CHAPTER ONE

PUTTING THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE

A History of Recent Interpretation
of the Parable of the Unjust Steward

Given the central role context is to play in this study of the parable of the unjust steward, an appropriate place to begin is to set the study itself in context. To do so is the goal in the present chapter, and the means is a history of the recent interpretation of the parable. In the course of this chapter I will call attention to the difficulty of the parable itself, highlight the key interpretive issues involved, and point out suggestive ideas or approaches that in turn will be woven into the fabric of my own argument in subsequent chapters.¹ In this way it is hoped the reader will gain perspective on the entire study.

In attempting to offer a history of interpretation of any sort one is immediately faced with procedural questions. What chronological or historical parameters should be used? Then, how should the relevant studies within the chosen parameters be categorized? With respect to the first question, this chapter is limited to interpretations of our parable offered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since this investigation is not simply a history of interpretation, limits had to be drawn somewhere, from a purely practical standpoint alone. What is more, “the literature dealing with the parable of the unjust steward is staggering,”² and almost defies comprehensive systematization, whatever the parameters. Interpretations of the present century are included because a great deal has been written on our parable during this period which has not been surveyed elsewhere. To include only the twentieth century, however, seemed too narrow a limit, so the scope was extended to include the nineteenth century as well. After surveying the pertinent literature from both centuries, it became apparent that these historical parameters would be adequate for my purposes. The interpretations of the parable prior to the nineteenth century had already been handled by M. J. C. Schreiter’s

¹ An abridgement of this chapter, along with a summary of the major conclusions of my study, can be found in WTJ 51 (1989) 293-318.
history of interpretation published in 1803, there is more than enough material available from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and these parameters have the added practical advantage of increasing the accessibility of the material.

Once the chronological or historical limits of this chapter were determined, the second major procedural question—that of categorization—had to be answered. If the question of parameters of the study is difficult, that of categorization of relevant material proves even more so. As even a quick glance at the literature reveals, the sheer volume of interpretations of the parable of the unjust steward even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is overwhelming. To illustrate, W. S. Kissinger, in the bibliographic section of his helpful book on the parables, lists 107 periodical articles alone on this parable which fall within our chronological parameters. This statistic should indicate the difficulty of the task of categorization. One interpreter speaks of “the jungle of explanations of our parable [des Urwaldes der Erklärungen unserer Parabel],” while another laments what he describes as “a wilderness of contradictory explanations and opinions.” When one adds to this state of affairs the almost limitless number of combinations of possible interpretations, the difficulty of systematic categorization is heightened even further. Many interpretations could justifiably be put in more than one category, and the danger of oversimplification looms large. How should one proceed?

To opt for a purely chronological approach, though convenient, appeared more confusing than helpful in attempting to convey the various major ways the parable of the unjust steward has been interpreted. To simply borrow A. Rücker’s three categories—“Allegorical Interpretations Mostly of a Contemporary Kind,” “Partial Elimination of Allegory Bound with Moralistic Interpretation,” and “Newer Refusals of Allegory and Their Critique”—, while again convenient, did not seem appropriate either. Among other things, Rücker’s categories rest on the difficult and much-debated issue of just what constitutes allegory. To

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5 Krämer, Rätsel, 27.


7 Rücker, “Gleichnis,” 6-26, 27-52, and 53-64, respectively.