WHEN PATRONS ARE NOT PATRONS: A SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC READING OF THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS (Lk 16:19–26)

ABSTRACT

This article presents a social-scientific interpretation of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Attention is first given to the history of the interpretation of the parable and to the integrity and authenticity of this interpretation. A social-scientific reading of the parable is then presented in terms of both the strategy and the situation of the parable. In terms of the strategy, the parable is read as an allegory. See also the backdrop of an advanced agrarian (aristocratic) society in which patronage and clientism played an important role. Regarding the parable’s strategy, it is argued that the different oppositions in the parable serve to highlight their only similarity: those who have the ability to help do not help. The gist of the parable is this: When patrons who do not act like patrons create a society wherein a chasm so great between rich and poor is brought into existence that it cannot be crossed.

INTRODUCTION

Social-scientific criticism, as an exegetical method, analyses texts in terms of their strategy (the pragmatic and rhetorical dimensions of the text) and situation (the social circumstances in which the text was produced). An analysis of the strategy of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus indicates that the many oppositions in the parable function to highlight their only similarity: the rich man and Abraham’s unwillingness to attend to those in need. How is this possible, especially in the case of Abraham, the ultimate example of hospitality in the Jewish tradition? This question is addressed by looking at the important role that patronage and clientism played in the world of Jesus (which was an advanced agrarian [aristocratic] society), focusing inter alia on hospitium (the relationship between host and guest).

It is argued that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is an illustration of the great class disparity that existed in first-century Palestine between the urban élite and the exploited rural peasantry. In the parable, the rich man symbolises the élite and Lazarus the exploited poor. The poor man’s name — Lazarus — is not accidental: it typifies the way in which Jesus sided with the poor, with the expendables and the socially impure of his day. The gist of the parable is this: When patrons who have in abundance do not pass through the gate to the poor, a society is created wherein a chasm so great is formed between rich (the élite) and poor (the peasantry) that it can no longer be crossed. When this happens — when patrons do not fulfil their role as patrons — no one can become part of the kingdom — neither Lazarus, nor the rich man. As such, the parable identifies Jesus’ historical activity essentially as political (the restructuring of society) and not as religious or theological.

Attention is also given to the interpretation history of the parable and to the questions of authenticity and integrity. It is argued that the parable most probably ends in Luke 16:26 and embodies the nucleus of Jesus’ teaching on topics like patronage, generalised reciprocity and the economic exploitation of the peasantry by the ruling élite. The parable can thus be traced to the historical Jesus.

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

The earliest interpretations of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus were the allegorical interpretations of Augustine, Gregory the Great and Ambrose (Wailes 1987:255-260).1 In an attempt to break away from these allegorical interpretations, Luther and Calvin employed a historical and literal approach to the parable (that can be typified as theological). Each text has as reference point Jesus Christ (Luther’s so-called ‘Christum treibet’ and literal reading of the text without considering, if possible, hidden or symbolic meanings in the text). In his interpretation of the parables, Calvin tried to avoid any kind of allegorisation and looked for the central theme of each parable, as was the case with Luther. Both of them took the literal sense of the text as the primary context in interpreting the parable. In his interpretation of the parables, Calvin tried to avoid anything that could be seen as allegorisation. The context of each parable is given in this way: When patrons who do not act like patrons create a social system wherein a chasm so great between rich and poor is brought into existence that it cannot be crossed.

1.According to Augustine, the rich man refers to the Jews, Lazarus to the Gentiles, the five brothers to the five books of the Law and Lazarus’ sores to the Jews. In Augustinian view, Lazarus typifies the Christ figure, while Ambrose saw Lazarus as Paul. Gregory the Great (circa 540-604) interpreted the parable in the same vein. The rich man represents the Jews, who used the law for vain motives, while Lazarus symbolises the Gentiles, who were not ashamed to confess their sins (Lazarus’ many wounds and sores). The crumbs that fall from the rich man’s (the Jew’s) table represent Jewish law and the licking of Lazarus’ sores signifies healing, that is the confession of sins to the holy doctors (the papacy). Because the Gentiles’ sins are forgiven, they will go to heaven, and the Jews will receive eternal torment upon their lips as a result of the law that was on their lips but which they chose not to fulfill. Morally speaking, the parable cautions against ostentation, exalts the virtue of poverty and admonishes the believer to lose no opportunity for doing good works of mercy (Kissinger 1979:39).

2.Luther’s historical-Christological interpretation of the parables entailed an interpretation of the Scriptures in their ‘plain sense’ (a plain and literal reading of the text without considering, if possible, hidden or symbolic meanings in the text). Each text has as reference point (centre of meaning) Jesus Christ (Luther’s so-called ‘Christus treibet’ principle; see Kissinger 1979:44–45). Luther identified at least three meanings in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Firstly, the parable teaches that it is not sufficient merely to do no evil and to do no harm but rather that one must be helpful and good. Secondly, the parable shows that God does not desire the dead to teach us, but that we should cling to the Scriptures. And, thirdly, it is an abominable and pagan practice, before the eyes of God, to consult the spirits and practise necromancy (Kissinger 1979:45–46). In this theological interpretation, the Reformation’s sola Scriptura principle is clearly visible, which also speaks for Luther’s interpretation of ‘Abraham’s bosom’ as referring to the faith (sola fide) that is promised in the gospel. In his interpretation of the parables, Calvin tried to avoid any kind of allegorisation and looked for the central theme of each parable (Kissinger 1979:48). The central point of the rich man and Lazarus is to show the final state of those who neglect the poor while they revel in pleasures and indulge themselves. Calvin also commented on the meaning of ‘Abraham’s bosom’ as: it is a metaphor that points to the fact that God’s children are strangers and pilgrims in the world, but if they follow the faith of their father Abraham, they will inherit the blessed rest when they die (cf. Torrance & Torrance 1972:116–122). As was the case with Luther, Calvin’s theological interpretation of the parable focused on the parables’ literary form and on the economic exploitation of the peasantry by the ruling élite. The parable can thus be traced to the historical Jesus.
The first historical-critical reading of the parable was that of Jülicher (1910:1886:634), who identified two (loosely connected) parts of the parable: Luke 16:19-26 (the opposite very different lives of the rich man and the poor Lazarus in this world) and Luke 16:27–31 (the complete and permanent reversal of the fortunes of the rich man and Lazarus in the afterlife). Jülicher’s interpretation of the parable has, in a certain sense, dominated the interpretation of the parable until the present in three ways. Firstly, most scholars divide the parable into two parts, and an opinion that has been a staple of the scholarly literature ever since (Hock 1987:449). Secondly, most scholars look for the main point of the parable in the second part; some scholars, however, find the main point of the parable in the first part; while some identify a distinctive message in both parts. Thirdly, scholars have proposed an array of extra-biblical stories that look for the first part of the parable supposedly borrowed from them in this regard, however, there is also a difference of opinion.

So wealth is characterised as a dividing power, since it creates semi-human relations between social classes. Jesus thus tells the parable to warn the rich that they must show generously before it is too late and they are also cast into hell as Dives (the rich man) was.

3. According to Herzog (1994:115), most interpretations of the parable are deeply indebted to the insight by Bultmann (1950:190) that the parable can be divided into two parts. Hock (1987:449), however, was correct when he stated that this division of the parable already formed part of Jülicher’s analysis in 1910.

3. See Hock (1987:449, note 5) for a list of scholars who interpret the parable by dividing it into the two parts identified by Jülicher (1910). To Hock’s list can be added the interpretations of Greissmann (1918), Cadoux (1930), Smith (1937) and Oesterley (1936).

See, for example, Manson (1949), Jeremias (1972) and Fitzmyer (1985). The point of view of Jeremias in this regard suffices. According to Jeremias (1972:182–186), the thrust of the parable (which should be named the parable of the six brothers) Jones (1999:163) is that of ‘the challenge of the hour’, in which evasion is impossible. The emphasis of the parable is to be found in its added ‘epilogue’: the rich man’s five brothers – like the rich man – live a callous life in the afterlife, a death to God’s word and in the belief that death ends all. Jesus tells the parable to warn men (who resemble the brothers of the rich man) of the impending danger. As such, the parable is not commentary on a social problem or a teaching on the afterlife but a warning to those for whom everything is at stake to make the right decision.

See, for example, Crossan (1973:66-68) and Scott (1989:146–151).

Bultmann (1963:210) divided the parable into two distinct parts, with a distinctive message expressed in each part. Luke 16:19–26 is a story based on a folkloric account of the reversal of fortunes in the afterlife and Luke 16:27–31 constitutes a polemic against the need for signs to augment the Torah and prophets for revealing the will of God. In following Bultmann, Smith (1937:135-141) argued that Jesus shifts the meaning of the traditional materials about the afterlife (Luke 16:19–26) to focus on the adequacy of the Torah (Luke 19:27–31); Oesterley (1936:208-210) was of the opinion that Luke 16:19-25 is addressed to the Pharisees, while Luke 16:27-31 is addressed to the Sadducees; and Cadoux (1930:273) saw Luke 16:19–26 as an authentic parable of Jesus that was used in his debate with the Pharisees over the importance of signs (Luke 16:27–31).

8. This idea was first championed by Greissmann (1918), who identified the Egyptian folktale of the parable of Si-Oris, the son of Seth-Chamis, to the underworld, a parallel for Luke 16:19–26. Jeremias (1972:182–183) and Bultmann (1963; see also Smith 1937:54), however, saw a Jewish legend (a folk-tale about a rich and godless married couple) as a parallel for Luke 16:19–20. According to Jeremias (in following the work of Salm; Jeremias 1972:178), Jesus used a Jewish version of the story of Greissmann’s Egyptian story of Seten. Alexandian Jews brought this story from Palestine, where it became popular as the story of the rich tax collector Bar Ma’jan and a poor scholar, a story that found its way into the (Aramaic) Palestinian Talmud (i. Sanh. 6:23a:par.; Hagg. 2:77). This folk-tale ends where Bar Ma’jan stands at the bank of a stream, unable to reach the water (Lk 16:26). Bultmann (1963:203) saw Luke 16:19–26 as a Jewish legend that came from the borderland of the Aramaic Targum, and Cadoux (1930:273) saw Luke 16:19–20 as a more or less the same. Differences are those of emphasis. The following examples substantiate this point.

Most scholars who regard the parable as a Lukian composition or interpret it in terms of its narrative context in Luke have found some moral lesson about the rich (the dangers that arise from the love of wealth) and the poor (or poverty) in the parable, a well-established motif in Luke (and Acts). According to Bultmann (1963:203), the parable (Lk 16:19–26) intends to tell the poor to be content with their lot, while Talbert (1982:156–159) saw Luke 16:19–31 as a teaching on the care of the poor (Dt 15:7–11) and as a condemnation of the rich. Hultgren (2000:115) reads the parable in the same vein: the parable serves to warn the rich about the perils of neglecting the needs of the poor, even (and especially) of those to whom it would be socially acceptable to be indifferent (cf. Donahue 1988:171; Perkins 1981:2). This is also the opinion of Schottroff (2006:115), who sees Luke 16:19–31 as a public warning to the rich to heed this command and a condemnation of the rich who ignore this warning. In the words of Snodgrass:

From the earliest days interpreters have focused on the parable’s moral impact with its denunciation of the wealthy who neglect the poor. Other options are minority opinions. In modern critical studies most interpreters still see the parable as denouncing the misuse of resources and the neglect of the poor.

When one looks at most modern critical studies of the parable, this indeed seems to be the case. Moreover, it also seems that, whatever the approach, the result of the interpretation is more or less the same. Differences are those of emphasis.

11. Hultgren (2000:115) sees the parable, in its present Lukian form, which is a chapter of halakah on the subject of money, from the perspective of the Lukian communities’ (Schottroff 2006:160), and, in this context, communicates that a good life based on the misery of the poor is not part of the kingdom. In the kingdom, money should be used held the same view: although stories about the fate of the rich and the poor in the afterlife are abundant, the parable is not an exact replica of any of these. While it is related to the content of other stories, the key to understanding the parable (Snodgrass 2008:426–428) is that some specific extra-biblical parallel for the parable is unlikely. There are dozens of stories in various cultures over thousands of years that tell of trips to the realm of the dead, often castigating the rich (e.g. the Gàigemès Épic, the Odyssey and 1 Enoch). Moreover, the Gospel story is different from the Egyptian and Jewish accounts. ‘The Gospel story uses common folkloric motifs shared by several cultures: descent to the underworld, reversal of circumstances, and denunciation of the rich for their neglect of the poor’ (Snodgrass 2008:427).

Lucian’s use of these themes in a variety of works also shows that even an indirect dependence on a specific account is not likely.
When patrons are not patrons: A social-scientific reading of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–26)

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Scholars who do argue for the authenticity of the parable also either defend the integrity of the parable (with both parts stemming from Jesus to form a unit [Herzog 1994; Hock 1987; Leonhard-Balzer 2007; Schnider & Stenger 1979; Snodgrass 2002; Stein 1981; Talbert 1982]) or argue that the parable consists of two separate narratives (with the first part paralleled in extra-biblical literature used by Jesus and the second part stemming from Jesus [Fitzmyer 1985; Gressmann 1918; Hendrickx 1986; Jeremias 1972; Julicher 1910; Manson 1949; Marshall 1963; Smith 1937; see also the list by Hock 1987:449–450, fn 7] or with only the first part stemming from Jesus and the second part added by Luke [Crossan 1973; Osterley 1936; Schottroff & Stegemann 1978; Scott 1989] or with parts being authentic sayings of Jesus [Cadoux 1930]).

It is the contention of this essay that a choice, with regard to the above possibilities on the integrity and authenticity of the parable, has to be made before an own interpretation (using a social-scientific approach) can be made. In the two sections that follow, arguments are put forward first for the parable ending in Luke 16:26 (§3.1) and then for the possibility that Luke 16:19–26 (§3.2).

Where does the parable end?

Scholars who defend the integrity of the parable are, inter alia, Herods (1993; see also note 10), Perkins (1981), Hock (1987), Herzog (1994), Leonhard-Balzer (2007) and Snodgrass (2008).

If Luke 16:19–31 is seen as a Lukan composition (Hultgren 2000; Perkins 1981; Schottroff 2006) and as part of Luke 16, a well-knit literary composition in itself (see especially Schottroff), the parable's integrity is above suspicion. From this point of view, Luke 16:19–31 and Luke 16 would obviously be a cohesive unit. This, of course, is also true of the whole of Luke-Acts; Luke is known for the careful way in which he structured his narrative as a double act. What if, however, the parable is taken from its literary context? Put differently, can Luke 16 not in and of itself propose Luke 16:27–31 as an addition? If, however, one argues (like Leonhard-Balzer) that the two parts of the parable, as opposite poles, need one another, one could also argue that all the opposites in the parable already occur in the first part and that the second part introduces a new theme (the validity of the prophets and the Torah) that is not necessary for the first part to function as a cohesive unit on its own. And if one sees the unity of the parable in the conviction that both parts stem from Jesus (Talbert), this automatically means that Jesus must have told these two parts as one parable. Have we any evidence to support this point of view? As we have seen, Julicher's, Jeremias', Bullmann's, Osterley's and Cadoux's points of view on the integrity of the parable contradict this possibility.


The ending of the parable is therefore most probably a Lukan creation (Funk et al. 1993:362). Crossan (1973:67) and Scott (1989:144–146) also disputed the possibility of Luke 16:27–31 being part of the parable, viewing it as an added piece of tradition from the early church, reworked by Luke to fit his interests. According to Crossan, the conclusion of the parable fits the style and programme of Luke-Acts, and a clear parallel between Luke 16:27–31 and Luke's account of the resurrection in Luke 24:44–47 can be indicated. Crossan notes the following parallels: the theme of disbelief (Lk 16:29, 31 and Lk 24:12, 25, 41); the use of Moses and the prophets (Lk 16:29, 31 and Lk 24:27, 44); the use of διαφωνεῖν in Luke 16:31 and 24:46 (the verb ‘to rise up’ is used with ‘from the dead’ only in these two occurrences in Luke); and the use of the theme of repentance (Luke 16:30 and Ac 2:38; 3:19; 8:22; 17:30; 26:20).

In support of Crossan, Scott (1989:145) also noted the parallel between διαφωνεῖν and the appeal to Moses in Lk 16:28 and Lk 16:31 in the parable’s conclusion, words that are frequently used in Acts (see Ac 18:4–5; 28:23). All this, according to Crossan and Scott, indicates a Lukan hand in the conclusion of the parable in order for the parable to fit his apologetic needs. The conclusion was therefore most probably not part of the original parable and either was appended to relate the parable to Jewish disbelief in Jesus’ messiahship (Scott 1989:146) or has, as content, the early Christian theme of the Judean lack of belief in the resurrection of Jesus (Funk et al. 1993:362).

The arguments of Funk, Crossan and Scott seem compelling enough to conclude that the parable probably ended in

22. The implication of the argument of Funk et al. is clear: if the parable goes back to Jesus, the second part cannot come from Jesus (otherwise one has to assume that Jesus is ‘foretelling’ his resurrection). One must also bear in mind that both the resurrection stories that Funk et al. refer to are Lukan-Sondergut, which makes the appeal to Moses and the prophets in Luke 16:29 and 31, and Luke 24:27 and 44 most probably a Lukan creation. Even in the light of this evidence, Snodgrass (2008:428) calls the similarities between Luke 16:27–31 and the resurrection story in Luke 24 ‘superficial’.


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The authenticity of Luke 16:19–26

Most scholars who question the authenticity of Luke 16:19–21 base their arguments on the possibility of the parable being paralleled in folkloric stories/legends of the reversal of fortunes in the afterlife (Beare 1962; Bultmann 1963; Donahue 1988; Gressmann 1918; Hughes 1993; Jeremias 1972; Mealand 1980; Montefiore 1909). Some argue for a parallel in the Enoch literature (Scott 1989:64), while others see the whole parable as being a Lukan composition (Hultgren 2000; Perkins 1981; Schottroff 2006; Talbert 1982) or as stemming from the early church tradition (Horn 1983).

The Jesus Seminar was divided about whether the story is traceable to Jesus and voted the parable grey (Funk, Scott & Butts 1988:64; Funk et al. 1993:361). The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar, who questioned the authenticity of the parable, supported the argument that folk-tales about the reversal of fates in the afterlife were widespread in the ancient Near East. They also noted the following features of the parable that most probably make it a Lukan composition (Funk et al. 1988:64; Funk et al. 1993:361): the parable is the only parable that gives characters proper names (cf. Scott 1989:141); attention to the poor is a special characteristic of Luke, and the bosom of Abraham (Lk 16:22) is most probably an allusion to Luke 3:8 (Scott 1989:141) also doubts the authenticity of the parable, since it is the only parable that depicts a scene from the afterlife.

Scholars who argue the opposite note that there were ‘dozens of stories in various cultures over thousands of years that tell of trips to the realm of the dead, often castingigate the rich’ and that ‘the use of preexisting materials is evident in other parables and would not be surprising’ (Snodgrass 2008:426, 427). The parable does differ in many respects from its Egyptian and Jewish counterparts: the folk-tales in the ancient Near East normally include a judgement scene, which this parable does not (Funk et al. 1993:361), and, in the parable, the fates of the rich man and Lazarus are simply reversed, reminiscent of Jesus’ technique of storytelling25 (Funk et al. 1988:64). Moreover, known folk-tales about rich and poor understand rich and poor mostly in economic terms. This is not the case in Luke. The relationship parallels between the parable and the available folk-tales are, in any case, only indirect and ‘neither as compelling nor as explanatory as these claims suggest’ (Bauckham 1998:97–118; Hock 1987:452). To do that these tales do exist only hint at the point that Luke wants to make (Funk et al. 1993:361). And if a popular tale does, in fact, lie behind the parable, this does not automatically mean that the parable could not have been told by Jesus (Hock 1987:452; Hultgren 2000:111; Snodgrass 2008:427). While it is related to common folklore, it is a creation in its own right (Hultgren 2000:111).

With regard to the proper names in the parable, scholars argue that the name ‘Lazarus’ is not accidental but essential to the meaning of the parable (Funk et al. 1988; Funk et al. 1993; Herzog 1994; Hultgren 2000; Scott 1989; Talbert 1982). The same holds true for Abraham. The introduction of Abraham in Luke 16:22 is not because of Luke 3:8 but because of the theme of hospitality in the parable. In this regard, Abraham is a suitable figure for heavenly reward, as he was rich but also well known for his hospitality (Funk et al. 1988:64). The rich man is not pictured negatively for being rich but rather for his indifference and lack of hospitality (Funk et al. 1988:64). The gap between rich and poor in the parable is therefore most probably not a creation of Luke’s – Luke would have condemned the rich man simply because he was rich. The parable also parallels Luke 11:5–13, another parable of Jesus’ that has hospitality as theme, together with the crossing of accepted cultural boundaries (an obvious theme in Luke 16:19–21). It also parallels Luke 16:22, which also depicts the indifference of a rich man (one that has) to a poor man (one that does not have) in a wrenchingly pathetic situation (Funk et al. 1993:361). Finally, the reversal of fortunes in the parable echoes Q 6:20/CThom 54, a saying that most probably goes back to Jesus.

Can the parable be traced back to the historical Jesus or is it a pre-Lukan or Lukan composition? The arguments for and against its authenticity do not seem to outweigh one another. Can one also argue that the parable goes back at least to a nucleus of Jesus’ teaching material? And, if it lies in an oral and pre-Lukan situation, can the text be referred to the historical (or the Lukan) Jesus? Can the parable be traced back to the historical Jesus or is it a pre-Lukan or Lukan composition? The arguments for and against its authenticity do not seem to outweigh one another. Can one also argue that the parable goes back at least to a nucleus of Jesus’ teaching material? And, if it lies in an oral and pre-Lukan situation, can the text be referred to the historical (or the Lukan) Jesus?

A SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC INTERPRETATION OF LUKE 16:19–26

Social-scientific criticism: A short definition

‘Social-scientific criticism . . . studies the text as both a reflection of and a response to the social and cultural settings in which the text was produced’ to determine ‘the meaning(s) explicit and implicit in the text, meanings made possible and shaped by the social and cultural systems inhabited by both authors and intended audiences’26 (Elliott 1993:5). Social-scientific criticism approaches texts as units of meaningful discourse that express (because of their ideological dimension) certain ideas and beliefs (cultural perceptions, values and world views), that describe social relations, behaviour and institutions and that serve to motivate and direct social behaviour. As such, texts either legitimate social institutions or serve as vehicles of social change (Elliott 1993:49–51). Social-scientific criticism, as an exegetical method, analyses and interprets texts as units of meaningful discourse that express (because of their ideological dimension) certain ideas and beliefs (cultural perceptions, values and world views), that describe social relations, behaviour and institutions and that serve to motivate and direct social behaviour. As such, texts either legitimate social institutions or serve as vehicles of social change (Elliott 1993:49–51).

Interpretations of the parable employing aspects of a social-scientific reading

The interpretation history of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus indicates that not much has been done in terms of a social-scientific analysis of the parable, except for the interpretations of Scott (1989:141–151), Hultgren (2000:110–118) and Herzog (1994:114–131). These readings of the parable, 25.Luke’s use of the historic present in Lk 16:22 also indicates that the parable consists of pre-Lukan material (Jeremias in Scott 1989:146, note 18). Of the 90 examples of the historic present in Mark, Luke retains only one (Lk 8:49). There are, however, five historic presents in the Lukan parables (Lk 13:8; 16:17; 16:23; 16:29; 19:22), clear evidence for an underlying pre-Lukan tradition in these parables.

26.Elliott (1993:36–59) lists the following salient features of the social-scientific approach: it considers all knowledge as socially conditioned and perspectival in nature; it distinguishes and clarifies the differences between the social location of the interpreter and the social location of the authors and objects to be interpreted; it tries to avoid a reductionistic, anachronistic and ethnocentric reading of the text (by distinguishing between emic and etic information and perspectives in the text); it employs theories and models as critical tools to clarify the differences between the contexts of ancient texts and of modern readers; it involves a process of logic that can be characterized as abduction; it considers the social and cultural models constructed on the basis of research and data pertaining to the geographical, social and cultural region inhabited by the biblical communities, that is the area of the Near East and the Mediterranean; and it considers that this method is different from but complementary to a historical orientation; it holds the presupposition that an analysis of religiosity in the biblical text and its environment requires a study of social structures and relations; it draws on the full range of social-scientific theory, methods and research; and it is concerned not only with the original meanings of the biblical documents but also with the aggregations of meanings down through the centuries.

When patrons are not patrons: A social-scientific reading of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–26)
In his analysis of the parable, Scott (1989:146) typifies the parable as a story of boundaries and opposite parallels and understands the different locations of the rich man (inside the gate) and Lazarus (outside the gate) as reflecting the limited-goods society of the first-century Mediterranean world, where the social status of the poor and the rich are fixed (Scott 1989:151). He also opines that the relationship between the rich man and Lazarus implies a relationship of patron and client (Scott 1989:150). In his analysis of the parable, he does not, however, explore the use of the gate to come to Lazarus' aid (Scott 1989:150). Hultgren states that the parable presupposes an ancient agrarian economy in which a person like Lazarus is not worth much. Hultgren states that Lazarus occupies a position of privilege and power (Fitzmyer 1985:1130). The fine linen that he wore thus insinuates that he lived like a king, was wealthy and honourable and occupied a position of privilege and power (Fitzmyer 1985:1130). The fine linen of the rich man is depicted as either the second or third son of a peasant farmer who has lost his land because of the wealth accumulated by the systematic exploitation of the poor (through taxes, the oppressive foreclosure of mortgages by the urban elite and the twisting of the Torah), who then becomes a day labourer and, finally, shifts to the city to become a beggar. He describes his descent from former landowner or excess child of a peasant household to day labourer and, finally, to beggar. Lazarus most probably seeks patronage or patron or patronage. He probably does not find work, becomes a beggar and can no longer compete for work. He becomes vulnerable to disease, which later makes even begging impossible. This reading of the parable shows much potential, especially if one takes into consideration that Hultgren sees the parable as stemming from the historical Jesus. Hultgren, however, reads the parable as pedagogy of the oppressed. The possibility of Jesus telling the parable to address the barriers erected by class and privilege through the method of criticising the principle of patronage and the wealth accumulated by the systematic exploitation of the poor in first-century Palestine is not considered.

In an attempt to remedy this seeming anomaly in the parable, various names have been attached to the rich man. p 75 (third century, Alexandrian) gave him the name of Neu/hu and the ancient writer Priscillian (died 385 CE) named him Finees. The Vulgate (fourth century, Western) opened with the words ‘homo quidam erat dives’ that is, ‘a certain man was rich’. This phrase popularly came to be understood as resembling the historical Jesus. Hultgren, however, reads the parable as pedagogy of the oppressed. The possibility of Jesus telling the parable to address the barriers erected by class and privilege through the method of criticising the principle of patronage and the wealth accumulated by the systematic exploitation of the poor in first-century Palestine is not considered.

The strategy of the parable, however, is not about opposites. One similarity in the parable can be indicated, a similarity between the rich man (inside the gate) and Lazarus (outside the gate) as reflecting the social status of the poor and the rich are fixed (Scott 1989:151). He also opines that the relationship between the rich man and Lazarus implies a relationship of patron and client (Scott 1989:150). In his analysis of the parable, he does not, however, explore the use of the gate to come to Lazarus' aid (Scott 1989:150). Hultgren states that the parable presupposes an ancient agrarian economy in which a person like Lazarus is not worth much.

The expression ‘to make merry’ (eυ)παινεῖν) is also in use in the parables of the rich fool (Lk 12:19) and the prodigal son (Lk 15:23, 24 and 32) and means ‘to make a feast’. It entails a feast well beyond those occasional celebrations that enlivened the otherwise boring and monotonous existence of Mediterranean peasants (Scott 1988:14). In Genesis 40:30, 32, 25, 23, 13), who translated ευ)παινεῖν as ‘to make glad, to cheer up, to cause to be happy’.

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In an attempt to remedy this seeming anomaly in the parable, various names have been attached to the rich man. p 75 (third century, Alexandrian) gave him the name of Neu/hu and the ancient writer Priscillian (died 385 CE) named him Finees. The Vulgate (fourth century, Western) opened with the words ‘homo quidam erat dives’ that is, ‘a certain man was rich’. This phrase popularly came to be understood as resembling the historical Jesus. Hultgren, however, reads the parable as pedagogy of the oppressed. The possibility of Jesus telling the parable to address the barriers erected by class and privilege through the method of criticising the principle of patronage and the wealth accumulated by the systematic exploitation of the poor in first-century Palestine is not considered.

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and perceptions) that construed ‘reality’ in the first-century Mediterranean world (Elliott 1993:39). Herzog (1994), Hultgren (2000) and in their analyses of the parable, correctly identified some of the salient cultural scripts of the world that Jesus lived in and that are implied in the parable. The parable assumes the social structure of an advanced agrarian society, in which the rich man and Lazarus exemplify the class disparity of that social structure, the big difference that existed between city and countryside and the oppressive system that it incorporated (Herzog 1995:190–193). It also implies patronage and clientism (one of the most important relationships in aristocratic societies) and the first-century Mediterranean world as a limited-goods society where the social status of the poor and the rich was fixed (Hultgren 2003:115–116; Scott 1989:150–151). To this we can add the lavish meals of the rich man, which functioned as ceremonies to affirm the values and structures of that society, and the pivotals of honour and shame. Very important also is the figure of Abraham, which evokes the important principle of hospitality. Finally, the physical state of Lazarus relates to the important principle of being socially (and ritually) pure or impure.

Not all the above cultural scripts can be attested to in the analysis that follows. As a discriminating principle that focuses on the strategy of the parable, the unwillingness of both the rich man and Abraham to help those who are in need will be attended to. Attention will therefore be given to patronage and clientism in the first-century Mediterranean world, the social status of being rich or poor and the figure of Abraham, which evokes the principle of hospitality.

The situation of the parable
The backdrop of the parable: An advanced agrarian (aristocratic) society
First-century Palestine was an advanced agrarian (aristocratic) society, divided into the ‘haves’ (the elite) and the ‘have-nots’ (the ruled peasantry). The ruling class (the élite) lived in the countryside (Fiensy 2007:39; Oakman 2008:58; 2008:51, 133). No middle class existed. Although comprising only one to two per cent of the population and lived in the cities while the rest of the population, the peasants (the ruled), lived in the countryside (Fiensy 2007:39; Oakman 2008:58; 2008:51, 133). No middle class existed. Although comprising only one to two per cent of the population, the élite controlled most of the wealth (from one half up to two thirds) comprised only one to two per cent of the population, and the ‘have-nots’ (the ruled peasantry). The ruling class (the élite) always sought to aggrandize their honour and status, and their pivotal values of honour and shame. Very important also is the figure of Abraham, which evokes the important principle of hospitality. Finally, the physical state of Lazarus relates to the important principle of being socially (and ritually) pure or impure.

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Patronage and clientism
Patron-client relationships were part and parcel of advanced aristocratic societies. Except for patron-client relationships between élites, the élite also entered into patron-client relationships with the poor and the peasantry. These relationships benefited the élite (the patrons) in terms of the accumulation of honour and status and, from the side of the poor, the day labourers and the peasantry, enabled them to survive (or secure something more than just subsistence living). The élite, always seeking to aggrandize their honour and status, competed to add dependent clients (as having only a few clients was considered shameful). ‘Clients competed for patrons just as patrons competed for clients in an often desperate struggle to gain economic or political advantage’ (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:388). Another aspect of patronage should be noted here, since it has an important bearing on the meaning of the parable. Part of patronage was the hospitium, the relations of host and guest (who were social equals). These relationships, according to Malina & Rohrbaugh (2003:389), were often formalized in contractual agreements for mutual aid, legal assistance, lodging, medical assistance, burial and protection for as long as a party remained in the city of the host.

Rich and poor
In the eastern Mediterranean in New Testament times, “rich” or “wealthy” as a rule meant “avaricious, greedy,” while “poor” referred to persons scarcely able to maintain their honor or dignity (Malina 1987:356). Traditional peasant societies (like those of the first-century Mediterranean) perceived all resources in terms of ‘limited goods’ and therefore saw wealthy people as ‘thieves’, who had benefited at the expense of the poor (Malina 1981:71; 1987:563). A poor person was therefore someone who could not maintain his inherited status due to circumstances that befell him and his family (like debt, being in a foreign land, sickness or some personal physical accident; those who hunger or thirst, the blind, the ill, the lame, lepers and the deaf [Malina 1981:55]). At the same time, the rich person was one who was able to maintain his status. According to Hollenbach credit to small farmers became an enormous source. The aim of these investments was to acquire land when the repayment of debts failed. Indebted farmers were frequently enslaved and became the property of their new masters.

In aristocratic societies (consisting of ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’), patronage and clientism is a relationship in which, as a special favor, a patron provides for his client access to scarce resources that are not universally accessible! (Mosques 1991:243). By entering into a patron-client arrangement, clients relate to their patrons as to superior and more powerful kinmen, while patrons see their clients as their dependants (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:388). Patron-client relationships thus describe the vertical dimension of exchange between higher and lower-status people (Neyrey 2004:249).

In the economic sphere, this led to an extensive and extractive relationship between patron and client (elite and peasant): leadership was concerned with plundering rather than with developing; taxation existed for the benefit of the élite; resources were exploited for personal benefit; focus was on trade; and the élite was always looking to control over land (mostly by expropriation and the creation of debt; Eisenstadt & Roniger 1984:208).

In terms of the exchange of resources between patrons and clients, Malina (1986:98–106; see also Neyrey 2004:253; 2005:469–470) identifies three types of reciprocity: generalized (extreme solidarity, altruism extended to the kin group); balanced (the midpoint; mutual banter and social interest extended to mutual friends and villagers); and negative (the unsocial extreme; seeking self-interest at the expense of the ‘other’). The last-mentioned kind of reciprocity is clearly acceptable in the case of patron-client relationships, where the élite lock only to gain from the relationship (e.g. to aggrandize honour or to add dependants in the process of gaining power).

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Reading the parable

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is a story about the great class disparity in first-century Palestine, about the divide between the urban elite, who controlled all the wealth, power and privilege, and the exploited rural peasantry, who lived in the narrow margin between famine and subsistence (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:295).

In the parable, the élite are represented by the rich man, most probably one of the Jewish aristocracy with official power (he knows Abraham and he wears purple). To show his status, he flaunts his wealth through conspicuous consumption stemming from lavish spending (Fiensy 2007:91). The clothes that he wears (rare and expensive Egyptian linen underwear and purple clothing) are also a status marker; purple is the colour of kings and honourable men, a mark of luxurious living and a sign of official power worn by those who were proud of their wealth. Since he was able to maintain his wealth, he was a man of honour. To enhance his honour and status, he ‘made merry’ (feasted) every day, most probably with other élites who stood with him in patron-client relationships. Being part of the élite, he also competed for clients among the poor and the peasantry. These patron-client relationships put him in a position to control more and more land, produce and labour.

At the rich man’s gate, one of the products of his exploitation, Lazarus, spends his days. Lazarus had become one of the expendables of the society that the rich man and the other élite had created. Lazarus was no longer of any use to the rich man. He may even have been a smallholder of inherited land who had only enough land for the eldest son to inherit, he may have had to leave the family plot and seek work elsewhere because there were too many mouths to feed in a household living below or just at the level of subsistence or his father may have lost his land because of rising indebtedness and eventual foreclosure on his mortgage by one of the exploiting urban élite (Herzog 1994:119). He may even have been a smallholder of inherited land who lost his land because of, inter alia, the excessive tax burden imposed by the ruling élite. Whatever the case may have been, the road that leads to the gate of the rich man is a one-way street: first tenant; then day labourer; eventually, drifting to the city where work is scarce, he did not find work and became a beggar. The parable describes the final stretch of the road that he travels: he becomes malnourished and covered with sores, not even able to beg anymore. Lazarus has no honour left: he is economically poor (Hollenbach 1987:58); poor in the sense that he cannot maintain his status as a peasant smallholder (Malina 1987:355); he has no family ties left; and, above all, he is socially and ritually impure. His name says it all: only God can help.

In the parable, the name ‘Lazarus’ is not accidental. It typifies the way in which Jesus sided with the poor, the expendables and the socially impure during his day. In a situation where Jesus knew very well that the exploiting rich were only becoming richer and the poor poorer, Jesus’ concern for the poor is not surprising. He congratulated the poor and the hungry, damned the rich and those who were well fed at the cost of the poor and exhorted the rich to sell their possessions and give to the poor. He also criticised patronage and clientism based on the principle of negative reciprocity by modelling all personal relations on those of closed kin, that is generalised reciprocity (Oakman 2008:103–107). He encouraged hosts to invite the poor, crippled, lame and blind who could not repay them (exemplified by the parable of the dinner party/wedding feast, which refers to élite hosts,9) to love their enemies,9 to do good and to pray for their enemies,9 to lend to others, expecting nothing in return (a sequence of sayings confirmed by the summary statement in Lk 6:35; see Funk et al. 1993:291), to treat people in the same way as they would want to be treated9 and to forgive the debt of others9 (paralleled in the parable of the unforgiving slave). Jesus even tried to turn the hearts of the powerful to the powerless and dishonoured poor (Oakman 2008:161) and criticised those patrons who were constantly looking for new ways to enhance their honour by means of salutations by their clients. Moreover, he ate indiscriminately with the so-called ‘sinners’9 and healed the sick.44 From this, it becomes clear that Jesus’ sympathies indeed lie with the poor.9 There is help, after all, for Lazarus – especially in a kingdom where God is the patron and not the ruling aristocratic élite.44 Where God is...
When patrons are not patrons: A social-scientific reading of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–26)

When the rich man dies, he has the opportunity of viewing the way that things are from the other side of the gate. He is confronted with the kind of patronage towards and of solidarity with the poor and the destitute that Jesus advocates. Abraham, the example of hospitality in the Old Testament, clearly embodies Jesus’ attitude towards the poor. Lazarus is sitting at the table (bosom) of Abraham, where hospitality has been extended to him. But the rich man, although being in torment and thirsty, is not troubled: Abraham is his father too and, in line with what is known of Abraham’s hospitality, it will be extended to him as well. Now, he is the one who is in need and, just as in the case of Lazarus, those who are in need are looked upon favourably by Abraham. He just has to ask.

But then the surprise in Jesus’ parable. Abraham is not willing to help. Abraham does not even offer one drop of water to be licked from Lazarus’ finger. Even the dogs that licked Lazarus’ sores were better off. This is indeed an oxymoron – Abraham not being hospitable? How is this possible? This simply cannot happen: when hospitality is involved, something happens the unthinkable happens: Abraham does not show hospitality. And then the big and final shock: this gate cannot be opened. It is not even belonging to him. But he does not pass through it – simply because there is nothing in it for him to do so. He could only lose some honour.

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This is the gist of the parable. When patrons who have in abundance do not pass through the gate to the poor, a society is created wherein a chasm so great is brought into existence between rich (the élite) and poor (the peasantry) that it cannot be crossed. The worlds of the urban élite and the peasantry drift so far apart that the gap between them eventually cannot be closed. Pass through the gate while you can. Just as unthinkable happens: Abraham does not show hospitality.

REFERENCES

4.2.4: ‘The bestowal of a benefit...is a mark of virtue, and to bestow it for any other reason other than merely the bestowing of it is a most shameful act’ (Seneca, Benefices 4.11.3). ‘Give to the one who, though poor, is good; for he will be grateful in the midst of extreme poverty, and, when he lacks all else, this heart he will still have. It is not gain that I try to get from a benefit; nor pleasure; nor glory; content with necessary, aid’ (Seneca, Benefits 2.2.1). ‘Therefore we ought to divine each man’s desire, and, when we have discovered it, he ought to be freed from the grievous necessity of making a request; the benefit aimed at is to be concealed from him so that they will be known only to those who receive the benefit (Seneca, Benefits 2.2.1) and one should always try to anticipate one’s own desire and indulge in giving that to someone else, even before someone has to beg (Seneca, Benefices 2.2.1).’

68. Contra Leonhardt-Balzer (2007:654), who views Abraham not as a character in the parable but as the voice of God.
69. This gospel has as content ‘material... which... in some instances reflects early traditions of Jesus’ (Cameron 1982:98).
When patrons are not patrons: A social-scientific reading of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–26)  
