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Alan T. Farnes
alan.taylor.farnes@gmail.com

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Alan Taylor Farnes

A New Interpretation of Luke's Prodigal Manager (Luke 16:1–8a)

What has been called the parable of the Unjust Steward¹ has been dubbed one of the most difficult passages in the entire New Testament. Indeed, John S. Kloppenborg has commented, “There is hardly a consensus on any single aspect of this parable.”² Almost every commentary on the topic begins with a disclaimer that this parable is “notoriously difficult.”³ This parable has gained its notoriety due to its seemingly contradictory conclusion. The Prodigal Manager is slothful, does not collect all of his master’s money but rather gives it away, and in the end is

¹ This parable has been called by many names including the Unjust Steward (J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Fresh Light on St. Luke XVI,” *NTS* 7.3 (1961), 198–219; Donald R. Fletcher, “The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?” *JBL* 82.1 [March 1963], 15; Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* [Grand Rapids: Fortress, 1978], 86; Michael R. Austin, “The Hypocritical Son,” *EvQ* 57 [1985], 310; John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988], 162; Mary Ann Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward [Luke 16:1–8],” *JBL* 111.1 [Spring 1992], 37; Dave L. Mathewson, “The Parable of the Unjust Steward [Luke 16:1–13]: A Reexamination of the Traditional View in Light of Recent Challenges,” *JETS* 38.1 [March 1995], 29); “The Parable of the Prudent Steward” (I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 614; David Landry and Ben May, “Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward [Luke 16:1–8a],” *JBL* 119/2 [Summer, 2000], 287–309); “The Parable of the Dishonest Manager,” (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X–XXIV)* [New York: Doubleday, 1985], 1094); “The Parable of the Dishonoured Master” (John S. Kloppenborg, “The Dishonoured Master [Luke 16, 1–8a],” *Bib* 70 [1989] 474); “The Parable of the Dishonest Steward,” (John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* [WBC; Word Books: Dallas, 1993], 792); “The Parable of the Wicked Household Manager,” (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* [SP; Collegeville, Minnesota, 1991], 246); “The Parable of the Shrewd Manager” (Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger III, *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 264) and many others. Here I will refer to this parable as the parable of the Prodigal Manager. I will also refer to the parable of Lazarus and Dives the parable of Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man.

² Kloppenborg, “Dishonoured Master,” 474.

³ Barker and Kohlenberger: “The interpretation of the parable of the shrewd manager is notoriously difficult” *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary*, 264. Also, “Of the recorded parables of Jesus, none has proved to be such a *crux interpretationis* as the parable of the Unjust Steward, Luke 16 1–13 . . . Exegetes have not been able to agree, nor, as it seems, to feel quite comfortable and secure in their conclusions” Fletcher, “Irony,” 15. And “Few passages in the Gospel can have [*sic*] given rise to so many different interpretations as the parable of the prudent steward” Marshall, *Luke*, 614. “Many commentators affirm that this parable is the most difficult of all the synoptic parables” Bailey, *Poet*, 86. Kloppenborg also says, “The parable of the ‘Unjust Steward’ in Luke 16,1–8a has been a constant source of puzzlement for exegetes and homelists alike” Kloppenborg, “Dishonoured Master,” 474. “The parable of the dishonest manager has always been puzzling” Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1095. “Very few chapters in the NT pose as many exegetical challenges as does Luke 16” Donahue, *Gospel*, 162. “Three major problems face the interpreter of this passage. So difficult is the solving of them that the ‘parable of the wicked household manager’ with its attendant sayings has generated a disproportionate amount of scholarly discussion. Although the basic point being made is in truth not terribly complicated, making all the details fit together is. We are given no help by Synoptic comparison since nothing in this section except the final logion has a parallel” Johnson, *Luke*, 246. “The tale of the steward is widely regarded as the most difficult of the parables of Jesus” Beavis, “Slavery,” 44. “The parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1–13 is well known for its vexing exegetical difficulties” Mathewson, “Reexamination,” 29. “Almost every article or book section devoted to the so-called parable of the Unjust Steward begins by noting that it is the most difficult of the parables. A whole series of seemingly intractable problems is involved in its interpretation” Landry and May, “Honor,” 287.

praised for his wisdom. Is the moral of the parable to cheat your boss out of his money? What exactly is Luke trying to tell us here? Thus the difficulty.

One connection that has not yet been made is to gain understanding of this parable by connecting it with Luke 15 and with the following parable: Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man.⁴ Here I will show that the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin should be read together, that the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager should be read together, and that the parable of Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man summarizes and concludes those preceding parables. Therefore, Luke 15 and 16 should be read as a coherent whole to fully understand the author's original meaning of these parables. If we can connect the parable of the Prodigal Son with the parable of the Prodigal Manager and the parable of Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man, then this connection will help us draw new conclusions. Also, perhaps Luke wanted his audience to understand Lazarus as the same person as the Prodigal Manager and as the Prodigal Son. By showing that Luke 15:11–32 and Luke 16 should be read together and used to interpret one another, we can gain greater insight into these difficult passages.

History of Scholarship

In recent times the closest that scholarship has come to a consensus is the interpretation put forth by J. Duncan M. Derrett in 1961.⁵ Derrett argues that the Manager, fearful of being fired, goes to his master's debtors and charges only the principal, without any usury or other fees.⁶ Discounting the debt would bring him into the good graces of the debtors.⁷ Also,

⁴ The full implications of my conclusions have yet to be drawn. As will be treated below, Kenneth E. Bailey seems to have pioneered the connecting of the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager in his *Poet and Peasant*. Michael R. Austin must have been ignorant of Bailey's work in his 1985 piece and says much of the same things that Bailey says. Austin's work has been expounded upon by Ben Landry and David May. These authors will be treated in depth below. See below for a summary of current scholarship.

⁵ Derrett, "Fresh Light," 198–219.

⁶ "In view of his inevitable dismissal the steward attempts successfully to obtain the support of the public opinion until he finds alternative employment. In the last moments of authority he gains that approval by doing what the law of God required of him. The debtors, writing their acknowledgements and destroying the old ones, were

presuming that the Manager worked for the master, the debtors would hold the master himself in high esteem—so much so that the master would not be angry that he is losing money because their respect may be worth more than the money lost. Therefore, all the master can do is praise the Manager for his prudence.⁸ This view has been adopted by many others and some have made variations on the theme.⁹

John S. Kloppenborg counters Derrett in his 1989 work “The Parable of the Dishonoured Master.” He rejects the notion that the steward is reducing the amount of interest or reducing his fee by quoting the steward asking how much the debtors owe *his master* (see Luke 16:5, 7).¹⁰

safe. He was safe from his master’s resentment; and he suspected that his master, whom in point of morals he was really helping, would adopt his act and, since he had no alternative, take credit for pious conduct which he had not in fact initiated. On dismissal his duty towards his master faded before the practical necessity to recognize his duty towards God. He decided to obey the creator instead of his creature . . . The master, who is the *kyrios*, is found that he was in a cleft stick. He did not merely praise the steward, he adopted the latter’s acts. He was willing to pose as a pious man, giving us an impression of the pious man who somehow omits to do the right thing until the perfect opportunity is presented to him. That the steward’s prudence was beneficial to the steward was evident; that it resounded to his master’s reputation with the public was obvious. An ungracious repudiation was out of the question. Gathering riches by various expedients, rich men often give lavishly in charity, seeking, especially towards the end of their lives, a reputation for piety” (Derrett, “Fresh Light,” 216–17).

⁷ “According to God’s law, if the contracts with the debtors had originally been usurious in their nature, he was a sinner in entering into them, and in releasing the debtors from the usurious portion of the debts he was acting righteously, and making amends” (Derrett, “Fresh Light,” 209).

⁸ This view is perhaps summed up more concisely by Barker and Kohlenberger: “Some have suggested that the amount taken off the bills in vv.5–7 was not part of the debt owed the master but rather represented the interest the master himself was charging. The bill to be repaid would be written in terms of the commodity rather than in monetary figures, with the interest hidden in the total. By law a master could not be held accountable for the illegal acts of an employee. So the master in the parable was in a position to view the manager’s activities objectively. If this explanation is correct, the manager’s transaction was not illegal. In any event, the master would lose no money if the amount forfeited was simply the interest the manager would have personally gained. Furthermore, such a forgiveness of debts would probably have helped the master’s own reputation. Therefore, the master admired the manager’s shrewdness. For his part, the manager knew his job and reputation were gone because of his previous mishandling of funds. He needed friends; and, by foregoing the customary interest, he won friends among the creditors” Barker and Kohlenberger, *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary*, 265.

⁹ This view is adopted by Marshall but he modifies the argument by citing Findlay and Fitzmyer who argue that the interest “was actually the steward’s ‘commission’ on the transactions. What happened was simply that the steward forewent his own profit on the debts, and the master suffered no loss” Marshall, *Luke*, 615. This view is also adopted by Nolland, *Luke*, 800, Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, (ANTC, Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 245–46, and Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 592.

¹⁰ Kloppenborg, “Dishonoured Master,” 481.

Therefore, according to Kloppenborg, he was not charging a fee or interest but rather reducing the actual principal of the debt.¹¹

Kloppenborg focuses on how the very rumors of the steward's mismanagement bring shame to the master and he emphasizes that Luke's society was an honor-shame culture.¹² He concludes that this shocking parable is about "fracturing cultural codes."¹³ To Kloppenborg, Jesus is teaching that, since the master did not immediately fire the steward with no questions asked because he was dishonored, we should care more about the individual rather than what society thinks about us.

Kloppenborg comes close to seeing our new reading when he says: "The 'Prodigal Son' functions analogously [to the Prodigal Manager]. It represents the father as not only welcoming a son who has dissipated his father's property and hence dishonoured him, but as welcoming and honouring him in a way that shocks the cultural codes of the audience."¹⁴ Kloppenborg sees the conclusions of the Prodigal Son as related to the Prodigal Manager but then goes on to forge parallels with the conclusions of the parable of The Feast and the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Though most have sided with Derrett and Kloppenborg, I am not the first to argue that the parable of the Prodigal Manager should be read with the parable of the Prodigal Son. Many

¹¹ "In sum, the attempts to exonerate the steward and account for the master's praise by positing a last-moment compliance with the laws of usury fail both because the narrative would have had to include much clearer indications of this if a first-century audience were to discern that intent, and because it currently contains elements which point *away* from that meaning. Although it is unclear whether the steward was dealing with tenants or borrowers, several facts are certain. First, the debtors involved are not poor sharecroppers, but either large farmers or wholesalers. Second, a Palestinian audience would not suppose that either usury or the manager's commission was the focal point of the story. And finally, the natural implication of the story is that the steward's actions are injurious to the master's interests." Kloppenborg, "Dishonoured Master," 486.

¹² "Ancient Mediterranean society was an honour-shame culture in which the approbation of the public and especially of one's social peers is an intrinsic aspect of status. Subordinate persons were seen to be embedded in the honour of the dominant male, and actions of subordinates—sons, daughters, wives, agents—would threaten the social standing of the *paterfamilias*. It was also a culture in which honour ultimately counted more than wealth." Also, "The prodigal son...represents the father as not only welcoming a son who has dissipated his father's property and hence dishonoured him, but as welcoming and honouring him in a way that shocks the cultural codes of the audience" Kloppenborg, "Dishonoured Master," 488, 493.

¹³ Kloppenborg, "Dishonoured Master," 492.

¹⁴ Kloppenborg, "Dishonoured Master," 493.

scholars have noted the connection between the parable of the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager but all have either failed to see or discounted the connection between Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man as well and in the context of Luke 15 and 16 as a whole.¹⁵ Kenneth E. Bailey in his 1976 work entitled *Poet and Peasant* outlines eight ways that the parable of the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager are similar.¹⁶ Michael R. Austin, in his 1985 work entitled, “The Hypocritical Son,” also expertly shows how the parable of the Prodigal Manager should be read within the context of the Prodigal Son.¹⁷ He points out that the introductory formulas to the parable of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin are identical but the parable of the so-called Lost Son has a different introductory formula. Bailey and Austin are the first to clearly show a correlation between the parable of the Prodigal Son and the parable of the Prodigal Manager.

Although Bailey and Austin’s works extend the scholarly discussion by connecting the Prodigal Son with the Prodigal Manager, they fail to extend the parallel further to include Luke 15 and 16 as a whole—namely the parable of Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man. The parable of Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man also has the same introductory formula as the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager.

David Landry and Ben May seem to try to bring Bailey’s and Austin’s theory to the fore in their piece entitled “Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke

¹⁵ Goulder notes the theological similarities between the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager but then continues to agree with Derrett, Michael D. Goulder, “The Chiasmic Structure of the Lucan Journey,” *Studia Evangelica*, II (1963), 198. Manson believes that the story of the Prodigal Manager “may also be regarded as an appendix to the parable of the Prodigal Son” T.W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1937), 291.

¹⁶ Bailey, *Poet*, 109. His eight points are either inconsequential or are treated below.

¹⁷ Austin, “The Hypocritical Son,” 307–15. “When the two parables are viewed together we notice some remarkable similarities. Both stories are about relationships between two men: the father and the younger son, the father and the elder brother, the elder brother and the younger brother, the rich man and the servant. In both stories there has been reckless waste by one man of another man’s property: the younger son of his father’s wealth (his ‘living’, 15:12) and the servant of the rich man’s wealth (his ‘goods’, 16:1) Another point of similarity between the two stories is that a turning point is reached in each when the younger son ‘came to himself and said . . .’ (15:17) and the servant ‘said to himself . . .’ (16:3). Each poses to himself a crucial question and each lays down a course of action which he then carried out” Austin, “Hypocritical,” 311.

16:1–8a)”¹⁸ while at the same time arguing against Kloppenborg. Landry and May want to read these two parables together, as Austin does, but do not want to accept Kloppenborg’s “shocking” ending, preferring rather that the master’s actions were not irrational or incomprehensible.¹⁹ As far as Landry and May want to push Bailey and Austin’s hypothesis they too fail to see the full connections between Luke 15 and 16.²⁰

Luke 15 as a Doublet rather than a Trilogy

As far back as Bishop Ambrose of Milan (d. 397 C.E.), scholars and theologians alike have assumed that the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son should be

¹⁸ Landry and May, “Honor,” 287–309. “It is clear that telling a story about the redemption of a sinner is hardly out of character for Luke’s Jesus. In fact, this understanding of the parable would allow it to fit perfectly with the immediately preceding parable in Luke 15, the parable of the Prodigal Son. Most commentators see the Prodigal Son as the third in a trio of parables in Luke 15, following the Lost Sheep (15:4–7) and the Lost Coin (15:8–10). However, the similarities between the Prodigal Son and the preceding parables have been overstated, and the similarities between the Unjust Steward and the Prodigal Son underappreciated. Rather than a trio of parables in Luke 15, followed by an unrelated parable in Luke 16:1–8, there is in this section a pair of doublets: the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin form the first pair, and the Prodigal Son and the Unjust Steward form the second pair.” Landry and May, “Honor,” 305.

¹⁹ “The master’s approval of the steward is no more irrational or incomprehensible than are the father’s forgiveness and acceptance of his son. It is not the case for either the prodigal son or the steward that their acceptance or forgiveness is completely unmerited. Although the father has not heard the prodigal son’s repentance speech, the son has returned home. In the same way the master does not need a statement of repentance or an apology from the steward. The fact that he has acted to restore his master’s honor is sufficient. What we really have in each story is a character who has acted immorally and who then tries to make up for the wrong. In both stories the “prodigals” are met more than halfway by the parties they initially offended. If the different characters represent humans (the two sons, the steward) and God (the father, the master)—as is often supposed—then the theological implications of the two stories are rather clear.” Landry and May, “Honor,” 307–08.

²⁰ Joel Green also comes close to reading this text as I do in saying: “Many have noted how the opening parable of ch. 16 is related to the parable of 15:11–32, especially in terms of vocabulary and style. Both, for example, begin with a reference to ‘a certain person’ (15:11; 16:1), have central characters who ‘squander’ property (15:13; 16:3) and encounter life-threatening choices (15:15–17; 16:3), narrate the surprising action of the ‘certain person’ mentioned in the opening verse (15:20–24; 16:8), and so on. More consistently overlooked is the interesting parallel that develops between the younger son of 15:13–24 and Lazarus the beggar in 16:21–23. Although the prior autobiography of Lazarus is missing, both come to be portrayed as inhabitants of the cesspool of social status only to have their lots dramatically reversed. The structural similarities between chs. 15 and 16 remind Luke’s audience that the immediate backdrop of Jesus’ teaching to the disciples in ch. 16 is his portrayal of table fellowship as an appropriate means for including such outsiders as toll collectors and sinners in the community of the lost-but-found. In ch. 16, Jesus grounds this message about table fellowship more fundamentally in his overall teaching about possessions: Wealth should be used to welcome another cluster of outsiders, the poor who are incapable of reciprocating with invitations of their own or of helping to advance one’s status.” Green, *Luke*, 587. Although Green connects the parable of the Prodigal Son with the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man he fails to connect the parable of the Prodigal Manager.

read together and used to interpret one another. In his *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, Ambrose wrote,

St. Luke did not idly present three parables in a row. By the parables of the sheep that strayed and was found, the coin which was lost and was found, and the son who was dead and came to life, we may cure our wounds, being encouraged by a threefold memory The shepherd carries. The mother searches. The father clothes. First mercy comes, then intercession, and third reconciliation. Each complements the other The weary sheep is recalled by the shepherd, the coin which was lost is found, the son retraces his steps to his father and returns, guilty of error but totally repentant.²¹

Here we see that Ambrose accepted Luke 15 as a whole—to be read and interpreted together.

Modern scholars are no different. Most accept that the parables in Luke 15 are to be read together.²²

Austin rightly points out that the literary styles of the three parables in Luke differ from one another and should therefore be read separately.²³ The first two parables of Luke 15, the lost

²¹ Ambrose of Milan, *Expositio Evangelii Secundum Lucam*, 7.207–08. Earlier, Tertullian (160–220 C.E.), wrote, “There is a breadth of patience in our Lord’s parables, the patience of the shepherd that makes him seek and find the straying sheep. Impatience would readily take no account of a single sheep, but patience undertakes the wearisome search. He carries it on his shoulders as a patient bearer of a forsaken sinner. In the case of the prodigal son, it is the patience of his father that welcomes, clothes, feeds and finds an excuse for him in the face of the impatience of his angry brother.” Tertullian, *De Patientia*, 12.

²² The very naming of the third parable in Luke 15 as the parable of the Lost Son shows dependence within the chapter. Barker and Kohlenberger title Luke 15:11–32 as “The Lost Son” (Barker and Kohlenberger, *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary*, 263) as does Marshall. Marshall also claims, “There can be no doubt that ch. 15 forms one self-contained and artistically constructed unit with a single theme” and “The central figure is the father, just as in the previous parables the shepherd and the housewife stand at the centre” Marshall, *Luke*, 597, 604. Nolland says, “This third parable completes the section 15:1–32” *Luke*, 780. Likewise, Fitzmyer, “To the two preceding parables about the finding of the lost, Luke now adds a third (15:11–32) related to the same theme” *Luke*, 1083. Johnson includes the entire chapter under the heading “Parables of Lost and Found” and says “The necessary framework for understanding these three parables of the lost is provided in 15:1–2” *Luke*, 234, 238. Joel B. Green likewise titles the whole of chapter 15 as “Rejoicing at the Finding of the Lost” Green, *Luke*, 568. All of these sources see Luke 15 as a unit that should be read together.

²³ Austin, “Hypocritical,” 308–311. “Another reason to doubt that Luke 15:1–32 is to be read as a connected whole dominated by a single theme is that, if this was the case, Luke’s habit of forming *pairs* of parables

sheep and the lost coin, begin with a similar formula. First we read in Luke 15:4, “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” Then in Luke 15:8, “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?”

<p>Luke 15:4—Τίς ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ὑμῶν ἔχων ἑκατὸν πρόβατα καὶ ἀπολέσας ἐξ αὐτῶν ἓν οὐ καταλείπει τὰ ἐνενήκοντα ἑννέα ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ καὶ πορεύεται ἐπὶ τὸ ἀπολωλὸς ἕως εὗρη αὐτό;</p>	<p>Luke 15:8— Ἦ τίς γυνὴ δραχμὰς ἔχουσα δέκα, ἐὰν ἀπολέσῃ δραχμὴν μίαν, οὐχὶ ἄπει λύχνον καὶ σαροῖ τὴν οἰκίαν καὶ ζητεῖ ἐπιμελῶς ἕως οὗ εὗρη;</p>
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Analysis of Similarities

Luke introduces the main character in the same way—changing the word from ἄνθρωπος to γυνή only to fit the gender of the person. Verses four and eight both begin with τίς and then a gender specific object: either ἄνθρωπος or γυνή. So Luke sets up the parable with either a man or a woman.

The next difference may tell us about Jesus’ audience in these verses. In verse four Jesus says, “Which one of you...” but in verse eight he leaves out the ἐξ ὑμῶν and rather simply says, “what woman...” Therefore, while Luke may be including a parable about women because of his sensitivities towards women, it seems that there are no women in the immediate audience.²⁴

on a single theme would here be broken. In chapter 13 he gives us *The Mustard Seed* (13:18–19) and *The Leaven* (13:20), and in chapter 14, *The Tower-Builder* (14:29–30) and *The King going to Battle* (14:31–32). Yet chapter 15 does clearly contain a pair of parables, perhaps more closely related to each other than the pairs in chapters 13 and 14” Austin, “Hypocritical,” 309.

²⁴ Perhaps Luke’s need to be true to his source text shows that these saying may go back to the historical Jesus or else Luke would have included women in the immediate setting.

Then we have a participial form (matching gender) of ἔχω along with what that person has: either one-hundred sheep or ten drachmai.

Next Luke uses a form of the verb ἀπόλλυμι: once as a circumstantial participle and once as a subjunctive in a conditional clause. The verbs are the same but the verbal forms and grammatical structure are different.

Then Luke uses a number, inflected for gender, to refer to the one sheep or the one coin.

The next section varies as you would expect as the woman looks for her drachma in a different way than a shepherd looks for his sheep.

Then the endings match with ἕως εὔρη.

While there are a few differences between the two parables we can be secure that, while the minutia of grammatical forms may vary slightly, these parables were indeed meant to be read together. Perhaps the most telling aspect of these two parables—possibly more important than grammatical agreement—showing that they should be read together, is that Jesus provides a moral after these two parables, “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10). This clearly shows that Jesus has ended this thought and is moving on to a new one. Austin astutely observes that Luke has a “habit of forming *pairs* of parables on a single theme.”²⁵ Luke is again forming a pair of parables on a single theme here in Luke 15.

The parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin speak concerning hypothetical situations saying, “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them...” (Luke 15:4). Jesus is saying, “If this were to happen to you, wouldn’t you...” But the parable of the Prodigal Son seems to tell a story that really did happen or is at least a story about someone that

²⁵ Austin, “Hypocritical Son,” 309.

this happened to: “There was a man who had two sons...” (Luke 15:11). Therefore, Jesus moves from a theoretical realm to a realistic fiction realm.

For the parable of the Prodigal Son to fit within the narrative framework of Luke 15 it would have to start with, *Τίς ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ὑμῶν ἔχων δύο υἱούς καὶ ἀπολέσας ἐξ αὐτῶν ἓν οὐ καταλείπει τὴν οἰκίαν καὶ πορεύεται ἐπὶ τὸν ἀπολωλότα ἕως εὕρη αὐτὸν*; “What man of you, having two sons, and losing one of them, does not leave your house behind and go after the one who is lost until he finds him?” But the parable of the Prodigal Son does not start with that formula. While the parable of the Prodigal Son continues the literary theme (the son is lost, the father goes out to find him, he is found and there is a party), the grammatical theme changes and it is therefore properly set with the parable of the Prodigal Manager instead of with the first two parables of Luke 15.

We pointed out that the introductory formula of the parable of the Prodigal Son does not begin as it would if it were formally paired with the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin but rather begins with another introductory formula: Ἄνθρωπός τις.

Ἄνθρωπός τις

One major clue that Luke wanted us to read the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager and Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich together is the identical introductory formula. To introduce all three passages Jesus says the words, Ἄνθρωπός τις: “there was a man.”²⁶ While this opening formula may look exactly like an inverted form of the previous opening formula of *Τίς ἄνθρωπος* there is actually one small but significant difference. The

²⁶ Luke, the only New Testament writer to use this construction, also uses this introductory formula to introduce the parables of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33); Banquet (Luke 14:16); Pounds (Luke 19:12); and the Wicked Husbandmen (Luke 20:9); see also Luke 14:2. This introductory formula is also used in the Septuagint: Job 1:1; and Bel and the Dragon. Other classical Greek authors use this construction as well: Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 1091; Xenophon, *Anabasis*, II.4.14; Plato, *Lovers*, 138. Aesop is particularly fond of this introductory formula: *Fabulae*, 32.1, 2; 33.2; 34.2; 35.2, 3; 286.1.

absence of an acute accent above the word τις changes that tiny word from an interrogative pronoun into an indefinite pronoun. Therefore, Jesus is no longer asking a question but rather is stating that there was once a man who this happened to.

In Luke 15:11 we read, “There was a man who had two sons.” Then, in Luke 16:1, introducing the parable of the Prodigal Manager Jesus says, “There was a rich man who had a manager...” And finally in Luke 16:19, introducing Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man, Jesus says, “There was a rich man who...” This repetition could imply that these “certain men” were in fact the same certain man. At any rate, whether or not we accept that Luke meant that these men were the same man, the literary constructions definitively betray that these parables are to be read and understood together.

διασκορπίζω

Austin again rightly points out that “only twice in the N.T. is the verb *diaskorpizein* (‘to scatter’ or ‘to disperse’) used metaphorically in the sense of ‘to squander’ or ‘to waste’: once in the parable of *The Prodigal Son* (Lk. 15:13) and once in the parable of *The Prodigal Manager* (Lk. 16:1).²⁷ In most other New Testament uses of the word, it is applied either agriculturally or pastorally.²⁸ Both the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager are said to διασκορπίζω someone else’s funds. Here we see again a thematic thread woven between these two parables.

Austin makes many great points that may be illustrated through the following chart provided by Austin.²⁹

Luke 15:17— But when he came to himself he said, How many of my father’s hired hands	Luke 16:3— Then the manager said to himself, What will I do, now that my master is taking
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²⁷ Austin, “Hypocritical,” 311.

²⁸ See Matthew 25:24, 26; 26:31; and Mark 14:27.

²⁹ Austin, “Hypocritical,” 311–312. Austin uses the RSV in his chart while I have used the NRSV. Besides that minor change, I have retained Austin’s chart entirely.

have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!	the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.
18— I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;	4— I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.
19— I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.	
20–21— So he set off and went to his father...and said...	5— So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked...

We see in the chart that both the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager have an epiphany moment where they realize what is to be done within themselves. They both take steps towards their desired ends and act upon their plans. Perhaps they are intended to actually be the same person.

Country Life verses City Life and Rich verses Poor

Cicero, in *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino*, describes how someone from the country was viewed in ancient honor-shame cultures. Here Cicero is the defense attorney and one method that he employs to get his client acquitted is to portray him as a man from the country. Cicero argues, “Further what evil desires could exist in that man who as his accuser himself objected to him has always lived in the country and spent his time in cultivating his land, a mode of life which is utterly removed from covetousness, and inseparably allied to virtue?”³⁰ He accepts as fact that those who live in the country are “utterly removed from covetousness,” and “inseparably allied to virtue.” In the ancient world, as possibly still holds true today, the prospect of living in the

³⁰ Cicero, *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino*, XIV.14.39.

country was romantic as opposed to living in the bustle of a big city. Country dwellers were seen as more simple and honest people. This same stereotype can be applied to the rich and the poor. The rich, usually those who dwell in the cities, are often viewed as immoral whereas the poor are at times glamorized. Landry and May comment, “One must also note the idea of ‘limited good’ prevalent in peasant societies. It was believed that wealth, honor, status, love, and so on—the good things in life—existed in limited quantities. Thus a rich man is so at the expense of others.”³¹ Therefore, those reading or hearing these parables would naturally interpret those in the country, or those who are poor, as more moral than those in the city, or those who are rich. The Prodigal Son’s wanting money and leaving to go to the city would be a red flag in their minds. Similarly, the Prodigal Manager opens with the line, “There was a rich man...” (Luke 16:1). Immediately the audience is predisposed to think negatively of this rich man. And finally we read the same words at the inception of the parable of Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man: “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day” (Luke 16:19). Therefore, we see that Jesus includes stories about rich men and city folk in contrast to poor people in the country to illustrate his parables. We see this in the three parables: Prodigal Son, Prodigal Manager, and Lazarus the Prodigal Rich Man, but we do not see this in the Lost Sheep or the Lost Coin. The first two parables of Luke 15 are simply ambivalent concerning their economic status. A man with 100 sheep would actually be quite wealthy but we are not predisposed to dislike him. A woman with 10 silver drachmai is indeed poor.³² Thus we see that in these two parables Luke is not using rich verses poor imagery as he does in the parables of the Prodigal Son, the Prodigal Manager, and Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man are. It is only with the parable of the Prodigal Son and onward that Jesus is warning about wealth

³¹ Landry and May, “Honor,” 295.

³² For a masterful study on the economic status of the shepherd and the woman see E. Odin Yingling, “Seeking for the Lost: A Papyrological Search for Luke Fifteen’s Lost Economics,” forthcoming.

whereas in the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin Jesus is teaching the importance of each individual soul in the kingdom of God. Therefore, these three parables should be read together and used to interpret one another rather than the presupposed trilogy of Luke 15.

If we can show that the Prodigal Son is a good candidate to be the manager of his father's estate then perhaps we can accept that Luke wants us to view the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager as the same person.

The Prodigal Son as a *Vilicus*

Luke 16:1 begins the parable of the Prodigal Manager by telling the audience that there was a man who had a οἰκονόμος. Due to scant extant information concerning Ancient Jewish agricultural practices, Roman sources may be used to understand more about agricultural life. The Greek word οἰκονόμος is translated to *vilicus* in the Vulgate of Luke 16:1. Therefore, the οἰκονόμος in Luke 16:1–8 could possibly have fit the criteria of an ancient Roman *vilicus*.³³

In the ancient Roman agricultural system, a *vilicus* was usually a former member of a household—such as a freed slave.³⁴ The transition from being an urban slave to a free person would be difficult. Therefore, often a freed urban slave would become a *vilicus rusticus*. The former slave was often offered this job as a secure way to deal with his new-found freedom. It was a way to ensure financial security to one close to the owner as he probably could not perform many other tasks. Columella, the ancient Roman agrarian, implies that being a steward is a not physically demanding job: “If no accidental bodily defects intervene, a man will be able to perform the duties of an active enough farmer from thirty-five years until his sixty-fifth

³³ Obviously, agricultural practices of ancient Israelite society would be most helpful but, as records are scarce, the ancient Roman system is the closest equivalent.

³⁴ Jesper Carlsen, *Vilici and Roman Estate Managers Until A.D. 284*, (Accademia di Danimarca: Rome, 1995), 57ff; Jean-Jacques Aubert, *Business Managers in Ancient Rome: A Social and Economic Study of Institores, 200 B.C. – A.D. 250*, (Brill: Leiden, 1994), 150ff.

year.”³⁵ This fits perfectly with what we know about the steward: “I cannot dig” (Luke 16:3).

Obviously, the role of a *vilicus* did not involve heavy labor.

Columella also gives advice on whom to appoint as a *vilicus*: “It is fitting that a bailiff (*vilicus*) should be set over your farm and household who is neither in the first or in the last stage of his life.”³⁶ He also advises,

Let us, mindful of our ignorance, place young men who are mentally active and physically strong in charge of our most skilful husbandman, by whose advice one at least out of many (for education is difficult) may attain to a knowledge not only of farming but also of commanding others; for there are some who, although they are highly approved for the manner in which they carry out their crafts, have very little skill in commanding others and ruin their masters by handling the matter with either too much severity or even too much leniency.³⁷

In all of these things, the Prodigal Son seems to be a perfect candidate to be the *vilicus* of his father’s estate. He grew up in the country and knows how to run an estate. We see in Luke 15:25 that the prodigal’s older brother was out in the field—presumably working. We can assume that the prodigal also worked before his venturing into the city and therefore knew quite well how to be a manager. He also would have known the *subvilici* very well and would know how to interact with them. If something were to go amiss the father always retains the right to dismiss him with no further argument. Indeed, Jesper Carlsen supplies, “Ultimately, responsibility for the

³⁵ Columella, *De Re Rustica*, XI, 1.3.

³⁶ Columella, *Rustica*, XI.1.3.

³⁷ Columella, *Rustica*, XI.1.6. In *Luke*, I. Howard Marshall comments, “The [*vilicus*] was not merely a head-servant placed in charge of the household staff (as in Luke 12:42), but a trained, trusted, and duly empowered agent of the master. He was able to act in the name of the master in transactions with third parties (e.g. the renting of plots of ground to tenant-farmers, the making of loans against a harvest, the liquidation of debts, the keeping of accounts of all such transactions),” Marshall, *Luke*, 1097.

negligence or thievish tendencies of the bailiff (*vilicus*) rested on the master himself, since he appointed the *vilicus* and could, without difficulty, remove him from office again, if he chose.”³⁸

We do know of at least one example in ancient Roman history where a father made his son a manager. Though this was possibly rare and Columella warns against hiring those who are close to you,³⁹ we see from Cicero that it did indeed happen. Cicero’s *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino*, the same trial quoted above, describes the trial of a man tried for the murder of his father. The son had been appointed as his *vilicus*. Therefore, the prosecutor claimed that he had motive to murder his father because he hated him for making him *vilicus*. Cicero counters the prosecutor’s claims by pointing out that it was not indeed a punishment to be appointed as a manager. He says, “What? Do not the heads of households who have children, especially those of Roscius’s class from the country towns think it most desirable for themselves that their sons should devote themselves as much as possible to the management of the estate and spend a large part of their labour and pains on cultivating the farms?”⁴⁰ Cicero points out that appointing your son as your manager is normal and, in some circles, preferred. Later he says that the fact that this practice is preferred is, “the facts of the case and the truth,”⁴¹ and, “the nature of the facts, the custom of mankind, and generally received opinions.”⁴² Columella quotes Socrates’ question to Ischomachus as to whether he would rather purchase a steward or train him up himself.

Ischomachus replied, “I train him up myself; for he who stands in my place in my absence and

³⁸ Carlsen, *Vilici*, 58; Cato, *agr.* V.2–4; Columella, *Rustica*, I.7.5; I.8.5–7; XI.1.13–14.

³⁹ Columella, *Rustica*, I.Preface.12; I.8.1–2.

⁴⁰ Cicero, *Roscio*, XV.43. Cicero employs the Latin *nonne* showing that the anticipated answer should be in the affirmative. I. Howard Marshall adds, “The Greek *oikonomos* [Latin *vilicus*] was often, but not necessarily, a slave born in the household (= Hebrew *ben bayit*, ‘a son of the house’ [Gen 15:3] or *yelid bayit*, ‘born of the house’ [Gen 14:14]), who was especially trained and tested in the supervision of a farm-estate. In the Roman world of the time he was called *vilicus* (or *villicus*).” Marshall, *Luke*, 1099.

⁴¹ Cicero, *Roscio*, XV.44.

⁴² Cicero, *Roscio*, XV.45.

acts as a deputy in my activities, ought to know what I know.”⁴³ Who better than the son to know what the father knows and to be brought up by him? Surely, a son would be the best candidate for the job.

Therefore, we see that it is possible that the Prodigal Son’s father would appoint the Prodigal Son as the manager of the estate. Under this arrangement, the son would have shelter and a small percentage of the fruits of the farms. In essence, the son would have a comfortable situation with all of his needs met without having to do much physical labor. After considering all the facts, this seems to be a viable situation. The son seems to be a good candidate for a manager and Luke wants us to see these people as the same person.

Parabolic Thematic Continuation

If indeed Luke has used the Prodigal Son as the same character as the Prodigal Manager and as Lazarus then it would not be the first time we see Luke using a continuing theme. Luke also uses the returning motif of the mustard seed to teach different principles. In Luke 13:19 Jesus teaches that the kingdom is like a mustard seed which grew into a great tree that birds lodge in. But then in Luke 17:6 Jesus reprises the role of the mustard seed to teach about faith. He teaches that if his disciples have faith as a mustard seed then they could pluck up trees by their very word. Here we see that Jesus does at times use the same idea to convey two different principles and that he is not against using the same character more than once as he is doing here in these three parables.

Purpose of Thematic Continuation

Why would Luke want his audience to understand the Prodigal Son and Lazarus as the same person as the manager? Marshall comments on the father’s closing statements in Luke 15:32 saying, “With the father’s statement the parable comes to an end, leaving his words as the

⁴³ Columella, *Rustica*, XI.1.5.

climax.”⁴⁴ If the father’s words are the climax, then should not there be a conclusion? From all of the interpretations of this parable we have been left without an ending. Indeed, Bailey notes that “In both stories [the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager], there is a missing final scene. We do not know the final response of the older son or the final result of the steward’s act.”⁴⁵ Finally, with this new interpretation, Luke 16 provides an ending and the rest of the story of the Prodigal Son’s life. Similarly, we know nothing about Lazarus before we meet him in Luke 16. This reading tells us about his life before he was a mendicant.

The Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man as the Capstone

Luke ties the four preceding parables together with one final parable: the parable of Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man. Luke uses this parable to synthesize the two sets of parables and to show the end of those who disregard the teachings of Jesus. This parable matches the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager in that ἄνθρωπός τις is used to introduce this parable as well (Luke 16:19). We also have an example of a rich person who, although the exact verb διασκοπίζω is not used, obviously squanders his money away by living sumptuously. The literary imagery of rich verses poor is again employed to show that the rich man is sinful and the poor man is righteous. Luke then expertly incorporates the parables of the Lost Sheep and Coin by painting Lazarus as the Lost Son who returns home to his father Abraham. Therefore, Luke, in a dramatic reversal, uses Lazarus, the same person as the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager, to show the end of those who are lost and subsequently found. Lazarus, the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager, now deeply penitent sitting in sores, represents those who repent and are found. Luke then uses the Prodigal Rich Man to show the end of those who, as the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager, squander their money and only keep their own needs in

⁴⁴ Marshall, *Luke*, 613.

⁴⁵ Bailey, *Poet*, 109.

mind. Luke ties up these five parables by stating that those who repent can be found but those who abuse wealth will suffer a worse fate.

Benefits of this New Reading

If we can accept the hypothesis that Luke intended these parables to inform one another, then we can glean great knowledge from them both. The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin are paired together, the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager are paired together, and the parable of the Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man summarize the four preceding parables. The parable of Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man is about repenting, sitting in sores, and being found by the father again. It is also about a wise use of wealth and not squandering away what truly belongs to God. In this way, the Prodigal Rich Man sums up what we learn from the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager whereas Lazarus sums up what we learn from the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. Finally, Lazarus is found and is brought into Abraham's bosom rejoicing.

There was a son who asked his father to prematurely give him his portion of the estate—a sign of gross disrespect on the part of the son. Finally, the father obliges and gives the son his third of the estate—a third of all that he has. The son then goes into the city (remember that the city is a literary symbol for corruption) and he squanders his, or rather his father's, wealth. On the brink of starvation, he has an epiphany. He will return to his father and beg to be a servant.

The proper reaction in an ancient honor-shame society would be for the father to disown the son for shaming him in front of his peers.⁴⁶ If the son ever came back he would be a stranger and the father would treat him as such. The son should now be literally dead to his father. Shockingly, the father “saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). His acceptance of his son was so quick that the son did not even have time to

⁴⁶ Kloppenborg, “Dishonoured Master,” 492.

beg to be a servant before the father placed his best robe and his ring upon his son (see Luke 15:18–19, 21). Placing the robe and especially the ring upon the son shows that he re-owns him. Also, the son would later use the ring as a form of investiture of authority while serving as Manager for his father.

The son is accepted back into the household of the father. But still he has no inheritance and does not have any prospect of gaining one because he has already spent it all. Although the father loves him and accepts him back into his *paterfamilias* still he must say to the other brother, “All that I have is thine” (Luke 15:31). Just because he forgives the prodigal of his offense against his honor does not mean that suddenly there is some hidden slush fund for the son to re-inherit. Therefore, the son will somehow have to provide for himself.

Mercifully, the father allows him to be the manager of the estate. This will provide him a roof over his head, food to eat, and a comfortable living. This son is grateful because he does not know how to dig or do other manual labor and he is too prideful, having been raised in a comfortable situation, to beg (see Luke 16:3).

But the son’s memory of all that his father has done for him is only short-term as he reverts back to his slothful and squandering way of living. The owner of the estate, his father, or possibly now his brother if his father has passed away, calls upon him to inquire concerning charges that are brought against him. Whether or not these charges are true, they are afloat and therefore have damaged the owner’s reputation once again.⁴⁷ The son prudently tries to find shelter for himself in the event that his owner puts him out once more or to hopefully regain his owner’s trust. The owner praises him for his wisdom and presumably keeps him on as his οἰκονόμος.

⁴⁷ Kloppenborg, “Dishonoured Master,” 488.

But old habits die hard and the owner, now his brother, once more hears of mismanagement of his estate. His only choice is to release his brother from stewardship. Now towards the end of his life he surely cannot dig and is left to beg—exactly what he feared in Luke 15:14–20 and Luke 16:3. Daily he sits outside his brother’s estate and watches as he comes in and out wearing fancy clothes but never shares his wealth with his younger brother. The older brother thinks to himself that the younger brother has had countless chances to change his ways but it is everlastingly too late. The day would come when the younger brother would die—there at the gates of the estate. The older brother wouldn’t even attend his funeral or give him proper burial. The older brother would someday die as well and is shocked to see his little brother in Abraham’s bosom. He pleads with Abraham to let Lazarus comfort him just as the Lazarus pled for his brother to comfort him in life. His plea is rejected. The older brother then plead that Lazarus would go back to the estate that he spent his entire life on and testify to his “brothers.”⁴⁸ But again his plea is denied.

The interim material from Luke 16:8b–17 is a summation of the two preceding parables (with an interpolation in Luke 16:18) of the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager, just as we saw a summation to the parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin (see Luke 15:10). Then Jesus continues to show what the end will be of one who ignores his teaching. The role of the son is reprised one last time as Lazarus.⁴⁹

A sheep was lost and found after much worry. A party is thrown. A coin is lost but found after much sweeping. A party is thrown. A son is lost because he squandered all his father’s money but is found after much sadness. A party is thrown. A manager is fired after squandering

⁴⁸ For the purposes of this parable we must take this word brother to mean “a person viewed as a brother in terms of a close affinity, brother, fellow member, member, associate, or compatriot.” BDAG, “*adelphos*,” 18–19.

⁴⁹ While I assert that Lazarus is the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager I do not assert that he is the same Lazarus found in the Gospel of John who was raised from the dead. I remain silent on what Lazarus means or why Luke chose to use that name in this parable.

his master's money and is found due to his shrewdness. This same sheep, coin, son, and Manager has now fallen on hard times and begs for forgiveness (remember that poverty is a sign of righteousness). He dies and again is found in Abraham's bosom. Surely a party is thrown. Another man dies as well after squandering all of his wealth. Sadly, he is not able to be found and no party is able to be thrown because he did not repent (as we learn to from the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin) and he squandered away his money, not helping beggars (as we learn from the Prodigal Son and the Prodigal Manager).

Conclusion

By using Lazarus as the Prodigal Son and as the same person as the Prodigal Manager, Jesus is showing the end of those who search after mammon.⁵⁰ By portraying Lazarus as a poor person, Luke uses the literary device of rich verses poor again to show that Lazarus is now a good person and has learned from his mistakes. Therefore, Luke is teaching that only after we become good people, cast away our wealth and sit full of sores can we be fit for the kingdom of God. When we read the parable of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin together and the parables of the Prodigal Son, the Prodigal Manager, and Lazarus and the Prodigal Rich Man we are able to glean the meaning that Luke intended for us to glean.

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⁵⁰ Marshall, *Luke*, 616: "[The parable] is now to be seen positively as an injunction to repentance and to the right use of wealth in order to gain the approval of God."

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