

Luke 16: The unjust steward

This article is written as a case study in how to interpret Scripture. Many of the commentaries fail to appreciate the “big picture” and offer *ad hoc* explanations which can be useful in understanding parts of the chapter but miss the main point altogether. Therefore this exercise is (hopefully) conducted as a useful guide on how to approach scripture. That is not to say that commentaries are not helpful but they must be used with discretion.

The first step

The first step is (obviously) to read the chapter, preferably using different translations. Gain an overall impression, identify problem areas and draw up a rough structure. We may well use commentaries at a later stage but first we need to be familiar with the material.

Rough structure

A rough structure of the chapter might look something like this:

1. Parable of the rich man and the unjust steward **vv. 1-13**
2. Response of Pharisees **v.14**
3. Pronouncement on John the Baptist and the Kingdom **vv.15-17**
4. Pronouncement on adultery **v.18**
5. Parable of the rich man and Lazarus **vv.19-31**

This is a “rough” structure as points 3 and 4 still form part of the reply to the Pharisees, so we could have included 3 and 4 with 2:

1. Parable of the rich man and the unjust steward **vv. 1-13**
2. Response of Pharisees and reply by Jesus (John + adultery) **v.14-18**
3. Parable of the rich man and Lazarus **vv.19-31**

The points in the first schema have been deliberately deconstructed for the sake of clarity and seem to be a *non-sequitur* with regards to the parable of the unjust steward. The commentators might talk about such things as “form criticism” and “sources” etc but how likely is it that Luke just cobbled together different stories about John and adultery and placed them after the parable (or more pertinently between parables). Jesus’ “illogical” reply (concerning John and adultery) is framed by two parables about a “certain rich man”.

Identifying difficulties

Leaving aside (for now) the parable of Lazurus and the rich man, the main difficulty in the first half of the chapter is vv. 8-11 which forms the conclusion of the parable concerning the unjust steward. We might ask who is speaking. Is it still a part of the parable or does the assessment of the steward’s character come from Jesus? Who is the lord “master” who gives the admiring (favourable) assessment? Is it the rich man (master) who employed the steward? It does not seem like Jesus would give the steward a favourable reference but neither does it seem like the rich man would do so. Why would the rich man “commend” the actions of a steward who he was going to fire and who obviously cooked the books. Looking at these verses in two different translations:

KJV: Luke 16:8-13 ⁸ And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light. ⁹ And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations. ¹⁰ He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. ¹¹ If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? ¹² And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own? ¹³ No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

NIV: Luke 16:8-13 ⁸ "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹ I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. ¹⁰ "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹ So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹² And if you have not been trustworthy

with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? ¹³"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

It seems that vv.10-13 is the conclusion (words) of Jesus and vv.8-9 is the conclusion of the "rich man" (master) who employed the steward. Turning to the commentators Adewale¹ has a unique suggestion. It is assumed that the steward is a crook but Adewale suggests that the accusation is *false* so the steward devises a scheme to salvage his master's honour and at the same time secure his own future! That is why the master "commends him" because by handing out "debt relief" he ensures that the debtors will not renege on their further obligations and the "master" saves face² as it were, while the falsely accused steward is also looked after. However, this ingenious solution does not stand scrutiny because as Jesus clearly points out "if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?" Another commentator points out that the "debt relief" although significant would hardly ensure the steward's future in perpetuity besides which who would want to employ a known felon? The people he has forgiven are hardly going to pay him a wage (forever) and put him in a position of responsibility. Other commentators such as Schellenberg state that if the parable is seen as a single level of discourse, then verses 8b to 13 are indeed not appropriate and therefore propose that this section is a "Lukan redaction" and not part of the original parable as conveyed by Jesus. None of these solutions is satisfactory.

All the above solutions fail to recognize that Jesus often employed hyperbole and cognitive dissonance in parables in order to make the hearers **think**. The reaction of the audience would be the same as ours. What? Impossible, the rich man would not condone such actions the steward acted out of self interest. He may have been clever but he was untrustworthy. That is the reaction that Jesus wanted! Elsewhere, Jesus tells his disciples to be as wise as serpents, and harmless as doves (Matt 10.16). That does not mean that he wants them to be as unscrupulous or as self-interested as the unjust steward but that he wants them to possess the same acumen and drive when seeking their "eternal habitations". Furthermore, the "eternal habitation" of the unjust steward is the same as the rich man of the next parable (not necessarily the same rich man as in the first parable), his habitation is (not literally) in "hell being in torments" (v.23). So the parable ends on a deliberately discordant note in order to challenge the listeners and evoke an outraged sense of natural justice. Rubbish! The rich man would not "commend" such actions. What non

¹ Olubiyi Adeniyi Adewale, *An Understanding of the Parable of the Shrewd Manager*, (Luke 16: 1-13)IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)Volume 16, Issue 6 (Nov.-Dec. 2013),pp. 125-130 <http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol16-issue6/T0166125130.pdf>

² The accusation against the steward was indirectly targeted at the master i.e., the master was defrauding the debtors?

sense. The steward was clever but crooked....he should have gotten his come-uppance and been punished. In reacting in such a way the Pharisees **condemned themselves**;

And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him. (Luke 16.14)

The parable was predominantly aimed at the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees who were God's stewards. The next section makes this abundantly clear and throws the entire parable into a new light. Ostensibly the parable is about managing wealth....but it is much more than that.....it is about coveting power and standing and all the accoutrements that come with it (including wealth).

Why does Jesus pronounce on John the Baptist followed by adultery at this particular point? What relevance does it have to the above parable? Those are the questions that exegetes should be asking.

Discounting God's righteousness

The answer is both satisfying and profound. **John the Baptist had been put to death for denouncing the adultery of Herod.** On the other hand, the high priest (a Sadducee) was appointed by Herod and the sect of the Pharisees took pride in the fact that Herod (an Edomite) had converted to Judaism.³ **Neither the Pharisees nor the Sadducees denounced the sins of the Herod dynasty.** They would not (and did not) hesitate to condemn such behaviour in "ordinary" people but they let Herod literally "get away" with murder and adultery. They were quite happy to write off Herod's debt in order to keep their jobs. Like the unjust steward they discounted God's righteousness in order to fulfil their own selfish needs. We can imagine....how many murders....two for the price of one? That's OK friend. Herod was a paranoid psychopath who murdered his wife and children (and John) and committed adultery. Augustus remarked that it was better to be Herod's pig than his son. And what did the Pharisees and Sadducees do? They wrote off his debt like the unjust steward in the mistaken belief that this made their "eternal habitation" secure. Not so, as Jesus will demonstrate with his next parable. If they were "friends" of mammon they could not be "friends" of God (like Abraham) and so they would be denied the "eternal habitation" of Abraham. Coincidentally (sic) Abraham had sent his faithful gentile steward

³ **Matthew 23:15** Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte (convert), and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.

Eliezer⁴ (the Hebrew form of the name Lazarus) to find a bride for his son in order to perpetuate the covenant through his promised son Isaac.

Inter-textual connections

The condemnation of the priests and the **Edomite** Herod dynasty was not simply “plucked out of the air” by Jesus as it had been anticipated **in the prophetic writings of Malachi**.⁵ The book of Malachi was not written in the Ezra/Nehemiah period (as the commentaries suggest)⁶ it was written about the same time that the father of Herod the Great appeared on the scene. It was therefore written when the Hasmonean dynasty was coming to an end and the priesthood had become corrupted by Idumean influences. The prophecy begins with the words “Edom (i.e., the Herod dynasty) have I hated”....it frequently condemns adultery...it speaks of the coming messenger of the covenant.....and anticipates the coming of Elijah (John the Baptist). It was then a prophetic work directly targeted at Herod (and his dynasty), the Pharisees and the Sadducees of the first century! They were robbing God! (You made the temple a den of thieves) and condoning the (cunning as a fox) Herod in his pursuit of adultery and murder etc. And the Jewish leaders “forgave” the debt...*the unjust steward in action!*

The rich man and Lazarus

Jesus immediately “ups the ante” by telling another parable about a rich man. It would be wrong to assume that this is the same “rich man” as in the previous parable. Lazarus is poor and seemingly also diseased (leprous) he is begging at the rich man’s gate feeding on scraps like a dog! This is interesting because lying at the gate and the mention of dogs suggest that Lazarus was an unclean gentile! Devout gentiles seeking some degree of religious affiliation with Israel were actually known as “proselytes of the gate” (John.12.20) and gentiles were often likened to dogs (by Jesus himself! cf. Matt 15.25-28). So, here then is (from a Jewish perspective) the lowest of the low – a poor, diseased gentile and he ends up in Abraham’s bosom! He is accorded the same dignity as the disciple John who lay on Jesus’ bosom; he is hid in the “bosom” of God like Moses in the cleft of the rock when he saw the grace of God pass by; in the same “bosom” where the leprously of Miriam was cured! The position of

⁴ Although his name is not spelled out in the Bible, but he is only described there as “the servant of Abraham” (Genesis 24:34 ff), Jewish tradition has that this man, who found Rebecca and facilitated her marriage with Isaac, bore the name Eliezer and that he came from Damascus probably based on Gen 15.3 where he is named.

⁵ See the comparison table at the end of this article.

⁶ On this see: <http://www.biblaridion.info/Digressions/malachi.pdf>

Lazarus (God helps) in the “after life” is completely overturned, so much so that the rich man now appeals to Abraham for Lazarus to act as his intercessor (send Lazarus with water....send Lazarus to my brothers)!

Who then is the rich man? The rich man of the previous parable was God....who is rich in mercy and grace. The rich man in this parable, with his beautiful robes and sumptuous fare was the high priest. He lived in his own palace just outside the temple. The high priest had a *representative role before God* – he embodied the Jewish people **and their exclusivity** – jealously “guarding the gate” of access to God and throwing the odd crumb to the gentiles (dogs). Jesus is effectively saying that the gentiles will end up in the “bosom” of Abraham the “friend of God” while the Jews will lose their privileged position because they are the “friend of mammon”. Harry Whittaker observes; “There is good reason to believe that, just as Jesus modelled his parable of the pounds (Luke 19.11-27) on the experience of *both Archelaus and Antipas, the sons of Herod the Great*, so here he built the present parable round Caiaphas the high priest whose five brothers-in-law, the sons of Annas, all held the high priestly office at one time or another. “Clothed in purple and fine linen” was a phrase apt enough to describe this family of place seekers. In the conclusion of the parable Jesus surely exposed also the absurdity of their Sadducee belief. In effect, he said: These men are so determined not to believe in life after death that even the resurrection of one known to them will make no impression on their prejudice. So there was no appearance of the risen Jesus to *them*.”⁷

The question of the “after-life”

The discourse presented by Jesus is so obviously a parable that it is patently absurd to extract any doctrine concerning “the after-life” from it. These are the sort of pictures painted by first century Judaism *in many of their writings* and obviously not meant to be taken literally.⁸ The picture is used by Jesus as a *teaching tool* – it suited his penchant for

⁷ H.A. Whittaker, *Studies in the Gospels*, (Biblia, 1988)@ <http://www.christadelphianbooks.org/haw/sitg/sitgb43.html>

⁸ H.A. Whittaker gives an example from Josephus in which Josephus describes the “after-life” in similar terms to the scene described in the Lazarus parable (even mentioning the bosom of Abraham), **however, this is incorrect**. The passage he quotes can be found in William Whiston in “Dissertation 6”, part **of the appendix to his Josephus** translation, printed the text of this “Discourse” in Greek and maintained that the piece was by Josephus, “preached or written when he was bishop of Jerusalem”. However, although generally still reprinted in editions of Whiston’s Josephus, later scholars have realized that this attribution is incorrect. This brief discourse, at least in its original form, is now attributed to the church father Hippolytus (170 – 235 AD). The attribution to Josephus, recorded by Photius in his *Bibliotheca*, did not stand unchallenged even in antiquity, and the “Discourse” was also ascribed to Caius, Presbyter of Rome, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus. We now know that a work by Hippolytus published in Vol. 5 of the Ante-Nicene Fathers under the title “Against Plato, on the Cause of the Universe” is essentially the same work as the “Discourse” attributed to Josephus. This Hippolytus work is in fact a fragment from a longer treatise entitled “Against the Greeks.” [Wikipedia contributors. (2018, April 4). Discourse to the Greeks concerning Hades. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 09:42,

hyperbole perfectly. For example, it says; “And in hell he (the rich man) lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom” (v.23). The phrase “afar off” is a key phrase⁹ used to describe the place of sacrifice in **Genesis 22** (and to structure Ps 22 but that is another story¹⁰), where the place is called “Yahweh-Yireh” (Gen 22.22) or, *Yah will be seen* (cf. Abraham saw my day; John 8.56). In other words, Abraham had the faith to see the messiah “afar off” (in the future), however, the rich man sees Lazarus “afar off” (in the future) residing in the comfort of Abraham’s bosom. This demonstrates that the rich man did not have the faith of Abraham to see the messianic implications of Isaac’s sacrifice instead the rich man regards with despair as the gentiles are blessed (as promised to Abraham) “afar off”. The temple would however *literally disappear in flames* as would the Jewish state. The priesthood would also disappear. In contrast the gospel preached to Abraham would now be preached to gentiles, who would share in the promises made to Abraham. Unfaithful Jews, who do not believe in the resurrection (like the Sadducee priests) are indeed *literally separated by a “great gulf”* (death) from the faith of Abraham (Abraham believed that Isaac would be restored from death because he was the child of promise cf. Gen 22.5). The Sadducees rejected the messiah because they rejected faith in the resurrection. As such they condemned themselves to the “everlasting habitation” of death. If they did not hear Abraham or Moses or the prophets...why would they listen to Jesus? They (the five brothers) certainly did not listen to one returned from the dead (Lazarus) and therefore the resurrected Jesus did not show himself to the Sadducees.

September 24, 2018, from (see there for footnotes)]. So, this particular passage incorrectly attributed to Josephus by Whiston (and HAW) has nothing to tell us about early Judaism. Judaism *did borrow* concepts from Hellenism (immortality) and Persia (reincarnation) and continued to develop other idea’s but the OT and NT and the early first century church only taught the bodily resurrection and the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth. Resurrection is implied in the story of Genesis 22, informs the conclusions of Job’s theological speculations, is upheld by Daniel and is typologically and allegorically used by the prophets. For a survey of current trends in scholarship regarding the after-life see: C.D. Elledge ,*Future Resurrection of the Dead in Early Judaism: Social Dynamics, Contested Evidence*, Currents in Biblical Research 9(3) 394–421. Elledge states that the most recent methodological advances arise from sociological studies, which attempt to contextualize resurrection within the social dynamics of the religious movements that advanced this hope. In other words (simplifying the hypotheses) belief in the resurrection, or immortal soul or reincarnation (and there are forms of Judaism with aspects/mixtures of these different beliefs) *developed* as a response to social/political pressures. So, for example a belief in immortality or going to paradise would aid those who (for example) fought the Romans. Think here in "modern" terms such as Jihadists that are promised paradise if they commit suicide in the name of Allah in the cause of establishing the Caliphate. However, (as we have already noted), the resurrection was an **early OT teaching** and that teaching was believed passionately by the early church (and as Paul affirms by the Pharisees **but not by the Sadducees**), so whatever later “developments” occurred in Judaism, they are corruptions of earlier Biblical doctrines.

⁹ **Genesis 22:4** Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off

¹⁰ See, P. Wyns, Psalm 22, *CEJBI*, Vol. 10, No.2, Apr 2016@ <http://www.biblaridion.info/resources/Ps22.pdf> and P. Wyns, *Sabachthani: the suffering servant and the akedha* @ <http://www.biblaridion.info/Anthology/Sabachthani.pdf> as well as the spreadsheet @ <http://www.biblaridion.info/Anthology/Sabek.xlsm>

The question of the relationship to John's Lazarus

In the fourth Gospel we have the resurrection of Lazarus and the response of Caiaphas (the high priest);

John 11:47-53 ⁴⁷ Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many miracles. ⁴⁸ If we let him thus alone, all *men* will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation. ⁴⁹ And one of them, *named* Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all, ⁵⁰ Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not. ⁵¹ And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; ⁵² And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad. ⁵³ Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death.

This the ultimate result of “discounting God’s righteousness” in order to maintain “eternal habitations” (our place and our nation). The high priest (unjust steward) was willing (as a matter of expediency) to commit murder and to “write of the debt” of all the participants in this nefarious act. Whether it was Herod, the Romans, the false witnesses.....no debt owed to God....all is forgiven as long as we can secure our standing. The end justifies the means.

There can be little doubt that some sort of connection exists between the parable and the resurrection miracle –both men are named Lazarus, both are sick, both die. There are of course differences but it seems too coincidental for Jesus to tell a parable (directed at the rulers) and then raise Lazarus (as a lesson to the rulers). The Jewish elite obviously thought that the resurrection of Lazarus was some sort of sleight of hand – as Jesus predicted “they would not believe though one came back from the dead”. The priestly (Sadducee) worldview was that resurrection was impossible, *ipso facto*, it could not have happened.

On the question of the relationship between the Gospel of John and Luke I recommend reading Anderson (the problem is too complex to discuss here) where he looks at John’s influence upon Luke (*Formative, Orderly and Theological*) in which (as one of many contact points) he says; “....Mary and Martha are mentioned as sisters and are presented as having similar roles (John 11.1;12.1-3; Luke 10.38-42), a man Lazarus is presented in both John and Luke and in both cases is associated with death and the testimony of after-death experiences (John 11.1-12.17; Luke 16.19-31)....”¹¹ He concludes, “Both in matters of inclusion and exclusion, John’s material appears to have played a formative role in the development of Luke’s Gospel, and that influence seems to have taken place during the oral stages of the Johannine tradition”¹²

It is (in my view) very probable that Luke “interviewed” Mary for his account of the conception and as she was probably living at Ephesus *with John* (and his followers) that is where the “oral tradition” may have originated.

¹¹ Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the quest for Jesus*, (T&T Clark, Continuum, 2007), 113

¹² *Ibid*, 114

Malachi	New Testament
2.7 he <i>is</i> the messenger of the LORD of hosts	Lk 7.27 This is <i>he</i> , of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger
3.1 he shall prepare the way before me	Lk 3.5 the rough ways <i>shall be</i> made smooth
4.5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD	Matt 11.13-14 And if ye will receive <i>it</i> , this is Elijah which was for to come
3.1 he shall prepare the way before me	Lk 1.17 He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah
4.6 And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children	Lk 1.17 to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children
4.2 But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise	Lk 1.78 By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us
2.7-8 For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord	Lk 1.77 To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins (the Baptist was a Levitical priest)
2.5 My covenant was with him of life and peace	Lk 1.79 to guide our feet into the way of peace
4.6 and the heart of the children to their fathers	Matt 3.9 And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to <i>our</i> father
4.1 shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up	Matt 3.12 but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire
4.1 that it shall leave them neither root nor branch	Matt 3.10 axe is laid unto the root of the trees
1.6 If I <i>be</i> a master, where <i>is</i> my fear? saith the LORD of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name.	Matt 3.7 many of the Pharisees and Sadducees (priests) come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
2.16 for <i>one</i> covereth violence with his garment	Matt 11.12 And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence
1.3 And I hated Esau	Herod the Edomite
1.4 Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places	John 2.20 Herod rebuilds the temple
3.1 the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple	John 2.13-21 Jesus cleanses the temple
3.8 Will a man rob God?	John 2.16 My Father's house an house of merchandise
2.16...the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away. 3.5 a swift witness... against the adulterers 2.10 why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother	Mk 6.18 For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife.
2.14 the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously	Herod executed his wife the beautiful Hasmonean princess Mariamme (died 29 BCE) and her family
1.4 They (Edom) shall build, but I will throw down	Matt 24.2 Herod's temple destroyed
3.2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?	Rev 6.17 ...for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?

