¹⁰Martin Scharlemann, Proclaiming the Parables (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, c.1963), p. 89.

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¹C.H. Dodd, The Parables of The Kingdom, revised (London: Nisbet and Co. Ltd., c.1950), 27.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., pp. 31,32.

⁴Joachim Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus, translated by S.H. Hooke from the third German edition (London: SCM Press Ltd., c.1955), p. 33.

⁵M. Krämer, "Ad parabolam de villico iniquo: Lc 16, 8.9," Verbum Domini, XXXVIII (May-June 1960), 278-291.

⁶F.J. Moore, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward," The Anglican Theological Review, 47 (January 1965), 103-105.

⁷J.A. Fitzmyer, "The Story of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13)," Theological Studies, XXV (January 1964), 23-42.

⁸Fitzmyer notes that many of the Roman Catholic scholars of earlier years were in the third group because they felt bound by the liturgical form of the story and were generally reluctant to adopt form critical methods of analysis. This he notes is not so prevalent today. Ibid., p. 27.

⁹Ibid., p 28.

¹⁰Jeremias, pp. 31-36.

¹¹Fitzmyer, pp. 38,39.

¹²A. Descamps, "La composition litteraire de Luc XVI, 9-13," Novem Testamentum 1 (1956), 49-53.

¹³Jeremias, pp. 31-36.

¹⁴F.W. Williams, "Is Almsgiving the point of the 'Unjust Steward'?", The Journal of Biblical Theology, 83 (March 1964), 293-297.

¹⁵Fitzmyer, pp. 29,30.

¹⁶Descamp.

¹⁷Fitzmyer.

¹⁸Jeremias.

¹⁹T.W. Manson, The Sayings of Jesus as Recorded in the Gospel According to St. Matthew and St. Luke, Arranged with Introduction and Commentary (London: SCM Press Ltd., c.1954).

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³R.G. Lunt, "Expounding the Parables: III. The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-15)," The Expository Times, 77 (May 1966), 132-136.

⁴As quoted by Richard Trench, Notes on the Parables of Our Lord (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.), p. 342.

⁵As quoted by ^{Trench}Ibid.

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²J.D.M. Derrett, "Fresh Light on St. Luke xvi. I. The Parable of the Unjust Steward," New Testament Studies, VII (March 1961), 198.

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⁵As compiled from Fitzmyer and Derrett.

⁶Fitzmyer, p.27.

⁷Derrett.

⁸Dodd.

⁹I.H. Marshall, "Luke xvi.8 — Who Commended the Unjust Steward?," The Journal of Theological Studies, 19 (February 1968), 617-619.

¹⁰M. Krämer, "Ad parabolam de villico iniquo: Lc 16, 8.9," Verbum Domini, XXXVIII (May-June 1960), 278-291.

¹¹William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, c.1957), pp. 459-462.

¹²W.F. Moulton and A.S. Geden, A Concordance to the Greek Testament (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913).

¹³Werner Foerster, "kurios," Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament, III, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Verlag Von W. Kohlhammer, 1938), pp. 1038-1094.

¹⁴Erich Kiehl, The Parable of the Unjust Manager in the Light of Contemporary Economic Life (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.: Doctor of Theology Thesis, 1959), p. 83.

¹⁵Martin Scharlemann, Proclaiming the Parables, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, c. 1963), p. 85.

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²Erich Kiehl, The Parable of the Unjust Manager in the Light of Contemporary Economic Life (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.: Doctor of Theology Thesis, 1959), pp. 61-62.

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⁶Leopold Fonck, The Parables of the Gospel, translated from the third German edition by E. Leahy (New York and Cincinnati: Frederick Pustet Co., Inc., 1914), pp 605.

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⁸Kiehl, pp. 86ff.

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¹¹Williams, p. 297.

¹²So Bigo, Beames, Creed, Kiehl, Krämer, Luther, and Scharlemann.

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³Ibid., p. 375.

⁴Richard R. Caemmerer, "Investment for Eternity. A Study of Luke 16:1-13," The Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXIV (February 1963), 69.

⁵Ibid., p. 70.

⁶Ibid., p. 73.

⁷J.D.M. Derrett, "Fresh Light on St. Luke xvi. I. The Parable of the Unjust Steward," New Testament Studies, VII (March 1961), p. 200

⁸Ibid., p. 201.

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¹⁰F.E. Williams, "Is Almsgiving the point of the 'Unjust Steward'?" The Journal of Biblical Theology, 83 (March 1964), 293-297.

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¹²Ibid., p. 294.

¹³Ibid., pp. 295-301.

¹⁴Erich Kiehl, The Parable of the Unjust Manager in the Light of Contemporary Economic Life (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.: Doctor of Theology Thesis, 1959), pp. 131, 132.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁶Derrett.

¹⁷Kiehl, p. 91.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 107.

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²⁰Frederick Beames, "The Unrighteous Steward," The Expository Times, XXIV (January 1913), 150-155.

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²⁵Ibid., p. 601.

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