

Friends By Unrighteous Mammon: The Eschatological Proletariat (Luke 16:9)

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LUKE 16:9 has been a troublesome verse for interpreters of Jesus' parables. Many consider it a separate saying of Jesus, appended by Luke to the parable of the "Dishonest Steward," which would have ended originally with vs. 8 (possibly vs. 8a, or even vs. 7).¹ C. H. Dodd does not discuss the story in his *Parables of the Kingdom*, but gives his judgment that vss. 8, 9, and 10 ff. are secondary additions.² Some, however, believe that vs. 9 belongs to the original parable.³ Luke evidently understood that it did, even if he then proceeded to elaborate some variations on its theme in vss. 10-13.

Bultmann lists the parable (16:1-9) with those whose original meaning "... has become irrecoverable in the course of the tradition."⁴ Can nothing be said about its meaning? First we must ask some questions. In particular, what are the "eternal habitations" or "tabernacles," who are the "friends," and why will "they" receive "you" into the "eternal habitations"? Is the saying meant seriously, or sardonically? The latter would be the case if the "eternal habitations" meant Sheol, the place where the unrighteous dead reside forever in misery and despair, as in Enoch 63:10 (cf. Eccles. 12:5).

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¹ R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. J. Marsh, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, pp. 77, 81, 175 f.; J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed., trans. S. H. Hooke, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963, p. 46; D. O. Via, Jr., *The Parables*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967, pp. 155 f.

² 2nd rev. ed., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961, p. 17. Technically the story is not a "parable of the Kingdom." Luke does not describe it as a "parable" and the Kingdom of God is not mentioned. The latter consideration illustrates the fact that the future coming of the Kingdom is a fundamental assumption of Lukan eschatology even where not explicitly stated. "Eschatology is not merely one topic among many; it is *the* issue that at the very outset defines Luke's distinctive interest in the witness of the church." (F. O. Francis, "Eschatology and History in Luke-Acts," *JAAR*, XXXVII [1969], 55.)

³ W. Manson, *The Gospel of Luke*, New York: Harper & Row, 1930, pp. 183 f.; A. Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906, p. 380. Also, D. R. Fletcher, "The Riddle of the Unjust Steward: Is Irony the Key?," *JBL*, LXXXIII (1963), 19; and F. E. Williams, "Is Almsgiving the Point of the 'Unjust Steward'?", *LXXXIV* (1964), 295.

⁴ Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, p. 199.

"Friends," then, would be one's fellow "wheelers and dealers" whom one would rejoin in Sheol after death or judgment.⁵

The exact meaning of *αἱ ἀλώνιοι σκηναί*, however, is uncertain, for it does not occur elsewhere in the N.T. or in rabbinic literature. Instead of meaning the abode of the *unrighteous*, it may mean the ultimate home of the *righteous*, as in Enoch 39:4 ff., or John 14:2 f.: *viz.*, Paradise (cf. Luke 16:22a; 23:43) or the Kingdom of God. In that case, the "friends" who are to "receive you" would not be the *unrighteous*, but rather those who have found favor with God. Several interpreters believe that *φίλοι* is a Jewish circumlocution for the divine name: Almsgiving intercedes with God.⁶ Certainly God is not to be excluded from the scene, but the plural form "friends" implies beings in addition to God. Meyer, therefore, proposes that "friends" refers to the angels who will play a decisive role in gathering the elect (Mark 13:27, cf. Luke 15:10).⁷ Not a few interpreters have suggested that the "friends" are the poor, those who, in the present life or age, have been befriended by gifts of (otherwise) *unrighteous mammon*. They will then receive or welcome their former benefactors into Paradise or the Kingdom of God.⁸ Unfortunately, these writers have not proceeded to develop this conception consistently and systematically. Plummer, for example, who urges that in vs. 9 Jesus "Himself gives the key to the meaning" of the parable, summarizes its thrust rather vacuously: "If Christians were as sagacious and persevering in using wealth to promote their welfare in the next world, as worldly men are in using it to promote their interests here, *the Kingdom of God would be more flourishing than it is.*"⁹ A. M. Hunter gives it a quite general (and typically non-eschatological) reading: "... Jesus is saying, in effect: 'Give me men who will show as much practical sense in God's business as worldlings do in theirs.'"¹⁰

I

Before going on to explore the possibility that the "friends" are the poor, the question must be raised whether vs. 9 is simply *appended* to the parable, or an integral part of it, at least as it now stands. Jeremias thinks that vs. 9 has been connected with the parable through verbal association of the phrase *δέξονται με εἰς* (vs. 4) with *δέξονται ὑμᾶς εἰς* in vs. 9. But is this repetition only superficially parallel, and are there no other parallels between vs. 9 and the earlier verses?

⁵ Thus, for instance, W. R. F. Browning, *The Gospel According to Saint Luke*, London: SCM Press, 1960, p. 133.

⁶ E. g., Billerbeck, II, 220 f.; N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, New York: Harper & Row, 1967, p. 115.

⁷ H. A. W. Meyer, *Handbook to the Gospels of Mark and Luke*, trans. R. E. Wallis, W. P. Dickson, New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884, pp. 467 f.

⁸ S. MacL. Gilmour in *Interpr. B.*, vol. 8, pp. 280-84; W. Manson, *Luke*, p. 184; A. Plummer, *St. Luke*, pp. 385 f.

⁹ Plummer, *St. Luke*, pp. 380 f. Ital. added.

¹⁰ *Interpreting the Parables*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960, pp. 67 f.

Both, of course, have to do with the prudent use of "goods": τὰ ὑπάρχοντα (vs. 1); ὁ μαμωνᾶς (vs. 9). These terms are synonymous: one's possessions, what one has, not simply one's "money."¹¹ The "Steward" had been wasting his master's goods; but now, at the last hour, he made prudent disposition of those goods. Similarly, Jesus calls on his hearers (disciples, Pharisees, or both) to make prudent use of the possessions at their disposal.

The parallelism is not confined to the phrases "that they may receive me into" (vs. 4) and "that they may receive you into" (vs. 9). Both verbally and in terms of the situation, the parallelism is more extensive: ἵνα ὅταν μετασταθῶ (vs. 4); ἵνα ὅταν ἐκλίπη (vs. 9). Here are the prospects in store for the respective parties: The steward will be discharged, and thus deprived of his previous livelihood; Jesus' hearers will, at death or the dawn of the Messianic Age, no longer have any use for their former possessions.¹² The parallel sentences conclude: δέξωνται με εἰς τοὺς οἴκους ἑαυτῶν; δέξωνται ὑμᾶς εἰς τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς ("that people may receive me into their houses; they may receive you into the eternal habitations"). In each case, the purpose clause describes the way in which the parties may avoid their otherwise dolorous fates. In the former instance, the steward (as a prudent son of the present age) ingratiates himself with those who can take him into *their houses* after his discharge. In the latter, Jesus' hearers may look for a still more promising future: entrance into the *eternal dwellings* (i. e., Paradise or the Kingdom of God), but only if they act as prudently in their own present situation of crisis as the clever steward did in his! The "eternal tabernacles" stand "in contrast to the uncertain and transitory houses of the debtors (vs. 4)"¹³ whose security does not extend beyond their own generation, i. e., the present age (vs. 8).

A further connection appears in the sentence structure at the beginning of vs. 8 and 9. What the master said to his steward is balanced by what Jesus said to his disciples: "And I say to you. . . ."¹⁴ Here, as with the debtors' houses and the eternal tabernacles, there is an implicit "how much more." Vs. 9 also echoes vs. 8 in the use of the phrase τῆς ἀδικίας "dishonest," "unrighteous") in the one case, with "the steward"; in the other with "mammon," in both places as a genitive of characteristic, modeled, perhaps, on a Semitic genitive construct. Further, in both verses Luke uses the verb ποιεῖν to designate the commended conduct: that of the steward (φρονίμως ἐποίησεν, he had "performed wisely"), and the course of action Jesus urged upon his hearers (ἑαυτοῖς ποιήσατε φίλους, "make friends for yourselves"). Finally, the reference to the "sons of light"¹⁵ in vs. 8 leads

¹¹ See Billerbeck, I, 434.

¹² See B. S. Easton, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926, p. 245.

¹³ Plummer, *St. Luke*, p. 386.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

¹⁵ The parallelism "sons of this age," "sons of light" suggests that the latter are "sons" or "heirs" of the age to come: cf. the use of the verb κληρονομέω in Luke 10:25, 18:18; Matt. 5:5, 25:34, etc. Similar expressions occur in Luke 20:34; John 12:36; I Thess. 5:5 and the Dead Sea Scrolls, especially the War Scrolls.

naturally to the "you" of vs. 9; for it is Jesus' followers who, as "sons of light," may look forward to being received into the Kingdom of God — if they take their cue from the wisdom of the sons of this present age.

Taken together, these parallels and contrasts make it unlikely that vs. 9 was simply tacked onto the parable. That it is especially related to vss. 4 and 8 is significant, for it is in these verses that the steward's basic plan, together with his master's and also, probably, Jesus' commentary¹⁶ on his conduct are presented. In vs. 9, Jesus advises (or commands) his hearers to follow the example of the prudent steward by making friends through use of their possessions in order that these friends — "they" as counterpart to the various debtors of vss. 4-7 — will welcome them into the eternal dwellings.

II

Who then are these "friends"? Elsewhere in Luke's gospel, it is clear what men must do if they wish to enter the Kingdom of God: Sell your possessions, and give alms; make purses for yourselves that do not grow old, a treasure in heaven that does not fail (Luke 12:33). The noun *τὰ ὑπάρχοντα* ("possessions"), the phrase *ποιήσατε ἑαυτοῖς* ("provide yourselves") and the adjective *ἀνεκλείπτου* ("does not fail"), all in 12:33, suggest a close relation to 16:1-9; 12:33 could even be considered a variant rescension of 16:9. The "poor" as such are not mentioned in 12:33, though presumably they are the recipients of the alms. This is explicit in Jesus' instruction to the "ruler" who wished to inherit eternal life: "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow me."¹⁷

It is generally recognized that in Luke's gospel Jesus is especially concerned that his followers use what they have for the benefit of the poor: If, when giving a feast, one invites the poor and disabled, he will be "repaid at the resurrection of the just" (14:13 f.). Zacchaeus, who gives half of his goods to the poor exemplifies the fitting response of those who look for salvation (19:8). The Samaritan offered his resources to provide for the traveler who had been robbed and beaten (10:34 f.). Conversely, Luke presents a number of sayings to the effect that those who do not so use their wealth face exclusion from the Kingdom of God or the coming age (6:24 f.; 12:15 ff.; 16:19 ff.; 18:24 f.). The rich man of Luke 16:19 ff. had not *done*

¹⁶ Whether *ὁ κύριος* in vs. 8 refers to the steward's master or to Jesus is much debated. For several reasons, including the fact that 16:1-13 otherwise consists of sayings attributed to Jesus, it seems likely that the former is correct. But vs. 8b, "For the sons of this age . . ." should be regarded as Jesus' appreciation of the steward's prudence, since its transcendent perspective and eschatological dualism would be out of place on the lips of the steward's employer.

¹⁷ 18:22; cf. 14:33. Jesus may have made statements of this sort on several occasions. The idea of distributing (to the poor?) in 11:22, however, is probably an instance of Lukan interest. See S. Legasse, "L'Homme fort' de Luc 11:21-22," *NovT*, V (1962), 5-9. Legasse suggests that *διαδίδουαι* here, as in 18:22 and Acts 4:35, means distributing goods to the poor.

anything wicked; he had simply *not* done anything for the indigent, sick and hungry man at his gate, while devoting his wealth to the satisfaction of his own desires. The respective fates of "Dives" and Lazarus illustrate the Lukan version of the Beatitudes (6:20 f., 24 f.) and also the prophetic promise and threat of Mary's "Magnificat" (1:51-53).

There can be little doubt that Jesus — according to Luke — expected that the Kingdom of God would be populated primarily, if not exclusively, by the poor: thus 6:20 f. It is not reported that Lazarus had done anything especially righteous, but he had been poor; therefore, when he died, he was carried to Abraham's bosom (16:22). In the parable about the messianic banquet, it is the poor and disabled who are first brought in to the feast (14:21).¹⁸ The poor, then, would be in a position to receive or welcome any subsequent arrivals. That a rich man might enter the Kingdom was most unlikely (18:22-27); for how in a world of poverty, hunger, and sickness could a rich man retain his wealth except through passing by on the other side of the road, ignoring the Lazaruses on his door step?¹⁹ Moreover, one who trusts in riches for his security commits idolatry: He should trust God for his future, rather than mammon (12:15-34). Such, then, seems to be the Lukan understanding of Jesus' teachings regarding possessions and poverty.

In this more inclusive context, as well as in relation to 16:1-8, Luke's intention in 16:9 is fairly plain: Those who use what they have for the benefit of the poor will please God, help those who are destined to inherit the coming age or Paradise, and may, therefore, hope to be received by them into that blessed era or abode.

III

But is *Luke's* intention in 16:9 the same as that of Jesus? To be sure, Luke does not portray Jesus as concerned exclusively with the poor. The poor are part of a broader company of the oppressed, afflicted, and outcaste: In effect, "the lost," who are the special objects of Jesus' care (15:8 ff., 32; 19:10).²⁰ Jesus is depicted similarly in the other synoptic gospels (and also John 7:53-8:11). The outcaste tax collectors and harlots would enter the Kingdom of God before the chief priests and elders (Matt. 21:28 ff.). The parable of the Lost Sheep appears not only in Luke, but also in Matt. (Matt.

¹⁸ Also, according to Luke, Jesus promised the thief with whom he was being executed, that "today" they would be together in Paradise (23:43). The thief not only trusted in Jesus as the coming messiah, but also, we may presume, was one of the "poor" or *am-ha-aretz*. In Luke, the gospel — the news and promise of the Kingdom — is directed to the poor and afflicted from the beginning of Jesus' ministry (4:18 ff.) to his final word to man (23:43).

¹⁹ Cf. R. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. L. P. Smith and E. H. Lantero, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958, p. 104: The "rich man is declared deserving of hell-fire simply because he is rich . . ." It is safe to say that Bultmann missed the point of the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

²⁰ Cf. 13:11 ff., 18:10-16, 23:43. So also W. G. Kümmel (P. Feine and J. Behm), *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. A. J. Mattill, Jr., New York-Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966, p. 98.

18:10-14=Luke 15:3-7). God's concern for the poor is implicit in the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.²¹

The story of the Great Judgment, preceded by the parables of the Bridesmaids and the Talents²² shows the importance of the prudent use of one's resources, explicitly, in Matt. 25:35 ff., in caring for those in need, the poor and outcaste. Those who have done so will "inherit the Kingdom"; those who have not will be excluded. The Matthean version of the Beatitudes may be later than the Lukan, at any rate, more spiritualized: The poor *in spirit* shall receive the Kingdom; those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness* shall be satisfied there. But as in Luke, it is clearly understood in Matthew that the humble, the oppressed, the outcaste will inherit the Kingdom. Jesus' favorable attitude toward the *am-ha-aretz* is evidenced in all of the gospels, especially in comparison with the Pharisees' indifference or contempt for them.

Luke did not invent all of the sayings about the peril of riches: Many of them have counterparts or parallels in Matthew, and must be regarded as part of the "Q" tradition (e. g., Matt. 6:19 f.,²³ 24b-33). The harsh saying about the exclusion of the rich from the Kingdom of God comes from Mark, where, as in the Matthean parallel, it concludes with the warning that when men enter the Kingdom, "many that are first will be last, and the last first" (Mark 10:31=Matt. 19:30). Probably this means that in the future Kingdom, the rich and exalted, if admitted at all, will occupy a lesser station, while the *am-ha-aretz* will be exalted (cf. Luke 1:52; 14:7-11). It may, however, imply that those of low degree will precede those formerly exalted into the Kingdom, as in Matt. 21:31. But the course of action indicated for those having possessions is scarcely in doubt: If one wishes to inherit eternal life (i. e., the Kingdom of God), he is to sell all that he has, give to the poor, and then he will have treasure in heaven (Mark 10:21).²⁴

The early Christian community in Jerusalem evidently regarded this sort of saying as dominical and authoritative. Acts 2:44 f.; 4:32, 34 f. describe a community of those who had sold all and given to the poor — in this instance, to the incipient Christian Church. It may be that the teaching of Jesus and the practice of the early Church alike were conditioned by the

²¹ See G. de Ru, "The Conception of Reward in the Teaching of Jesus," *NovT*, VIII (1966), esp. 202-09.

²² That these "parables of the Kingdom" (25:1) are understood by Matthew as prologue to the description of the Judgment is evident in the use of the future tense in 25:1 and 31 ff., also implicit in vs. 14.

²³ Such may be the meaning also of Matt. 6:22 f., as well as of 6:24-33. See H. J. Cadbury, "The Single Eye," *HarThRev*, XLVII (1954), 69-74.

²⁴ Cf. Matt. 13:44 f. For a list of other synoptic passages that appeal to "eschatological self-interest" see Williams, "Almsgiving," p. 293. Cf. Fletcher, "Riddle," p. 25: "Certainly the thinly veiled motive of self-interest in this kind of urging toward philanthropy strikes us as alien to the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth." It may be alien to Fletcher's conception of Jesus' teaching! However, Jesus was not concerned with the problem of "reward" or "philanthropy," but with the response men should make to God and man in face of the coming Kingdom and Judgment. Cf. T. W. Manson, "The Sayings of Jesus," in H. D. A. Major, et al., *The Mission and Message of Jesus*, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1938, p. 329.

expectation that the Kingdom would soon come (cf. Luke 19:11; Acts 1:6; 2:14 ff.). The interim would be so brief that there was no need to "take thought for the morrow." Had they not been taught to pray that God would bring the bread for the morrow (the messianic banquet and era) today? (Matt. 6:11 = Luke 11:3). At all events, God would provide for the needs of the faithful both in the interim and in the coming age (cf. Luke 18:28 ff. and parallels). The situation of the Jerusalem congregation is attested also in Paul's letters, where he refers to the collection he is raising for "the poor" or "saints" — i. e., the members — of that Church (Gal. 2:10; I Cor 16:1-3; II Cor. 9:1 ff.; Rom. 15:25 ff. Since the earliest believers had sold all they had and given to the poor (the Church), perhaps it seemed proper to the leaders of that Church for later converts — namely, Paul's — to go and do likewise (Gal. 2:10). Paul did not insist, however, that members of his churches sell all: It was enough for each to "put something aside" every week in accordance with his means (I Cor. 16:1 f.). That the early Church elsewhere viewed the rich with suspicion, but expected that the poor would inherit the Kingdom appears in James 2:5 ff. One should respond to those in need with what he has (James 2:14 ff.; I John 3:17 f.).

IV

Luke 16:9 is not merely attached to the parable. It is an integral part of it, and brings out Luke's conception of Jesus' purpose in telling the parable, and possibly Jesus' own intention. Neither the parable nor its application are intelligible apart from the eschatological situation: While one has time, he should act appropriately (cf. Matt. 5:25 f. = Luke 12:57 ff.). Soon comes the Judgment, when the fate of each will depend on how he has responded to those about him during his life in the old world. If he has sought security in this old world through riches, he will have had his reward already — all that he is going to get (Luke 6:24). But if he has befriended the poor and outcaste, he will have treasure in heaven (12:32 ff.), for he will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (14:13 f.).²⁵

When these other Lukan sayings are taken seriously, along with other synoptic and early church traditions and the eschatological context in which they are found, the meaning of Luke 16:1-9 should be clear. Like the other sayings and parables attributed to Jesus, it is a summons to a decision of ultimate consequence. Those who wish to inherit the Kingdom should profit from the example of the sons of this world. They should now give what they have to the poor, for only such — the poor and their benefactors — can hope to be received into the Kingdom.

²⁵ A distinctively Lukan touch may appear in the expectation that some would meet their ultimate destiny in Paradise through death, rather than at the coming of the Kingdom and Judgment in the near future: e. g., 12:20 f., 14:14b, 16:22 f., 23:43 (but cf. 20:36). Perhaps 16:9 also has this meaning. By Luke's time most if not all of Jesus' contemporaries had died. But Jesus also may have contemplated immediate entry into Paradise or Gehenna — at least in the case of some of those who had died in the past.