

IS IT FALSE TESTIMONY? STUDYING LUKE 16.1-13
AS THE REHABILITATION OF A REJECTED PARABLE

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At times, it seems that there is a common view among some that early Christians were generally accepting or open to whatever traditions were passed down about the Historical Jesus and his ministry, depending on what was available in their local areas.¹ This presumption of Christian naivety often appears most when it is typically assumed by default that if a Gospel is missing something that other Gospels have, it is because it did not *know* of it. This proposed ignorance is chosen instead of the other potential hypothesis: that the author of the Gospel actively *rejected* it. The unstated presumption behind such an assumption is that if the individuals/community responsible for that Gospel had known of a tradition about Jesus, surely they would have preserved it.² And yet, our earliest Christian sources suggest

1. Special thanks to Peter C. Ajer of the Graduate Theological Union for giving me the chance to explore this topic. And I give my gratitude as well to Candida R. Moss of the University of Birmingham for the conversations that helped to further push my thinking about this. As always, the shortcomings of this paper remain only my own.

2. While there are many examples of this that could be given, one can be taken recently from Justin Strong's work on reconstructing some of the special L material as stemming from an early Christian fable collection. When commenting on why Luke is the only one to preserve this material, he proposes three possibilities, and none of them specifically imagines the other Gospel accounts actively rejected the material. The closest he gets to this idea is when he says, 'it may mean that they did not think to include this material for one reason or another,' but then he notes a few sentences later that 'it is most likely that the other evangelists show no signs of being aware of most of Luke's fables because Luke alone among the evangelists

that it was common for Christian communities in the first and second century to disregard or ignore statements by Jesus that were perceived to be problematic, even at times claiming they originated with their enemies.

This paper will turn attention to the early Christian phenomenon of rejecting sayings attributed to Jesus, exploring what the reasons for such rejection were and what the motivations might have been. Following this, the parable of the dishonest manager (Lk. 16.1-13) is explored as a test example of a text that appears to have been rejected but uniquely preserved by Luke in his Gospel. This represents one of the currently most debated parables attributed to Jesus in early Christian literature, and there still exists little to no consensus on much of it amongst scholars.³ Regardless of this fact, it will be argued that by paying attention to the problematic nature of the parable and its potentially *rejected* status at the time of Luke's composition, it is possible to find convincing support for a view of the parable that embraces its immoral character and harmonizes it with the rest of the Lukan Jesus' attributed teachings.

This paper will argue that Luke has defended the authenticity of the parable by understanding Jesus' words as rhetorically ironic or sarcastic (rather than straightforwardly truthful). In this way, this paper follows the work of Fletcher, Porter, and others who have proposed the same. Contrary to Porter and others who have argued similarly for the irony interpretation,⁴ it is *not*

had access to them' (Justin Strong, *The Fables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: A New Foundation for the Study of Parables* [Leiden: Brill, 2021], p. 520). What is 'most likely' for Strong, an assumption shared by many scholars, is that the evangelists would not likely reject, ignore, or push aside material attributed to Jesus if they knew of it. Yet, this is no more likely than the alternative, so far as we can judge from our ancient sources. If the other evangelists do not include the material that Luke does, it is just as possible that it is because they purposefully did not want to.

3. John K. Goodrich, 'Voluntary Debt Remission and the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13)', *JBL* 131 (2012), pp. 448-553 (547), who states, 'The parable of the unjust steward is widely considered the most puzzling of Jesus' teachings. Although a seemingly endless string of interpretations continues to appear in print, no single reading has convinced the current scholarly majority.'

4. Stanley E. Porter, 'The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16.1-13): Irony Is the Key', in David J. A. Clines, Stephen Fowl, and Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield* (JSOTSup, 87; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990),

assumed by me that the parable was recognizably ironic to many of its first audiences (explaining why it was rejected by so many or ignored). Instead of a parable that seeks to be accepted, I argue that the parable's message is intentionally controversial and although the motives of the Historical Jesus cannot be hypothesized (if he is to be credited with the parable's origin), the strategy by which Luke preserved it can be articulated. It will be argued that the additional statements of Jesus (vv. 10-13) were added by Luke afterward to serve the purpose of reminding readers to reflect on the parable in light of Jesus' overall known teachings, a disposition that for Luke appears to serve as a hermeneutical key for understanding Jesus' message.

1. *Christian Rejection of Jesus' Teachings*

The earliest example of a Christian consciously ignoring something Jesus was attributed to have said is Paul, who in 1 Cor. 7.12-15 informs his congregation that they are not 'bound' to follow Jesus' teaching on divorce strictly, since as he argues, Jesus has called them to peace. The issue at stake was Jesus' teaching that forbade divorce and whether Paul's community in Corinth should refuse requests for divorce from their non-Christian spouses. Not granting a divorce to the unbelieving spouse who wants it would only create the opposite of peace according to the letter, and so he argues ('I, and not the Lord') that the best way to honor Jesus' *overall* teaching is to ignore the specific one offered on divorce, allowing a unique exception for new circumstances.

In this example, Paul appears to be aware that the circumstances distinguishing the audience Jesus spoke to and his own with his Greek converts was different enough that a simple 1 to 1 ratio of equivalence is ill advised when applying Jesus' past teachings. Paul rejects something he and his community believe stems from the Historical Jesus' specific teaching, but only because he finds rationale for doing so in his interpretation of Jesus' own teachings elsewhere.⁵

pp. 127-53; Donald R. Fletcher, 'The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?', *JBL* 82 (1963), pp. 15-30.

5. In this way, I find both agreement and disagreement with Chak Him Chow's proposal that Paul esteemed his authority above Jesus in the passage. Chak Him Chow ('Paul's Divergence from Jesus' Prohibition of Divorce in 1 Corinthians

The next time that this phenomenon appears is in the Gospel accounts, however in a much stronger manner. In the Gospel of Mark (7.24-30) and Matthew (15.21-28), a story is told of either a Syrophenician or Canaanite woman for whom Jesus refuses to perform a miracle. He tells her that it is logically impossible for him to offer a miracle to her, a dog, when the children (Jews) are needing it. She counters this argument by the Jewish messiah, rejecting his words (three or more times in Matthew's account) and even implying that Jesus is illogical and/or mistaken since the analogy he gave, according to her, was incorrect. In Matthew's account, this theme of rejecting Jesus' words is heightened since one of the things he tells her is actually first given to the disciples in Mt. 10.5-6, making his concluding praise of her faith a condemnation of the disciples who had not similarly rejected the same teaching when given.

In this instance and in Paul's, the saying of Jesus is accepted as authentic, but still put aside, ignored, or rejected as wrong despite no disagreement over its historical validity in the minds of the Christian audience. This indicates that early Christians, with regard to their hermeneutics, had more in common with Valentinians (i.e. Ptolemy's *Epistula ad Floram*) and the author of the *Apocryphon of James* than would be expected by many commentators today. Like Valentinians, just because the Bible said something did not indicate one should blindly accept it as equally inspired to other Scriptures or believe that it was even good (*Flor.* 33.5.1-2, 7),⁶ and like the Canaanite woman, if Jesus appears to teach something that pushes you away

7:10-16', *Open Theology* 7 [2021], pp. 169-79 [176]) states that 'Paul's divergence from Jesus' absolute prohibition of divorce should already indicate that Paul's position ... is so extraordinary as to rival that of Jesus.' It is my contention that Paul's own authority to differ from Jesus is for him authorized by Jesus ('called to peace', 1 Cor. 7.15; cf. Mt. 13.52), in a similar way by which Jesus is presented as authorizing his own hermeneutical authority to disregard the law by appeal to that same law (see Mk 2.23-28; Mt. 19.1-9).

6. A clear distinction between the later Valentinians and the earlier Christians, however, is that while Ptolemy warned Flora that 'our savior's words' were the means 'by which alone it is possible to reach a certain apprehension of the reality of the matter without stumbling' (*Flor.* 33.3.8), earlier Christians apparently found Jesus' words just as problematic as the God of the Hebrew Bible. Translation is taken from Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 309.

from the kingdom, one should reject his teaching and know that this is his ultimate desire. This is specifically articulated by the *Apocryphon of James* which has Jesus state to James and Peter that they should reject anything Jesus says to them that pushes them away from the kingdom (NHC I 2; 14.10; *Ap. James* 9.5⁷).

Whereas the earlier reviewed texts deal with how to interpret and potentially reject or alter Jesus' words (when assumed authentic), other texts from the New Testament and early Christianity point to debates over when to reject statements of Jesus that are assumed disingenuous. In Mark's account (14.55-59), our earliest Gospel, this theme appears at the trial of Jesus:

Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. *For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree.* Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying 'We heard him say, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands."' *But even on this point their testimony did not agree.*⁸

Mark argues that they gave 'false testimony', but what does he mean by the term? It appears that he defines it as *disagreement* over what was said.⁹

7. Verse numbering taken from the Scholars Translation, as printed in Robert J. Miller (ed.), *The Complete Gospels* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 4th edn, 2010).

8. Emphasis is my own.

9. M. Eugene Boring (*Mark: A Commentary* [NTL; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012], p. 412) states, 'Mark must intend the reader to understand that they had reported various versions of what they had "heard him say", otherwise their testimony would not have been inconsistent. There were indeed various versions of Jesus' saying(s) about the temple in circulation in early Christianity, for which there must have been a historical core that goes back to Jesus himself.' See also John R. Donahue, 'Mark', in James Luther Mays (ed.), *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 983-1009 (1006); Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (BNTC; London: Continuum, 1991), p. 358. This stands in contrast to those commentators who suggest that it related *not* to the words, but to the context of the words. Craig A. Evans ('Mark', in James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson [eds.], *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], pp. 1064-1103 [1100]), states, 'The disagreement does not seem to lie with the words themselves ('we heard him say'). It probably lies

While many gave testimony about what they heard Jesus predict, ‘even on this point their testimony did not agree.’¹⁰ As Mary Ann Beavis notes, ‘From the evangelist’s perspective, this is not a saying of Jesus but an in-

with the circumstances in which they were spoken and their intent. This is only a guess, but it follows the lead of the apocryphal book Susanna, a later addition to Daniel. When the two elders falsely accuse Susanna of adultery (1:36-40), their words are in agreement. But when they are questioned separately, their testimony as to the circumstances of Susanna’s alleged sin does not agree (1:52-59). We may suppose that the testimony against Jesus broke down in a similar fashion.’ The line of thinking seems weaker than noting that Matthew might have accepted the words as authentic and eliminates Mark’s comment about them explicitly being false (suggesting that he too interpreted Mark as making the comment about the saying and not about something contextual). However, the fact that Jesus remains silent in response to questioning about the saying may also imply that Matthew believes, like Mark, that the saying is false testimony.

10. Some commentators try to suggest that the statement by Jesus is only false in certain aspects. Lamar Williamson (*Mark: Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983], pp. 264-65) states, ‘Yet at no point in Mark has Jesus claimed that *he* would destroy the Temple, or that after three days he would build another not made with hands. The allegation is therefore false.’ The problem with this view is that as R. Alan Cole (*Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* [TNTC, 2; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989], p. 311) notes, ‘Indeed, without the Johannine reference, we should be at a loss to explain the charge except as a pure fabrication.’ Cole points out the little acknowledged fact that most commentaries on Mark are heavily influenced by their knowledge of John and other sources, rather than giving weight to Mark itself as a narrative. The Gospel of Mark, on its own terms, does not provide this statement of Jesus outside of the context of false testimony, and as such, expects its audience to reject it wholly. John’s statement in contrast appears to be aware of this categorical rejection by those of Mark’s mindset, and is apologetic in its attempt to defend the statement’s validity. See the comment by Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), p. 302, which is most applicable: ‘In terms of the Markan narrative, which *must* be taken as the norm for an appreciation of the reader’s response to this statement from the witnesses, Jesus has *never* made this statement. Mark states explicitly that the accusation that Jesus has said these words is false testimony ... As the Markan Jesus has never uttered these words, whatever may be the case with other New Testament documents, the witness is not true.’

vention of false witnesses (14:57).'¹¹ This both elucidates that Mark assumed that something was only authentic if many could *agree* on what Jesus spoke (similar, if the analogy is allowed, to the modern criterion in Historical Jesus studies of Multiple Attestation), but also that it was likely to be inauthentic if there was disagreement. This early hermeneutic was not generated, however, by non-Christians, as Mark and Matthew's Gospels suggest, for other parts of the New Testament and early Christian tradition affirm or argue that Jesus *did* teach the very thing Mark/Matthew rejects (i.e. Acts 6.14 and *Gos. Thom.* 71). In the Gospel of John (2.19-21), apparently aware of this internal hermeneutical conflict, the author defends the statement that Mark rejects by arguing that it wasn't literal. John reports that 'he was speaking of the temple of his body' (2.20) and notes its pedigree from who first reported it: 'after he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this' (2.21).

Here we can see that because a saying of Jesus had various versions floating around, or was remembered in different ways, Mark assumes that it was falsely created by Jesus' enemies,¹² while John creates an explanation based in other aspects of the Jesus tradition to combat the charge (it was misunderstood, and this misunderstanding occurred prior to the resurrection). Intriguingly, some commentators have noted that the version of the saying Mark knew appears to have already derived from Christian circles.¹³ On a similar note to the theme of false testimony, in the *Gospel of Mary*, the disciples Andrew and Peter presume that Mary is lying when she presents teachings of Jesus that appear to sound unlike other teachings of his (BG

11. Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark* (Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 220.

12. Contrary to Stein's point that Mk 15.29 combats this idea, because it depicts the crowds repeating the saying at Jesus' crucifixion, such a scene actually demonstrates that for Mark, the false testimony about Jesus was not generated necessarily the night of the trial but had already been ongoing prior. Misinformation about Jesus was prevalent. This would be similar to the post-resurrection claim of Matthew that misinformation about Jesus' resurrection was spread by Roman soldiers and Jewish elite (Mt. 28.12-15). See Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 682.

13. Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYB, 27A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 1010.

8502 1 17.10–18.6; *Gos. Mary* 10.1-6)¹⁴. Again, the *Gospel of Mary* assumes that early Christians, like Peter, would reject statements attributed to Jesus if they seemed to be in conflict with other known teachings.¹⁵ Given the evidence of John and Mark, this hermeneutical disposition appears to have its roots in the first century.

This overall hermeneutic displayed by Mark (and Matthew) and referred to by the *Gospel of Mary* for Jesus' oral traditions is curious in that it represents a tension with the earliest descriptions of Jesus' teachings. For example, Mk 4.10-12 reports that Jesus intentionally gave confusing and problematic teachings so that the crowds would not find salvation (a prophetic fulfillment of Isaiah), and the *Gospel of Thomas* reports that Jesus' sayings were disturbing for people who heard them (*Gos. Thom.* 2; 13; cf. Mt. 11.6; Lk. 7.23). Both of these points would seemingly suggest that those sayings or parables that were the most disturbing or problematic would be the most historically accurate and find their source in public discourses given to the crowds (as opposed to the disciples for whom Mark states 'everything was explained in private,' 4.33-34). Curiously, when Matthew and Luke take up that same Markan passage, they each soften it with revisions, demonstrating

14. Verse numbering is taken from R.J. Miller (ed.), *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, rev edn, 1994).

15. Christopher Tuckett (*The Gospel of Mary* [Oxford Christian Gospel Texts; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007], pp. 196-97) states,

Further, it would seem that at least the beginning of a process of drawing boundary lines is under way here, and the basis for this process appears to be the differing—and evidently disputed—*contents* of the message which Mary's teaching and the report of her vision have provided. Thus Andrew's complaint against Mary ... says that Mary's teaching does not agree with the Jesus tradition known from elsewhere. Peter's comment is, in part at least, similar in its implications ... The issue is thus not only one of who might be authorized as a legitimate preacher of the gospel, but also of *which* 'gospel' is to be preached.

See also de Boer's comment: 'Apparently, Andrew is of the opinion that he and the others share a sort of canon of teaching of the Saviour. Teaching that seems different is not to be viewed as coming from the Saviour. Thus, Andrew has a clear rule: only the teaching of the Saviour that the brothers (and sisters) hold as a canon determines the authenticity of what others add from their knowledge of the Saviour' (Esther A. de Boer, *The Gospel of Mary: Beyond a Gnostic and a Biblical Mary Magdalene* [LNTS, 260; New York: T. & T. Clark, 2004], p. 90).

that the earlier ‘problematic Jesus’ idea itself became problematic (Mt. 10.13-17; Lk. 8:9-10).

While the specific hermeneutic is not important for this paper’s discussion, the fact that early Christians were consciously and actively altering, ignoring, or even *rejecting* things attributed to Jesus based on perceived inconsistencies or contradictions with the rest of the tradition (however subjectively that was determined), and also harmonizing those sayings by the same method, raises to our attention the need to take seriously when a saying or parable is preserved only by one Gospel writer. While it may be that those that didn’t preserve it simply didn’t know about it or ignored it, it is also very possible they chose not to include it *because* they rejected it as inconsistent with Jesus’ teaching. And if they rejected it, it means that the Gospel writer who chose to include it may have had to *defend* their reason for doing so, either directly like John or indirectly by their presentation of it.

2. *The Parable of the Dishonest Manager: Why It Is Problematic*

The parable of the dishonest manager (Lk. 16.1-9) represents one of the worst, if not the most, controversial of all Jesus’ many known parables. While it is possible that he told even more contentious stories—see, for example, the Parable of the Assassin in *Gos. Thom.* 98—within the Synoptic tradition this remains a contender for the most problematic and scandalous in its Lukan form. The parable is produced below:

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering (i.e. unfaithful with) his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’⁶ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ And his master com-

mended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into their eternal homes (Lk. 16.1-9).

Needless to explain, most readers naturally find the parable problematic without an introduction. The most basic sense of the passage, and one which can be attested to in its earliest interpretations among the early church fathers (and thus is not merely an anachronism of our own modern times), is that a man who was unfaithful or squandered his master's goods further acts unfaithful and moreover dishonest by altering the master's trade deals so that the master receives less money.¹⁶ In doing this, for a purely selfish ethic (to increase his own recently lost status), he is surprisingly commended by his master (v. 8a) and then commended further by Jesus himself (v. 9) who uplifts the dishonest manager's conduct as something to imitate by his disciples. But as if the idea that a morally problematic character (who works with unrighteous, unjust, or *wicked* wealth)¹⁷ could be a role model for Christian disciples, the situation is made worse by the fact that Jesus specifically states that they should seemingly make use of such 'wicked' wealth for the purpose of being received into the eternal homes of not God or the angels, but seemingly other wealthy human beings.

That is at least three distinct levels of surprise and shock that many readers encounter upon their first confrontation with the text. Whether or not this represents the reality exegetically of the text, this is at the very least the majority reading of it that has spawned the many attempts in scholarship (and church history) to try and explain it. As Stein notes well, 'This traditional interpretation takes the parable at face value. The only serious criticism in understanding the behavior as being dishonest is a moral one. How

16. See F. Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27* (ed. Helmut Koester; trans. Donald S. Deer; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), p. 448, who says, 'At first blush, it seems to recommend making false entries ...'

17. BDAG, p. 20; Timothy Friberg *et al.* (eds.), *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Baker's Greek New Testament Library; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), p. 35.

can the master commend someone for his dishonesty?’¹⁸ It is that central question that undergirds the very heart of this parable’s reception.

Justin Strong, in his recent and important work on the relationship between the Greco-Roman fable and Christian parable traditions, shares this outlook as well. As he notes, vv. 8b and 9 appear to match a common theme found in first century fables,¹⁹ and as such ‘The Lukan Jesus appears to exonerate the weak who resort, in desperation, to behavior that would be considered morally dubious. Indeed, he encourages it.’²⁰ Identifying the ‘Crafty Steward’ parable as an example of a fable, he argues that the presence of contradictory *epimythia* following the parable/fable indicates that ‘in the pre-Gospel tradition, early interpreters were not entirely onboard with this evaluation of the Crafty Steward.’²¹ Regardless of their evaluations, Strong gives additional evidence that the most problematic way to read the parable may be the oldest attested interpretation.

What many modern interpretations of the parable share in common is a desire to escape this first encounter of the text, for it seems to suggest things that stand in direct contradiction to the rest of Jesus’ teachings (both in Luke and in the overall tradition).²² This fact appears at least at a surface level to motivate interpreters to try and propose new meanings and so it seems probable that if scholarship has not achieved a consensus about the text in their attempt to escape this first encounter, perhaps more attention is needed to be spent on examining this *problematic* reading so many share.

A brief review serves the point of illustrating this. Take for example Balch’s articulation that Jesus’ instructions intend to suggest that ‘By the use of “dishonest wealth” (for Luke all wealth is dishonest), that is, by giv-

18. Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (NAC, 24; Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), p. 412.

19. Justin D. Strong, *The Fables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: A New Foundation for the Study of Parables* (Studies in Cultural Contexts of the Bible, 5; Leiden: Brill, 2021), p. 355. Note Strong’s points that ‘Of the scores of fables dealing with craftiness and deceit, the deceived character, whether weak or strong, never blames the trickster for their misfortune ... In other words, counterintuitively, it would be out of character for a fable if the master *did* blame the steward for the trickery’ (p. 353).

20. Strong, *Fables*, p. 357.

21. Strong, *Fables*, p. 357.

22. For an overview of attempts, see Goodrich, ‘Voluntary Debt Remission’.

ing all (14.33) or some of it (8.3) away, or by the wealthy forgiving the debts of the poor (compare 16.5 and 11.4-5), one may prepare to be “welcomed” into an eternal home.²³ More recently, Delbert Burkett proposes that the parable was aimed at the wealthy and exhorted them to give their wealth to the small Jesus movement.²⁴ While avoiding the problems somewhat successfully by utilizing a close reading of Luke, this interpretation also problematizes the passage, for if this was the point, why would it have been so controversial? Why would we not expect to see this authentic parable with a positive exhortation utilized elsewhere in early Christian tradition and why would Luke dilute its message by including so many additional messages following it, many of which appear to contradict the parable?²⁵ Why not expressly state such a principle and make it clear that Christians are *not* to emulate the dishonesty? If this parable’s meaning was so straightforward as to be using ‘dishonest wealth’ as just a term for money in general, and intended the parable to propose that early Christians should freely give it away to the poor,²⁶ why is it that the elements within the parable make so little sense of that theme and the sayings that follow don’t underscore such a message? As John Nolland notes, ‘The master is dealing with large-scale business associates here, not with ordinary people and ordinary economic levels.’²⁷

Other interpretations have attempted to soften the portrait of the dishonest manager, by arguing that he is not falsifying documents to rob his master further, but simply not including his own commission of interest that he would charge for his own benefit. But Bovon points out that this makes little sense of v. 8b that clearly identifies the dishonest manager as a child of

23. David L. Balch, ‘Luke’, in James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (eds.), *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 1104-60 (1138).

24. Delbert Burkett, ‘The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward (Luke 16.1-9): A Prudent Use of Mammon’, *NTS* 64 (2018), pp. 326-42.

25. Bovon (*Luke 2*, p. 445) notes, ‘This commentary (vv. 10-12) grew out of a double embarrassment: ascertaining the point of the parable, and dealing with the implication that the story might encourage dishonest conduct ... What is more, this joining was not accomplished without problems, since vv. 10-12 extol honesty, while the parable itself praises a certain kind of dishonesty.’

26. Stein, *Luke*, p. 416.

27. John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* (WBC, 35B; Dallas: Word, 1993), p. 799.

this age, and not the kingdom, thus indicating that the earliest readers understood the manager's actions as wicked.²⁸ Likewise, it is only after the dishonest manager comes up with his plan that he is called "dishonest," having not received that label previously despite being charged with *wasting* his masters accounts. This suggests that the story seeks to affirm that what he does at the end as a character is indeed furthering the same characteristic that got him in trouble in the first place.

In contradiction to attempts such as this and others has been the work of Fletcher (1963), Porter (1990) and others who have made the case for retaining the face value message (*imitate* dishonesty) but understanding it as ironically false. For them, Jesus is mocking the example of the dishonest manager, and his use of 'eternal homes' (literally *tents*) suggests the limitations of such dishonesty. This view, I believe, has the best chance of explaining the parable's early controversial reception. However, a number of problems present themselves with these proposals that I believe explain partially why the *ironic* interpretation has yet to gain traction.

To begin, when Fletcher first proposed the idea in 1963, he suggested that the parable was clearly ironic to its earliest readers and that it was intended by Jesus to be such. He based this idea on the presumption that Jesus endorsing dishonest behavior wouldn't make sense with the rest of the Jesus tradition, and so he sought to explain it away. In the end, he interprets v. 9 as the center of the parable (as traditionally has been the case) and then rewrites it with the perceived ironic flare:

'Make friends for yourselves,' he seems to taunt; 'imitate the example of the steward; use the unrighteous mammon; surround yourselves with the type of insincere, self-interested friendship it can buy; how far will this carry you when the end comes and you are finally dismissed?'²⁹

The problem with this view is that it is *not* self-evident from the parable itself that it is ironically taunting anyone. It is *possible* to read it that way, but this view is more derived by attention to the other attached sayings and the overall tradition about Jesus in contrast to the parable, rather than intuitively from the parable itself. Similarly, when Porter proposes that all vv. 1-13 should be understood to belong to the original parable and Historical

28. Bovon, *Luke 2*, p. 448.

29. Fletcher, 'The Riddle of the Unjust Steward', p. 15.

Jesus, ignoring the typical divisions, he also undermines whatever potential the proposal holds. Like Fletcher, the irony is identified by Porter as primarily arising from the contradiction within Luke between the parable of the prodigal son and the unjust steward, rather than within the steward's parable itself.³⁰

I.J. du Plessis, the same year as Porter, published an essay also continuing the idea proposed by Fletcher.³¹ He argued that v. 8a suggested that the dishonest manager's plan was not necessarily successful since the master discovered it. Thus, he sees the endorsement in v. 9 as 'sarcastic'.³² However, like those before, he makes an argument that is dependent on other factors (presuming the plan did not work, when the parable does not explicitly say that). Richard Dormandy, picking up the proposal, suggests that the master or rich man converts at the end, recognizing the dishonest manager as righteous.³³ Again, like du Plessis, he has to resort to adding things to the story that are not apparent.

In contrast to these approaches, I suggest that irony is primarily derived from the conversation between vv. 10-13 and the parable (including v. 9), and that this is the product of Luke's attempt to make sense of the meaning, in much of the same way that these and many other commentators have tried to do since. Decisive decisions about the relation of irony to the Historical Jesus or to the original pericope unit matter less than determining whether Luke, who preserved it, did so because he found a rationale that salvaged it from the dustbin of church history.

3. *What Did Luke Receive? Reconstructing a Different Textual History*

Many commentators presume that the original parable (as the Historical Jesus is presumed to have given it) runs from 16:1-8a and that v. 8b indicates a comment *about* the parable by either Jesus or Luke (or a source be-

30. Porter, 'The Parable of the Unjust Steward', p. 153.

31. I.J. du Plessis, 'Philanthropy or Sarcasm? Another Look at the Parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13)', *Neot* 24 (1990), pp. 1-20.

32. du Plessis, 'Philanthropy or Sarcasm?', p. 13.

33. Richard Dormandy, 'Unjust Steward or Converted Master?', *RB* 109 (2002), pp. 512-27.

fore Luke).³⁴ I agree with commentators on this point, but presume that v. 9 was originally part of the pericope unit, at least in so far as Luke received it.³⁵ The reason I do is quite straightforward: vv. 8a and 9 are the only reason that the parable is problematic and receives the attention by readers of Luke that it does. It is only because it appears that Jesus endorses the behavior of the dishonest manager as exemplary for Christians that it becomes imperative for many to struggle with it.

Apart from that element, the parable is ambiguous in regard to its meaning, simply detailing what the steward did and how his manager reacted. It would be very simple for a reader to assume, if the parable cut off early in v. 8a, that the parable was intended as a sad illustration of how corrupt rich people are. Or if it broke off in v. 7, we would have even less indication as to what the message might be, left confused as to what it intended. Amongst the many scholarly attempts to reconstruct this parable's meaning, a common thread can be detected: the desire to distinguish v. 9 from what came before for the sake of avoiding the very problem that has made the parable infamous. Yet, it is precisely by removing v. 9 that the parable becomes ambiguous. With v. 9 retained, the parable's meaning appears to become clear, but with that clarity, deeply problematic.

Contrary to the many attempts to reconstruct some hypothetical version of Jesus' earlier statement (an enterprise that while theoretically good has produced no consensus), this paper simply proposes that attention be given to the question of what the parable looked like when Luke received it. This appears to be a question for which an answer can be proposed, but only if we take seriously the possible answers for why Luke alone preserves it. If we consider the possibility that other Gospels and early Christian documents ignored the passage due to some perceived problem in it, then we should look at Lk. 16:1-9 for signs of such a potential problem.

34. Given the large amount of literature on this topic and the innumerable articles produced regularly about it and given the restraints of this paper and the need to conserve space, a full breakdown of citations of this literature is avoided. For a good overview of these issues, please consult Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X–XXIV: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AYB, 28A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 1096-99.

35. Fitzmyer (*The Gospel according to Luke X–XXIV*, p. 1105) states, 'Verse 9 seems to have been fashioned in the pre-Lucan tradition in imitation of v. 4; it scarcely owes its existence to Luke himself.'

When we do, it is clear that v. 8a and v. 9 represent the most problematic aspects of the parable. Why does the master commend the servant for something which was just labeled as dishonest (and appears to further cheat the master of his money the same manager squandered), but also why does Jesus encourage his disciples to imitate the man? It is the latter which is the true problem, for v. 8a can be explained a number of ways in a potentially positive manner, but v. 9 causes the most interpretive struggle for it forces the reader to presume that not only does the worldly master endorse the actions of the manager, but so too does Jesus himself. Only with Jesus' exhortation of the behavior does the parable become something that would warrant its status as disturbing or problematic, as per the traditions in Mark and *Gospel of Thomas*, and could help to explain apparently why Luke *alone* preserves it.³⁶

When the parable unit (16:1-9) is taken as a whole, the message appears to be clear: Jesus wants his followers to imitate the wicked. The dishonest manager is a child of the world who is more 'shrewd' than those who are righteous and is a better role model for Christians. Only if Jesus' followers make friends for themselves from the dishonest use of dishonest wealth will they be accepted into eternity. Is there any evidence that Luke understood this unit as his received parable? The fact that vv. 10-13 are clearly agreed on to be additional statements that were added would confirm this, but moreover, vv. 10-11 appear to contradict v. 9. Whereas Jesus said in the latter that his hearers should imitate the manager, vv. 10-11 are presented as Jesus teaching the opposite: those who are unfaithful with dishonest wealth will not be trusted with the true riches. It is this contradictory element that I believe marks this passage as a Lukan addition and distinguishes vv. 1-9 from vv. 10-13.

This very feature of the text that causes modern and past readers so much confusion is the very part that may also underscore why Luke is the only source to preserve it. Given the previous review of early Christian hermeneutical attitudes toward controversial Jesus sayings, it appears likely that this parable would have been a prime text for such debate. If the idea of Jesus potentially predicting the destruction of the temple was understood to

36. Fletcher ('The Riddle of the Unjust Steward', 19) states, 'v. 9 is the real *crux interpretationis* of the parable.'

have been a falsely attributed saying, how much more likely an ethical teaching from him that promoted wicked wealth?

How can we know then whether v. 8 or v. 9 represents the end of the source that Luke inherited? One argument, rather simple, is this: that it is inconceivable that a Christian would write such an ambiguous promotion of the manager's behavior had it been left ambiguous in v. 7 or 8. Verse 9 is simply too controversial in its current form to imagine it having originated secondhand as a way to wrestle with the text. On the other hand, v. 8b and its Qumran-esque description of 'children of this age' and 'children of light' makes sense as a later interpretation, for it now seeks to qualify that the manager's behavior has limits on its analogy (cf. Mt. 10.16 and its balance between doves and serpents), thus removing the controversy somewhat from what came before, but also softening v. 9's apparent endorsement of his behavior. It is this latter point, however, that must be underscored further, for again, it does not seem likely that a later Christian would have written v. 9 after v. 8b was added.

It therefore seems plausible to argue that the parable as received by Luke was either 16:1-8a, and v. 9, making v. 8b a Lukan addition, or that prior to Luke someone added v. 8b to that pericope. Because vv. 10-11 appear to contradict v. 9, and v. 8b instead appears to accept the analogy of v. 9, it is my belief that vv. 10-13 represent Luke's addition, and thus v. 8b precedes his account. In short, he received all of vv. 1-9 together, before appending vv. 10-13. Yet, v. 8b is an earlier pre-Lukan attempt to qualify the otherwise very problematic parable.³⁷

37. This is the argument that is also presented by Strong in his recent and important work comparing Greek fables with the Gospel parable tradition (see Strong, *Fables*). He argues that what we call 'parables' (especially as found in Luke) are essentially 'fables' and that they follow the same traditional forms. He draws attention to the use of *epimythia*, short concluding statements that follow such fables and provide an interpretation of their moral message. There are several types of *epimythia*, one of which is to have the speaker address the audience (as v. 9 does), but another is to have the character speak the moral within the fable (as v. 8b seems to do) (see Strong, *Fables*, pp. 406-17). See also Justin D. Strong, 'How to Interpret Parables in Light of the Fable: Lessons from the *Promythium* and *Epimythium*', in Albertina Oegema *et al.* (eds.), *Overcoming Dichotomies: Parables, Fables, and Similes in the Graeco-Roman World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), pp. 327-52 (330). For Strong, v. 8b uses apocalyptic and non-Lukan language, thus indicating

While many may wish to reinterpret it in a different way, presuming that there is no way Jesus could have given such a message, it doesn't change what the face value of the parable appears to teach. Interpreting away this sense of the text will not answer why this parable was also potentially controversial in Luke's own day. Rather, to understand why and how Luke included it, one must be willing to embrace its problematic nature and in so doing, ask how Luke conceived of it differently. If Mark and Matthew potentially rejected or ignored the parable due to its teaching (one of several possibilities that past interpreters haven't given due attention), perhaps presuming Jesus didn't teach something so antithetical to his own overall message, how did Luke overcome that contradiction?

4. *The Parable Reworked by Luke: Why It Is Included at All*

Luke attaches two different teachings attributed to Jesus after the parable. This is clearly an active choice and decision on Luke's part, and not something tied to the original parable, for some of these sayings are found independently and floating in other early Christian Gospels. As Joseph Fitzmyer notes, 'What the meaning of this parable is in itself is one thing; what it becomes in the Lucan context, when the following sayings are appended, is another.'³⁸ Luke's decision to place them after this parable is then likely significant and suggests that they, for him, need to be read afterward as part of the process of meaning-making for early readers of this section of his Gospel.³⁹ Below, the sayings are offered in their distinct independence, rather than as a unit, on the presumption that this is how Luke first knew of them.

that it does not belong to Luke but has been added (Strong, *Fables*, pp. 435-36, 490). Why then would Luke have included it? Strong proposes that the uniquely L material found in Luke belongs to a hypothetical source document, a Christian fable collection of Jesus material. Presumably, within this document, v. 8b had already been appended to the parable, which is why Luke includes it (Strong, *Fables*, pp. 490, 513).

38. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV*, p. 1099.

39. Stein (*Luke*, p. 416) states, 'Quite likely Luke brought together various sayings of Jesus in this section that stood isolated in the tradition to help his readers understand what it means to act "shrewdly" in light of the final judgment.'

Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? (vv. 10-12).

No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (v. 13).

Why include these two sayings? It appears that they *subvert* what Jesus taught in the parable of the dishonest manager, when read following after it.⁴⁰ For example, in the first saying about evaluating faithfulness, the message turns out to be the reverse of the original parable's conclusion. Here, the one who is dishonest turns out to be even more dishonest at the end. Despite the fact that the wealth is 'dishonest', one is expected to be faithful with it or else they will not get 'the true riches' or receive 'what is your own'. This stands in contrast to Jesus' exhortation in v. 9 to make friends by means of dishonest wealth and mishandling it in one's own 'shrewd' favor. Likewise, the second saying about serving two masters also stands in contrast with Jesus' message, since rather than seeking friends by means of dishonest wealth, the message now states that one can't without betraying God.

Given this tension, why did Luke include them?⁴¹ A provocative answer can be found when one looks closely at that exhortation by Jesus. He states,

40. Stein (*Luke*, p. 412) writes, 'Fourth, note that the manager is only called dishonest *after* his lowering of the bills. This eliminates any possibility of interpreting his actions as moral. The manager need only have been inept, uncreative, or a poor manager to have wasted his master's money (16.1). No interpretation should overlook that the manager is called dishonest not because of wasting his master's possessions (16.1) but because of "fixing" the accounts (16.5-7).'

41. Strong (*Fables*) notes that fables typically could have multiple *epimythia* attached at the end. He sees the lengthy number here in the Crafty Steward's parable and the parable of Unjust Judge as evidence of their original source in a fable collection, where various contributors added meanings. This is partly because of the fact that 'sometimes they [the *epimythia*] refute each other ... It is perfectly acceptable for a single author to draw more than one lesson from one fable, but a single author will not contradict himself. The sheer number of *epimythia*, including some that refute the preceding *epimythia* (e.g. Lk. 18.7-8), strongly suggests at least two

‘And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, *they* may welcome you into the *eternal homes*’ (16.9). Although most become offended when they presume that those spoken of are the redeemed in heaven and the eternal homes are the mansions of the righteous, it only takes a second look to note a different understanding of Jesus’ words. He warns that when the money that is dishonest and unfaithfully handled to gain friends runs out, that person will have secured their status and security with *those* friends who will welcome him into *their* ‘eternal homes’.

In short, when taken very literally, it appears that the words of Jesus are dripping in irony and dark humor.⁴² If one gains friends from dishonest

authors’ (*Fables*, pp. 513 [see also 391-95]). In fact, he notes that the ambiguity over deceitfulness/craftiness in the fable tradition (some fables against it, others for it) ‘could easily prompt debates already in the pre-Gospel tradition. The menacing variety of *epimythia* following this fable [the parable of the crafty steward] that disagree about what stance to take are evidence for precisely this ambivalence’ (*Fables*, p. 356). To include these additional statements by Jesus as *epimythia* in addition to the fable source’s own statements would, in the eyes of this paper, suggest that Luke disagrees with a straightforward interpretation of the source’s original *epimythia* (vv. 8b-9). It may also suggest that Luke believed that vv. 8b-9 were spoken by Jesus and were not the result of the editor of a fable collection adding their own interpretation. This would appear to be backed up by the fact that Luke’s additional *epimythia* are simply other sayings attributed to Jesus, indicating that he sought to interpret one thing Jesus said through another thing he said.

42. Strong (*Fables*) appears to provide potential background for this. Despite his own belief that the parable was intended to praise craftiness, he notes that some fables critique deception. Such fables present a story in which a wicked or crafty individual/animal tricks someone, but the audience is supposed to identify with the one tricked, learning from their mistake. As for the fable of the fox and the goat in Phaedrus, *Fab.* 4.9, for example, Strong says, ‘In this cautionary fable, the reader is not to identify with the fox, rather to learn from the mistake of the goat to avoid falling victim to deceit’ (*Fables*, p. 351). This sort of fabulist approach would match this paper’s proposal well, suggesting that the Lukan Jesus has told a fable/parable that is meant to be cautionary, rather than endorsing. Yet, due to the ambiguity of fables toward deception, audiences would have been divided in what interpretations they took since it was possible to interpret the story in a straightforward manner. As Strong notes, ‘The diversity of viewpoints among the ancient fables on these ethical topics is also useful for explaining why the Crafty Steward

wealth, the wealthy friends (the elites who often are viewed in apocalyptic literature at this time period as synonymous with the wicked) will welcome you to *their* homes, not God's. The only eternal respite that wealth will get you is a spare room in someone else's rich home, rather than 'what is yours' (v. 12). Either Luke recognized this irony or has changed his source to emphasize it, but his inclusion of these two further sayings of Jesus appears to serve the purpose of forcing the reader to return and read the parable a second time in light of the additional sayings, in case a reader may not have taken note of the irony.

This indicates that for Luke, he found a way to read the parable that brought it into harmony with the rest of Jesus' known sayings: he created the impression that Jesus was employing sarcasm and irony. By apparently rationalizing that Jesus' teaching couldn't be understood in a straightforward method (perhaps knowing of the tradition in Mk 4.10-12, 33-34) and believing that one saying of Jesus needed to be compared with another, Luke expresses an early Christian hermeneutic for understanding Jesus' teachings that is otherwise unstated or articulated in those exact terms elsewhere. This demonstrates that Luke's decisions as to what parables he included were undertaken purposefully and not uncritically (though certainly subjectively). Like John's Gospel in its debate over Jesus' temple prediction, Luke senses a need to defend why he includes statements by Jesus as authentic that others might have rejected.⁴³ In fact, it might even speak to

has received such a mixed reception, already canonized into the Gospel of Luke with its catena of *epimythia*' (*Fables*, p. 349).

43. If Strong is correct to hypothesize that Luke's parables are taken from an early Christian collection of Jesus fables, then we can note both that this fable collection did not reject the parable and that Luke was hesitant to include it without adding *epimythia* that would contradict the shallow reading of the text's moral. Presumably, for the editor(s) of the fable collection, this parable's message endorsing dishonesty was acceptable. Not only does the original fable likely end with the endorsement in v. 9, but a later editor (presumably secondary to the original fable) has added an elaboration by adding an *epimythia* prior in v. 8b. Yet, while two early readers apparently found this moral acceptable (or attempted to rationalize it), Luke's desire to change the fable by adding contradictory *epimythia* in order to include the fable in his Gospel suggests further evidence for presuming it plausible that the reason other early Christian sources don't include the parable of the dishonest manager is not because they were unaware of it, but because they were un-

his claim in 1.1 that he undertook an exhaustive investigation of the true facts. It is possible that this investigation also included theological evaluations of Jesus' teachings.

In the end, Luke appears to present the parable of the dishonest manager as a parable by Jesus that was intended to provoke and be controversial. The only way to understand it, and not be misled, was if one knew what else Jesus had taught and was then able to reflect anew on whether the teaching Jesus gave was intended to be sarcastic or serious.⁴⁴ This understanding of Jesus as potentially misleading and provocative matches the earliest descriptions of his ministry by other early Christian sources and helps provide further potential evidence to the belief among many scholars that this parable indeed stemmed from the Historical Jesus, albeit that discussion is distinct from this paper's interest in Luke's compositional decisions.

5. Conclusion

In summary, it appears that there is a strong reason to presume that the reason why the parable of the dishonest manager is missing from the other Gospels is precisely because it was perceived to be too problematic. There is of course no way to know definitively whether Matthew or Mark (1) did not know that the parable existed; (2) ignored it because it was too offensive

easy with its message. To this end, Strong agrees, noting that 'we might expect an ancient audience would be divided about how to evaluate the steward's deceit' (*Fables*, p. 356). Yet, by noting the ambiguity of fable collections toward this phenomenon, it also helps to explain why Luke's hypothetical source, if it was a fable collection, did not find it problematic, since fables that praised dishonesty were as common as those that discouraged it.

44. This understanding of the parable does not necessarily disagree with recent work done by others, such as van Eck (Ernest van Eck, 'Realism and Method: The Parables of Jesus', *Neot* 51 [2017], pp. 163-84). Whereas van Eck argues for a realistic reading of the parable as the first audiences in Galilee may have heard it, and the Historical Jesus may have given it, my own work is mostly focused on Luke as the first attested reader/interpreter of it. However, the fact that Luke appears to find the manager and message of the parable problematic, and sees the need to interpret it through other parts of the Jesus tradition, is itself a caution as to whether van Eck's realistic reading of the manager as a positive figure is the best interpretive choice.

and confusing; or (3) rejected it as inauthentic Jesus tradition. The fact that it is missing from those two Gospels indicates one of those three options, but it alone does not specify which is more likely. However, when looking at Luke's Gospel and noting how he handles the parable's inclusion, defensively situating it with other teachings so as to negate its negative sense, it becomes possible to suggest plausibly that Luke knew of the parable as *rejected* or *ignored* by some Christian communities and sought to make it palatable by a hermeneutical strategy that brought Jesus' teachings (and rhetorical strategy) into conversation with other similar sayings. Although Bovon did not intend this to apply *directly* to Luke himself as an author, his comments about Jesus are still applicable to Luke:

The reason Jesus chose to shock his audience was that it made it possible for him to engage them more effectively. He told a scandalous story in order to invite each listener to take steps that were existentially sound ... Christian tradition has preserved this parable in spite of the fact that it was a source of embarrassment. It has attempted to offer an acceptable interpretation of it ... He is also happy that he has vv. 10-12, which rule out understanding the parable as an incitement to deception and which stress each person's personal responsibility.⁴⁵

Because Luke appears to know the parable as rejected by some and seeks to correct this situation, it is possible to intimate that one possible reason it is missing from Mark and Matthew (and any other early Christian work) is due to that very same reason. At the very least, those Gospel writers thought it apparently best to leave out certain things Jesus taught as non-essential or questionable enough not to warrant inclusion in apologetic and missional works (see, for example, a similar thought expressed in Jn 21.25). For scholars who wish to understand early Christianity and the development of the Jesus tradition, attention to their internal debates about the authenticity of Jesus' sayings is crucial. Likewise, recognizing the hermeneutical strategy that Luke employs helps to shed light not only on that Gospel writer's assumptions about how to work with Jesus' oral traditions, but also what they assumed, imagined or disagreed about Jesus' own intentions.

Luke's strategy, as argued in this paper, suggests that he understood Jesus as ironic and sly with his words. It suggests that he understood Jesus as a riddler who spoke in double meanings and tested his audiences with

⁴⁵ Bovon, *Luke 2*, pp. 453-54.

contradictions that revealed tensions inviting deconstruction and cross-evaluation. However, this also reveals that many others known to Luke did not view Jesus so sophisticated, and presumed likely a more straightforward shallow approach, assuming that whatever Jesus said was intended to be taken at face value.⁴⁶ This perspective, as seen earlier in this paper, was shared by Mark and the disciple Andrew in the *Gospel of Mary*. Luke, in contrast, finds company with John and its attempt to explain the deeper meaning of troubling or disputed passages. Rather than reject the teaching as wrong, as the story of the Syrophenician Woman in Mk 7.24-30 might suggest (cf. Mt. 15.21-28), Luke avoids the implication of rejecting the divine (cf. Acts 5:39) and instead seeks to harmonize Jesus' messages together.

By recognizing the potentially contested nature of the parable of the dishonest manager, one can both recognize what the earliest perceived meaning of the parable might have been (the one that was most problematic), and also underscore how Luke perceived his own hermeneutic for overcoming that problematic meaning. In short, it provides a way of seeing part of the Gospel writer's own conceived portrait of who the Historical Jesus was (or how he wished to portray him to others). And what is concluded? Luke's portrait confirms the enigmatic description of Mk 4.10-12. Jesus was believed to purposefully confuse an audience, but leaves enough clarity for those with ears to hear to finally listen.⁴⁷

46. This would include Strong's hypothetical fable source, as well as any Gospel that left out the parable due to rejecting it or feeling uneasy about its apparent immoral message.

47. This agrees with Strong's argument that fable material can presume a coded language aspect, such as was utilized by the enslaved to help speak freely through stories on issues that were barred using more direct speech. Strong (*Fables*, p. 267) says, 'From the use of fable as a critique from below, riddle speech to tell someone off without being understood, and coded language that only insiders are privy to, a particularly nebulous area of the Jesus tradition becomes comprehensible. The tradition of speaking in "parables" in order to not be understood has escaped a satisfying scholarly explanation ... Puzzling as these verses are, they are comprehensible from this fable background in which the genre is employed as riddle speech, with the intention that the "hidden transcript" will not be understood, except to the "in" group.'