Bystander Theology and the Desire to End a Hermeneutic Hegemony

David Kahan

Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology 2010 40: 138
DOI: 10.1177/0146107910375548

Biblical Theology Bulletin Volume 40 Number 3 Pages 138-147

DOI: 10.1177/0146107910375548
http://btb.sagepub.com

Bystander Theology and the Desire to End a Hermeneutic Hegemony

David Kahan

Abstract

The parable of the crafty steward in Luke 16:1–8 may be central to Jesus' negotiation of identity and mission, not an impossibility or an embarrassment as many exegetes believe. Received tradition has been unable to access the text adequately, falling short of offering faith communities a suitable hermeneutic that decodes the world of Jesus' contemporaries. This essay approaches the text by introducing bystander theology, which turns to aesthetics, the fine arts, to develop exegetical and theological concepts that embody density, texture, and depth that elucidate how biblical persons can be understood today. The essay advocates that the body of Christ extends not only spatially but also through layers of time. By participating in a biblical encounter as a bystander and exploring biblical actors' frames of reference, biblical worlds may more clearly come into focus.

Key words: Bystander theology, Aesthetics, Lucan Studies, Nature of presence, Moral dilemmas, Cartesian paradigm

To simplify discussion I contend there are two diametrically opposed approaches to the Bible, and that the received exegetical tradition of the last two centuries in many ways has had catastrophic consequences for Christianity. What is referred to here as bystander theology abandons what I consider to be fatally compromised traditional hermeneutics in favor of an alternative approach. Bystander principles broaden the corpus of Christian affirmations of faith, and provide a fresh perspective to the Christian negotiation of identity. These tenets will be developed by exploring the steward's story in Luke 16:1–8; discussion will not, however, engage with the field of parable studies in general. To understand the importance and need for bystander theology, discussion will start with received tradition, which has a marked tendency to emphasize extracted messages.

The Bible Abused

I will briefly address what can be considered to be three kinds of Bible abuse; the first is in regards to doctrinal exegesis. Jesus' retort in his argument with the Pharisees, "Can one of you convict me of sin" (John 8.46—New American

David Kahan, Ph.D. (University of Glasgow), is a Fellow at the Institute for Hermeneutics, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, An der Schlosskirche 2-4, 53113 Bonn, Germany; e-mail: aggadah@gmx.de. He is the author of such articles as "Textured Spatiality and the Art of Interpretation," *Heythrop Journal* 48 (2009) and is working on a book, *Trickster Redux*, which returns to the question of how to read the Bible.

Bible translation) for Berkhof leads to a theological assertion: "Though He was a real man, He was without sin. He did not sin and could not sin" (87). Berkhof believes that the parable of the laborers, in which Jesus has the vineyard owner saying "Have I no right to do what I like with my own?" (Matt 20:15), points to God's sovereignty: "His sovereign will, and His sovereign power, the final cause of all things" (33). Perhaps Berkhof is correct, but removing biblical statements from their context, and rushing into assertions that lead pell-mell into theological systems seems to put the cart before the horse. One wonders if doctrine came first and biblical texts were sought to support the theory. Admittedly Berkhof's concern is with doctrine, but preachers tread comparable paths; applied exegesis in sermons is the second form of Bible abuse.

One sermon heard recently was emblematic of how the Bible often is approached. It used Samson's riddle as its biblical springboard (Judges 14: 12–19), and as its theme the danger of and possible addiction to computer games (Vetter). The Rev. Dr. Vetter's exposition of the threat was excellent, but perhaps it would have been more sincere to dispense this one time with the Bible to discuss a serious issue than to treat Scripture in such an insouciant manner. Having heard sermons in various countries for forty years, I can attest that using the Bible as nondescript building material is ubiquitous. One could say that with doctrine and sermon a biblical text has been reduced in its function to that of a wall stud to support some other seemingly more relevant subject. By concentrating on disembodied terse clichés, Christianity casts its core biblical world adrift. For Samson's riddle Vetter could have substituted an example from the Qur'an or the Bhagavad-Gita, retained the bulk of his sermon, and spoken to a group of Muslims or Hindus. Neither Berkhof nor Vetter answers the question of what was happening in this biblical passage and why that was so important to original listeners.

The third type of maltreatment is in regards to academic interpretation. The focus of this paper is on the crafty steward of Luke 16, and received exegesis has not adequately explained Jesus' parable. Chapter headings of many Bible versions demarcate the conclusion a reader is to reach: "Parable of the Dishonest Manager" (English Standard, Contemporary English, Holman), or "Unrighteous" (New American), "Crooked" (Message), and "Unjust" (New King James). With translator and exegete one suspects the text has been given a cursory perusal, what is read is found to be jarring to modern sensitivities, and therefore to smooth over the dissonance, conclusions are made that may not truly reflect what the original author or Jesus was saying. Johnson is convinced the steward is to be commended, as "he has realized his master's gain was ill-gotten so he gave it away" (244) and Young that it "glorifies the actions of a shady character" (232). Exegesis is often equally dismissive of the steward, with Ladd lamenting that "this parable teaches that cleverness is better than honesty but this is obviously impossible" (92). Although Jesus spoke Aramaic, Lapide finds a Hebrew word, *barech* having a double meaning of praise and curse that he feels could explain the text. Lapide would ask for the narrative to be rewritten with the word praise changed so that "The master praised the steward" (Luke 16.8) becomes "The master damned the malicious deceiver for his perfidious actions" (92). Karris turns to general practices of the early Common Era, reasoning that since stewards were often paid from the interest charged, the amount Luke's steward deducted most likely was the exorbitant interest he originally had coming to him. He lost his share, but the master was repaid in full (965). That the steward is downright dishonest is also clear to Young, who concurs that the steward has probably overcharged and embezzled as well. He agrees with others who believe the story presumably is an attack on the Essenes, who in their confiscating members' wealth take unfair advantage of people (232–34). For Sanders, Jesus could be taken to task for allowing the wicked into his kingdom (323). That the story is a damaging embarrassment is assumed by all (Derret: 48).

The most disturbing aspect of this parable is that the steward has had the accounts falsified. "One hundred measures of oil?" "Write fifty" (Luke 16:5–6). Surely from a modern point of view there can be no exoneration of his behavior. As might be expected of a parable, because the logic is at times unfamiliar (the master applauds deception and the steward's fate remains unresolved), how the story coheres remains obscured. Under these circumstances it is easy to read much into the text while providing little evidence to support one's conclusions. Still, it is facile to resort to overly simplistic conclusions such as Bailey's, in which all he extends is a message of dishonest administrator placing his trust in the mercy of the master (107). And in finding an alien story with an alien actor, less effort is required to resort to read the parable typologically or anagogically. The exegesis surveyed above follows received tradition's penchant for bringing to heel seemingly recalcitrant biblical texts. As the

interpreter remains solidly entrenched in his or her familiar world, the past world of Jesus and the steward has become cut off and isolated. There appears to be an "unwillingness of some to open history to conflicting or contested versions of the past, as well as a reluctance to acknowledge the enduring presence of the past" (Gatens: 144). If Jesus does have a message, it may remain unheard as the modern ego dictates what is important. In seeking to master the text, however, received tradition is inattentive to the possibility that the steward's actions, which appear to be morally repugnant, may actually represent an essential element in Jesus' conception of his identity and mission.

Received Tradition Fatally Compromised

A small summary may be helpful. Whether with doctrinal, applied, or academic exegesis, the modern exegete tends to interpret while under the influence of metaphysics. Similar to metaphysicians, many biblical interpreters describe transcendental reality and ultimate truths. In determining the way God and the Bible should be understood, such metaphysical presuppositions not only constrain interpretation, but as Burch believes "at the root of metaphysics there is the everyday attitude of tranquilization, diversion and dismissal" (184). Informed that this is "the dishonest steward," a reader or listener may indeed become tranquilized ("Since someone of authority tells me this, it must be true"), and find him- or herself diverted ("If true then I don't have to investigate further"). The end result is that both text and steward are dismissed.

Another influence, the Cartesian "I think," projects back onto a biblical narrative a modern ideology with modern moral expectations. Exegesis is conducted from a modern standpoint and the Bible examined from modern perspectives. The exegete reaches back into a biblical scene as a postmodern detective attempting to make sense of what happened. There appears to be a belief that just as a bronze lion can be found intact in Nimrud, timeless facts exist in Scripture tangible and whole waiting to be dusted off and brought to light. Modern rational thinking is brought to bear as the material is evaluated and ranked, and the insignificant is discarded. With the chaff dispensed with, specific details then flow smoothly into general statements: Jesus was without sin. When a young blade extends a rose to his beloved, one assumes the rose itself is less important than what it stands for. When abstracted Christological concepts take precedence, the context of the biblical text is negated.

When a seemingly rational conclusion is made, a message has been abstracted from the text, and Scripture ceases to be the object of attention. Scripture is quarried like bauxite, and something of value is extracted while the rest is discarded. A superb automobile will be fatally compromised if it lacks brakes; so too if biblical interpretation and the church lose their scriptural focus. In generally not having one, consequences must surely follow, and possibly one of them is the parallel loss of mainstream Protestant and Catholic congregations where regular Sunday attendance in Europe now averages six percent. Solemn pageantry and processions where congregations rise as the Bible is carried forth cannot be enough to overcome the demise of Scripture exploration.

Bystander Theology

Bystander theology foregrounds the biblical other, affirming the existence and significance of seemingly insignificant biblical figures such as the unknown woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears, the publican, "the orphan with his rights or the widow with her cause" (Isa 1.17). A traditional theologian surveyed above can be said to momentarily highlight a marginal biblical character in order to make a point. Bailey proverbially has Jesus momentarily reaching out and drawing Luke's steward onto center stage in order to illustrate "an eschatological warning to sinners" (86). Having done so, the manager is dispatched back to the shadows, excluded once again. The steward's story only serves to reinforce a theological point, and for Bailey, Luke's focus is on the play's movers and shakers (Jesus and Pharisee) discussing weighty subjects, eschatology.

Because such characters generally make a brief entrance, are often nameless, are possibly fictive (the steward?), and serve didactic purposes, I call them biblical bystanders (such figures as Dinah or Tamar can also be considered belonging to the group). Although this vast multitude tends to be forgotten or sidelined when the focus is on prime characters and theological subjects, such characters still possess a powerful presence. Ironically, for Christians the one who refused to be marginalized was Jesus the supreme biblical bystander. Consigned to a brief and small part of an obscure early Common Era stage, and belonging to a culture whose members the Romans treated as rejected outcasts, God con-

descended to pick up this other and say, "This is my son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). Bystander theology affirms that a central message of Scripture is the inviolable dignity of each biblical character; it sees as its task the need to ensure that these biblical others endure as well. The steward's story should be heard and its theological implications taken into serious consideration.

For the modern theologian, declaring "I am only a bystander" is an affirmation of faith that fundamentally alters the relationship of believer and Bible. The surveyed theologians can be conceived as theater directors standing on the biblical stage telling actors what message is to be conveyed. Bailey, e.g., with his "the message is the need for believers to place their trust in God" (107) can be imagined instructing Jesus that the parable should be narrated in a way to make that need apparent. The bystander theologian on the other hand retreats to the edge of the stage altogether and observes. Orientation is reprioritized and shifted away from the all consuming theological "I" (its needs and orientations) to those of the biblical characters. The bystander theologian avoids shaping the message, endeavoring instead to make sense of what is happening on the stage the way a skillful journalist or ethnographer does. This is what Lamarche would call a "radical passivity" where in standing back and observing, one allows a biblical world "to come of its own accord" (71–73). The goal is to pass on the primary biblical story in a form that is fresh and vibrant.

To comprehend biblical accord or harmony requires an interpretative approach that utilizes a sensitive awareness, one that does not seek ideal objects of beauty but strives to present a text in its materiality, in its own reality (Levinas: 52–57). As such, a text may contain that which is ordinary, coarse or ugly, but as Buck-Morss recognized, the text is embraced even if it "maintains an uncivilized and uncivilizable trace, a core of resistance to cultural domestication" (6–7). One is to encounter a biblical world that one can enter and walk around in. Here is how Drucker defines a bystander:

> Bystanders have no history of their own. They are on stage but are not part of the action. They are not even audience. While not part of the action nor influencing the actor as the audience does, the bystander is on the stage standing in the wings as it were, reflectively and reflexively seeing things neither actor nor audience notices. Above all, he sees differently, and he has to fit into the pattern of his own experience his fragmentary vision of the world around him. Seeing as a bystander is intensely subjective, the way a first-rate photograph tries to be [1].

The modern interpreter's story is subordinate, and by reigning in his or her own history he or she seeks to articulate a biblical character's witness. In foregrounding biblical communities in place of modern ones, and by observing how ordinary biblical individuals and groups struggle to forge their religious identity and think about God in ordinary everyday situations, the primary story can emerge. First there must be comprehension of their lives, practices and faith. Only then can contemporary faith communities be brought in, compared, and beliefs systematized.

As an alternative to arriving on the scene *after* something has happened, the theologian arrives on the scene *before* the action has taken place. In approaching the biblical text from the opposite end as if he or she were an onlooker attempting to discover what is happening, a particular biblical moment is reconstructed. The text is read with a forward movement, as if one had been there at the beginning as an observer with an advantageous viewpoint. Only then can there be what Sternberg calls anticipatory suspense or surprise at what will happen (2003). The heuristic focus is on how things present themselves, not on what happened. Such interpretation is attuned to evanescent moments at hand both in their critical and insignificant aspects. Faced with a biblical text that is in many ways a flat, unarticulated surface, the exegete turns to the principles of fine arts, to painting, architecture, sculpture, and certainly to performance found in theater. In order to explore this space, a series of preliminary sketches and studies are made from observations of numerous short dramatic scenes of biblical life. With these sketches the exegetical goal is to create a portrait of a biblical text or a conception of God that is analogous to an Old Master painting with density, texture, and depth. Returning to Lamarche's ideas, even in a fleeting narrated moment, the interpreter is attuned to how characters inhabit space or move across it, how the space fills up, empties, is bankrupt, or how space becomes transformed (71–73). Time does not speed up but slows down.

If modern Christian faith communities profess affiliation with Israel, then belonging cannot be in an abstract sense with the Bible functioning as a Christian classic. Instead it must mean that faith communities relate to and encompass Israelite individuals and groups who inhabited particular

worlds, who had substance, and whose bodies occupied real textual space. Belonging to Israel confers not only benefits but burdens of obligation. An essential one is to *zakhor*, "remember!" in the original active social imaginary Hebrew sense of the word. Paraphrasing Gatens (142–51), Christians dwell in the odd in-between, situated between things that are no longer and those not yet. Only by taking on the responsibility to ensure the past endures in the present will Christians have the capacity to contribute to the way the future will be constituted. That means returning to the Bible and coming to a consciousness of how biblical figures exercised judgment, made choices, and created strategies for coping with change. Their negotiation of identity may not necessarily coincide with modern interpretative criteria. The steward in Luke 16 may be a rogue, but he is our rogue; among Christians he is still a member of the family.

Bystander Theology and the Crafty Steward

Filling in the scene's theological and social materiality, the parable of the steward is (as many of Jesus' parables are) affectively discordant. As Sanders saw, Jesus may be going so far as to include the wicked in God's kingdom (323). Perhaps Matthew's words, "God sends the rain on the just and the unjust," need to be examined once again (5:43–45). Additionally, the disciples find themselves sitting on a widening fissure as Jesus shifts an easy familiarity with money into an uneasy relationship with wealth of any kind. Mammon may have been seen in Judaism simply as the rule of money but Jesus continues to create a rupture between the nascent Christian community and Judaism in his ascetic elevation of wealth as the mammon of iniquity, the god of money (Bromiley: 232). Later, Mammon iniquity as the supposed embodiment of the Jewish spirit will become foundational for anti-Semitism (Adorno: 216–32). Defusing the highly charged atmosphere may have been the motive for the humor Jesus uses: an able-bodied man unable to do hard labor or debt so high it would have taken years of hard work to accumulate it (Luke 16:3).

The steward inhabits a world where the soil is steeped with the laws of the land: each individual is to live in rest and security (Deut 12:8–12), and the "land must not be sold beyond reclaim for the land is mine, you are but strangers resident with me" (Lev 25:23). In this theocratic society there is little separation between the social and the theological. Jesus' listeners would have been familiar with the administrator's agrarian community with its custom of *hakirīn*, "renters" (Bailey: 92). That agricultural products, not money, comprise the debt (Luke 16:5–7) lends weight to the idea these are tenant farmers engaging in a forward contract. They agree to a certain percentage of the hopefully forthcoming harvest in exchange for the right to till a rich man's land. Their lives were precarious, and the farmers were in the good graces of the weather, the land's lord, the manager of the estate, Herodian rulers, and passing Romans. Theoretically they could be evicted at anytime from their small plots, and from the day they signed, the *hakirīn* were obligated to settle the bill regardless of the outcome of the actual harvest.

Later, Mammon iniquity as the supposed embodiment of the Jewish spirit will become foundational for anti-Semitism

Most slaves would relish being fired and set free; from this we can infer the steward was a free man. The master calls for the manager to bring the accounts (Luke 16:2), and the steward renegotiates the bills with the debtors (Luke 16:5–7)—these too point to the man's function as administrator of the estate with power of attorney. In verse two it appears that based on the words of one adversary, the steward is accused of embezzlement and fired. This type of dismissal would be a travesty of long established Jewish juridical procedure, for the law is unequivocal. "A single witness cannot suffice to convict a person of any crime or offense of any kind" (Deut 19:15). Other injunctions, such as "not to judge unfairly" (Deut 16:18–21), make this legal position clear. However, no inquiry is mentioned. The steward is summarily dismissed, and in this small community setting, the shame of having been fired would mean he would never again work as an administrator. He could perhaps escape to a larger city, such as Jerusalem, and work for a merchant, but it is likely that word of his disgrace would follow him. Furthermore the steward is not a farmer, nor does he exhibit any artisan skills hence he has nothing to fall back on. Esslin characterized the world of absurd theater as sombre, bitter, capricious, and sometimes violent (300, 298). For Spina,

the Israelites had little sense of security of being home in the world, and "Israel lived in a real world of disproportion where the wicked prospered and the righteous suffered" (323). As will be discussed in a moment, absurd suffering of those unjustly wronged may be apt in describing the tragedy that has befallen the steward.

Coming into Presence

Early Christians conceivably held dear the steward's story and orally passed it on generation to generation not only because it has an authentic feel of Jesus or because of its didactic theological value. They may also have held onto the steward's story because it is riveting. It is inconceivable Jesus would have delivered the parable as an academic lecture. More plausible is that Jesus created a playing space, a stage as it were, between himself and his followers where the action was to take place. Bystander theology turns to theater and aesthetics because both are concerned with presence. It turns to that culturally conditioned place where humans consider their bodies to be part of a cosmology and see themselves being fully part of the world in a spatial and physical way (Gumbrecht: 83). For two millennia Scripture had been transmitted as verbal performed art; so it should not be surprising that one characteristic biblical organizing principle, the chiasm (the crossing of two opposing thoughts in the form of an X), closely resembles the acts, movements and interactions found in theater. The five dramatic movements of Luke 16:1–8 comprise "Reprimand" (dismissal), "Future obstacles" (can't dig or beg), "Big idea" (rewriting the bills), "Calling in the debtors," and at the conclusion "Praise." As a chiasm, a tragic direction is established but with the steward's big idea, a chiastic juncture is reached, which thoroughly alters the outcome.

Drawing on Nancy, we see that each step in this chiastic pattern is unique and yet is part of a sequence of discrete presences. Each does not constitute a contradiction but composes the paradoxical logic of presence which is always singular, a coming into or going out of presence, an ebbing within itself (345–49). The parable's five moments are inescapably tied together, and yet each can be termed a discrete presence. As each aspect is explored, its underlying facets come more into presence, and as it moves offstage, another of the five passages makes its entrance. In chiastic structure, presence and absence fluctuate, resembling characters stepping on or off stage. The steward is first on his way to absence; fired, he will soon leave the spotlight and be forgotten by those in his community. After the chiastic crossroad, the steward is on his way to become an eternal presence in Christian memory, even as a biblical bystander.

To help bring lexical or semantic shadings into presence, internet tools are readily available. The following discussion makes use of such resources as Strong's Lexicon, Vine's Expository Dictionary and Thayer's Dictionary. The Greek phrase *oikonomon adikias*, "the unrighteous steward" (enlisted twice), is problematic. First, the frequent use of the phrase as a chapter title is not found in the original Greek text. Additionally, while verse eight does deploy the phrase, the word *adikias* does not necessarily refer to a permanent state of iniquity. Instead it can refer to a momentary act of unrighteousness, to a specific act, or to a violation of some law. In this instance the word does not address a long period of nefarious management but the immediate action beforehand, the rewriting of the bills. This conclusion is supported by the following linking verb "had done" which attests to one act, not to anything earlier. Hence a possible translation could be "the steward who had acted unrighteously." Also taking into consideration that the master praised the manager, it is possible that Jesus refers to a specific, situational unrighteousness where the steward, who has been technically fired and theoretically no longer should have the power of attorney, still exercises that capacity. As a narrator of verbal art can provide contextual clues a written text lack, Luke may have had Jesus speaking of the "so-called dishonest steward."

Discussion now turns to the central question of the steward's guilt. Strong's Lexicon and Vine's Dictionary present the Greek word *diaballo* in the first verse as "accused" ("the steward was accused"), whence *diabolos* "devil" arises. The root meaning is to forcefully hurl something. The word is used in the passive (*dieblēthē*) as in "was accused" or "was accused by an adversary." Here it denotes an occasion of something evil, to disseminate maliciously, slander by gossip. Interestingly, as the emphasis of the passive is on the action not the actor, the one doing the accusing slips into anonymity. Complementing the nature of intrigue, the passive is used in such a way that no time frame is specified in how long, *diabalesthai tini*, it took for the master to be filled with suspicion and hatred against the steward.

This use of *diaballo* or *dieblēthē* does not in itself conclusively prove the administrator was guilty—it indicates only

that "the steward was accused" (whether falsely or not is left open). The manager's transgression is that he is "accused of scattering." Luke uses the same Greek word with the prodigal son, "And there he scattered his wealth" (15:13, Lamsa version). Scattering may be a sign of ineptitude, but it is not necessary one of mendacity. Biblical Hebrew has a word Luke's listeners would have been familiar with: *dibba* for "slander" or "accuse," which is found in such places as Psalm 31:13 or Proverb 10:18, and the great accuser, the *ha-satan*, of Job 1:6, tries to set God at variance with Job or fill God with suspicion. *Dibbah* is poetically used of death, and while it is hyperbole, the word does describe in a small way the administrator's future when he leaves the estate.

The parable's first sentence brings into presence a vivid chiastic contrast of concentration versus scattering. The steward is fired because he "scattered his master's wealth" (Luke 16:1). His adversary clearly was more concentrated in his accusation, and the act of firing is a focused act. The master's choice of word to fire the steward, *apodos*, with its forceful root meaning "separate," "expel" or "throw," confers another concentrated act of vengeful retribution. The administrator's silence may show an inability to mount a defense; hence it may be he is indeed disconnected and incapable of serious thought. Reinforcing the impression of a concerted assault, verse three of the parable uses *aphaireitai*, which contains a sensation of violence and explains how the administrator's responsibilities have been violently "wrested away." Concluding the first and tragic movement of the steward's story, the man contemplates his bleak future in verse four by saying "when I will be deposed." The phrase carries with it the image of his soon being scattered to the winds.

The Steward's Story as High Drama

Taking this raw material and putting it into a coherent dramatic form helps clarify Jesus' possible theological concept. As with tragedy in general, the accuser sets a ball in motion and a flaw in the landowner allows consequences to follow. Chiastic structure can be envisioned as a series of waves, one building to a crest but with another one already forming underneath to supercede the first. A similar pattern can be detected in this parable. Although the adversary is ascendant, the master has acquiesced, and the steward is on his way to certain destruction; the landowner has made a decisive mistake. In what may be penetrating humor, the one who truly demonstrates scattered cognitive faculties is the lord. He is gravely imprecise in his firing of his administrator. In a single sentence, verse two, the owner tells the steward he is fired though still remaining an employee. First, the master demands *apodos ton logon* from his manager. Under other circumstances perhaps the Greek phrase could be construed as "What have you to say?" or "Give an account of your actions." In this case, the imperative is on "Relinquish the account notes!"

Double entry book-keeping manifests itself more evidently in the 15th century, and later in verse six the word *gramma* is employed, referring to written acknowledgements of a debt. Most likely then, these are the accounts the master wants to have, and rather than demanding to audit the books, the master asks to have back the absolutely vital debentures. Possibly the landowner's name is on the promissory notes, but here in the Palestinian countryside of the Common Era, these debentures were informal internal sources of debt capital, and as such they were certainly unregistered. Both creditor and debtor each may have had a copy (see Jer 32:9–15) but if the creditor's copy is lost there is no independent secondary record. It is the steward who holds the documents. The master demands their return, and at the same time condemns to a dismal fate the only one who can restore them.

The second part of the master's sentence opens a window of opportunity for the hapless employee. The owner states *ou gar dunei eti*, "not for you shall be able still." To capture this future sense, the phrase is generally rendered "you shall no longer be my steward." *De facto* the manager is no longer an employee, but until that future point when the steward turns over the precious accounts, *de jure* technically he still is. Incomprehensibly, the steward remains invested with the power to do with the invoices what he chooses until he turns the bills over. The turning point and climax of the play is when the steward reverses his fortune. He first does so in a wonderful stage aside to the listeners guaranteed to garner their sympathy. In his "can't dig" (Luke 16:3) he admits to his absurd frailty and with his "ashamed to beg" appeals to a strongly shared sense of dignity and honor.

The chiastic contrast of concentrated-scattered continues in the latter half of the parable. Accused of not being able to knuckle down and consolidate his efforts, the man will now conclusively show how he can concentrate. He goes "within himself" *en heautōi* (Luke 16:3) to brainstorm and find a solution. *Egnōn!* "Eureka, I have it" follows in the

subsequent line, and here at the core of the chiasm, thus concentrated the offended goes on the offensive. Unlike the man who buried his talent (Matt 26:18), the steward does not give up but takes the initiative, and given that he is still technically the farm's manager, what he does is lawfully proper. Assuming the debtors will be reluctant to question their surprising good luck in having their bills halved, the steward's only hope is to reach the debtors before word of his dismissal does.

Confronted with a *fait accompli*, where the master has little choice but to accede to the changed bills, imminent tragedy shifts into tentatively transcendent romance. The original records most likely have been altered or destroyed; an attempt to have the new bills annulled would create untold animosity, and would reveal his incompetence in poorly managing his manager. The owner would lose what was most crucial in this close-knit community, face. In comparison with an insurmountable loss of dignity (and a newly enhanced reputation as a generous and merciful master), the loss of revenue loses its significance. Now with his wits more about him, the scattered master praises the attentive steward. Rather than finding himself deposed, the steward finds himself commended for disposing of or scattering the master's wealth. The steward has acted *phronimōs*, "wisely" or "prudently." The word means practically wise, a discerning intellect with a faculty of perceiving, judging, and getting out of difficult situations.

Bystander Theology's Potential

Bystander theology, although never truly successful, attempts to shift the self-centered orientation to a text-centred model. Even as a bystander, participating in the biblical encounter erodes the boundaries between modern exegete and biblical event. In exploring biblical actors' frames of reference, textual contours come to presence. When Paul preached his sermon of one bread, one body (1 Cor 10:14–18) he raised the question of what exactly constitutes the Christian body. If it extends temporally as well as spatially, as bystander theology proposes, then the steward cannot be separated and excluded from the whole simply because he existed in the past. Imperfect as modern eyes are, one attempts to see the steward's story through the eyes of a farmer or Galilean fisherman of the early Common Era, seeking to reach a consciousness of how they might make sense of the situation. The emphasis is on proximity, on the presence of biblical individuals affectively felt by modern readers.

With a different logic, it is possible to regard the parable not as anagogical but autobiographical. Targum Isaiah 50.1 juxtaposes debt as money owed with debt as sins before God (Neusner: 184–85). Since forgiveness of debt therefore has metaphoric connotations of God's forgiveness of sins, Jesus may be alluding to himself. Jesus may be the crafty steward offering others extreme unearned forgiveness in direct opposition to conventional religious methodology ("Jesus is blaspheming," the scribes thought. "Who can forgive sins but God?"—Mark 2:.7). The parable's Greek word *phronimōs*—the steward acted "wisely"—not only sums the story up but may direct attention to Jesus emphasizing with Isaiah (1:11–18) that a committed believer is less pious and more active in achieving God's purposes. Surrounded by the strong ready to crush and exploit, the vulnerable are often forced to resort to questionable means to prevail. "Behold I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be *phronimōs*—"be street-wise" Jesus says in Matthew 10:16. Elsewhere Jesus speaks of *biazetai* suffering *biazō*, individuals using force to storm the kingdom of God (Luke 16:16, Matt 11:11–13). In Matthew 25, those who have helped the least of the brothers because it was right (not because of a felt religious obligation) are welcomed into the kingdom. Either positively or negatively, force is fundamentally entangled with change and status quo; it may not only be the most pious who win the race. Without acceding to satire's futility, the crafty steward's parable may be satirically ironic with social and theological nuances.

Jesus may be critical of the established social system where one can so easily be cast off, where there is no job protection, and the only friends one can find are those who are purchased. Subversive carnivalesque elements may be present—the entrenched impoverished expected to welcome the newly poor steward, or those in charge being more clueless than their servants. Boyarin claims that the durability of the Jewish political and cultural system that the rabbis built was founded on unmasculine modes of resistance (58). Those who manage to outwit their adversary and escape unscathed, those who engage in dishonest practices and deceptions, are valorized in direct opposition to the manly arts of violent resistance (*ibid*.: 56, 58). Dishonorable means are often less relevant than the theme of the vulnerability of the people without power (*ibid*.: 72). In praising the steward

Jesus may obliquely be illustrating the need to resist.

Jesus may also be attacking an established religious system in which the social justice inherent in the Tanakh has become encrusted, and there may have been an acquiescence of accepting suffering as a timeless tragedy. Perhaps religious leaders (as with many of all ages) had turned Scripture into a revered remnant of a bygone golden age. In presenting a story of a man wrongly accused who resorts to trickery to survive (and is later praised for doing his master's will), Jesus may have had a biting word for those who preached piety and patience, that someday the Kingdom of God would descend Deus ex machina. Luke's parable may even be a gentle parody of God with God the absentee landlord who has listened to the Roman accuser maliciously letting it be said that Jews were incapable of governing his creation. At some point, though, God will see what has happened and will praise the Jewish servant for having had the wily means to faithfully survive.

The Bible's Paramount Crafty Steward

That faithful believers sometimes have to resort to cunning endurance may be a key theological concept for Jesus can be seen in the story's most striking parallels with the narrative of *the* crafty steward, Jacob the patriarch. The master has been seduced by the adversary, Isaac by his son Esau the hunter because Isaac had a taste for game (Gen 25:28). Both the steward and Jacob are destined for penury by masters determined to bestow blessings on others. Faced with intractable decrees, both Jacob and the steward are silent. Rewriting the bills or donning the goatskins, both endeavors can be traced back to *de jure* rights; in Jacob's narrative he is in possession of the birthright which technically makes him the elder son. The biblical injunction for decisive covenantal action can be seen in Genesis 27:9–10 with Jacob's mother commanding him to accept the covenant with "Go . . . fetch . . . take" (Chanes). Correspondingly, the steward ardently telling the debtors "Take the bill . . . be seated . . . swiftly write" (Luke 16:6–7) commands the debtors to accept a covenant of unearned forgiveness (Luther's justification of faith). The steward acting wisely resonates with Isaac's remark which can be translated as "through wisdom Jacob received the blessing," referring to a similar subtle cleverness (Gen 27:35). For his action the steward receives praise from the landowner; for his feat Jacob is blessed by God at Bet-el.

Closing Thoughts

Indispensable to the maintenance and durability of a continuing Christian existence across time is a collective responsibility for the past (Gatens: 146). This does not necessarily mean speaking for the steward, but it does mean a responsibility to tell his story. Both participant and bystander have an ethical relation to the other. In this way all are confronted by the steward's actions; if he is guilty, then in some way all share responsibility. The fact that a modern exegete has had nothing to do with the steward, his traditions, or the world he lived in does not mean a facile attempt can be made to excuse oneself or to justify possible complicity. If a modern member of the faith community were somehow present on this Common Era estate, the question can be raised if he or she would stand by and let the steward be dismissed or would condemn his actions. The question can be asked whether the modern believer would accept the Common Era's social system as business as usual. In the same way, the questions can be asked of any believer today who witnesses unjust discharges or the suffering caused by oppressive social systems. Bystander responsibility focuses on those allowing repressive actions to occur and those who justify complicity.

The tired tradition oriented to the needs of "I" the modern interpreter and to extracting abstracted meaning, experiences difficulties in adequately responding to the other. This essay has provided the contours of an aesthetic that allows a felt proximity to a world beyond the usual modern Christian framework of identity. This is an aesthetic in which the other can come into presence. The other may not be or may not provide that which meets expected standards as to beauty, sublimity or even ethics, but still the other is profoundly connected with all members of the faith community. Bystander theology advocates a theology and commentary that is aesthetically rich and aesthetically satisfying, linguistically plausible and historically possible. It encourages a hermeneutic appreciative of how an inclusive text hangs together (Carrol 171, 59). Freed of the need to subject biblical texts to modern logic and the need to domesticate them for modern audiences, the interpreter is open to alternative exegetical and theological vistas. Such sensibility offers hope that God may also be revealed outside accustomed theological symmetry.

Adorno Theodor. 1998. *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 11, edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Darmstadt, Germany: Wissenschaftliche

Works Cited

Buchgesellschaft.

Bailey, Kenneth. 1999. *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Berkhoff, Louis. 2000. *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*. Edinburgh, UK: WS Bookwell.

Boyarin, Daniel. 1998. "The Talmud Meets Church History." *Diacritics* 28/2: 52–80.

Bromiley, Geoffrey. 1959. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Buck-Morss, Susan. 1992. "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," *October* 62: 3–41.

Burch, Robert. 2002. "The Simulacrum of Death," in *Extreme Beauty: Aesthetics, Politics*, edited by James Swearingen & Joanne Cutting-Gray. London, UK: Continuum.

Carroll, Noël. 2001. *Beyond Aesthetics*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Chanes, Jerome. 2007. "Covenantal Language." *Parashat Toldot*, Academy for Jewish Religion, ajrsem.org/index.php?id=42–10k, access. July 2007.

Derret, J. Duncan. 1974. *Law in the New Testament*, London, UK: Darton, Longman & Todd.

Drucker, Peter. 1980. *Adventures of a Bystander*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Esslin, Martin. 1961. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. London, UK: Eyre & Spottiswoode.

Gatens, Moira. 2002. "Post-Colonialism and History." Pp. 142–51 in *Extreme Beauty: Aesthetics, Politics, Death*, edited by James Swearingen & Joanne Cutting-Gray. New York, NY: Continuum.

Gumbrecht, Hans. 2004. *Production of Presence*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Johnson, Luke. 1991. *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

Jousse, Marcel. 1990. *The Oral Style*, New York, NY: Garland Publishing.

Karris, Robert. 1992. *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press.

Ladd, George. 1975. *A Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Lamarche, Pierre. "Blanchot not reading Proust." Pp. 67–77 in *Extreme Beauty: Aesthetics, Politics, Death*, edited by James Swearingen & Joanne Cutting-Gray. New York, NY: Continuum.

Lapide, Pinchas. 1995. *Ist die Bibel richtig übersetzt?* Band 1, Gütersloh, Germany: Gütersloher Verlagshaus.

Levinas, Emmanuel. 1978. *Existence and Existent*, translated by Alphonso Lingis. The Hague, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. 1993. *The Birth to Presence*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Neusner, Jacob. 2005. *Neusner on Judaism: Religion and Theology*. Surrey, UK: Ashgate.

Sanders, E. P. 1985. *Jesus and Judaism*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press,

Spina, Frank. 1983. "Israelites as *gērîm*," Pp. 321–35 in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth*, edited by Eric Meyers. Winona Lake, MN: Eisenbrauns.

Sternberg, Meir. 2003. "Universals of Narrative and Their Cognitivist Fortunes (II)." *Poetics Today* 24/3: 517–638.

Stokes, Dustin. 2006. "Art and Modal Knowledge." Pp. 67–82 in *Knowing Art*, edited by Matthew Kieran. New York, NY: Springer.

Styan J. L. 1988. "The Mystery of the Play Experience." Pp. 9–26 in *Performing Texts*, edited by Michael Issacharoff. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Vetter Uwe, Delila. 2009. "Geliebte Umnachtung (Simsons World of Warcraft)." *Johanneskirche Sermon*, 20 September 2009. Copy of the sermon available at Ursula.ortmanns@evdus.de.

Ward, Graham. 2006. "Narrative and Ethics," *Literature and Theology* 20/4: 436–61

Young, Brad. 2008. *The Parables: Jewish Traditions and Christian Interpretation*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.