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A dialogic reading of Luke 8:1–3

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In this article, the topic of patronage in ancient Roman Palestine is discussed from the viewpoint of God as a benefactor who bestows grace on the early Christians. The article suggests that Luke 8:1–3 describes the women as ἀσθενής (those without adequate strength), portraying them as clients who received a gift and reciprocated in loyalty and gratitude. The perspective sheds light on the women within the ancient patronage culture, where there is no such thing as a gift without reciprocation. It argues that patronage, as an integral part of human existence, was ominously linked for the ancients (as with many 'societies' today). It is, however, argued here that the theme, as defined by its content and meaning in multiple contexts, forms an interpretive paradigm for understanding Luke 8:1–3. The article concludes that the appropriate human response to a gift from God is gratitude. The study concludes with some reflections on the theme in African society, particularly South African and Nigerian contexts, which have largely been characterised by these ancient attributes.

Contribution: This article contributes to discussions on ancient patronage by framing God as a benefactor and the women in Luke 8:1–3 as clients who reciprocate divine gifts with loyalty and gratitude. It highlights the pervasive nature of patronage in antiquity and its parallels in contemporary societies, particularly in South Africa and Nigeria. By interpreting the women as ἀσθενής, it underscores their social vulnerability and dependence on divine favour. The study offers patronage as an interpretive lens for understanding Luke 8:1–3, emphasising gratitude as the proper response to divine benefaction. Ultimately, it bridges biblical patronage with African socio-cultural contexts.

Keywords: patronage; reciprocation; dialogic reading; Luke 8:1–3; grace, Χάρις.

Introduction

Patronage is a theme that spans different disciplines, which may thereby give the theme some interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary relevance. Thus, an interpretive paradigm for understanding Luke 8:1–3 may be determined from the cultural context in which Luke wrote. Williams A. Simmons (1996:275) further elucidates that patronage functions as a theme within the general category of human relationships, which is characterised by χάρις and the reciprocation of a gift, however small, will be given in return. But it is also a voluntary relationship established between people from the 'upper echelons of society … to the level of slaves'. Furthermore, patronage is characterised by the exchange of resources, either material or non-material, and especially as it fosters loyalty and conformity in a world controlled by the wealthy and powerful (DeSilva 2000; Eisenstadt & Roniger 1984; eds. Garnsey & Saller 1987; Neyrey 2005; Roniger 1983; Wallace-Hadrill 1989).

This article argues that the theme itself provides us with an interpretive paradigm for interpreting the narrative in Luke 8:1–3. Indeed, it is an integral part of history and human relationships. Patronage as an interpretive approach is illustrated from the given pericope – Luke 8:1–3.

Patronage seeks first to interpret the theme in the ancient Greco-Roman world vis-à-vis (modern) human social relationships. It is identified within the narrative in Luke vis-à-vis the larger cultural context in which the theme serves as an interpretive paradigm. In this way, the meaning of the text is understood from its multiple contexts. Thus, the text both generates and is linked to a wider context of the theme of patronage in Luke's gospel.

Let us now proceed to explore below the cultural context that provides us with the building blocks for understanding the theme of χάρις and reciprocation of gift. This context builds on but diverges at points from previous work carried out in the area. The article will engage with the issues that emerge from various scholars' works, which facilitate in elucidation of the relevance of the theme within a particular context. We will test the context itself against the narrative in Luke 8:1–3 and offer

some new conclusions. The article ends with hermeneutical reflections on aspects of the theme within the African context, particularly the South African and Nigerian contexts[1]. To put it more bluntly, the primary contribution of the article lies in drawing a fresh connection between ancient Roman patron–client relationships and contemporary African systems. However, this contribution must be made more explicit by explicitly identifying what is novel in the comparison. While previous studies have addressed aspects of patron-clientism in the ancient world and Africa (Smith 2020:134; see also Chidubem 2018:56), this article's innovation is that it attempts to bridge these two distinct socio-political contexts. The article argues that although patron-client relationships manifest differently in their respective contexts, certain structural similarities can be identified, especially regarding power dynamics, the provision of protection or resources, and social stratification (Lee 2017:77; see Tsang 2019:112). This study aims to bridge the gap in existing studies, which have focused exclusively on the Roman or the African contexts. Few have directly compared the two societies in this regard (Mark 2016:45).

Grace and reciprocation of gifts in ancient Roman Palestine

The significance of the topic of the reciprocal relationship in the Greco-Roman world is attested to by a number of publications, including David R. Bidnell's (2011) 'Cultural-Literary Reading of Luke's Parables'; Jonathan Marshall's (1978) Jesus, Patrons, and Benefactors; I.H. Marshall's Gospel of Luke, Fredrick W. Danker's (1982) Benefactor; Bruce W. Winter's (1994) Seek the Welfare of the City; and David A. DeSilva's (2000) 'Patronage and Reciprocity'. We highlight Bidnell's work, which is perhaps the most comprehensive of the recent studies of this type that are currently available, because a thorough examination of these sources would be outside the purview of this study.

In Bidnell's work, a reciprocal relationship is characterised by an unequal relationship between parties of different social statuses, which is maintained by loyalty. This relationship is sustained by voluntary reciprocal exchange of goods, designed in part to provide the patron with a greater degree of honour (Bidnell 2011). Bidnell (2011:186) observes that 'both the patron and client are expected to follow principles regarding mutual benefit'. Let us begin by returning to Bidnell's brief remark above. Bidnell judged that this mutual benefits and reciprocity requires that a gift of equivalent value be returned to the giver, and the same orientation was perhaps to save the recipient from dependency syndrome and to also avoid rendering the recipient inferior (Bidnell 2011; Oropeza 2014). Bidnell's (2011:186–188) work supports the idea that Jesus' relationship with the women in Luke 8:1–3 could be defined in terms of patrons and clients. These women identify with Luke's main emphasis on God's χάρις and acceptance.

1.Since both authors originate from specific geographical regions within the African continent, they are intentional in their approach to avoid generalisations about Africa. Recognising the vastness, diversity and the significant cultural and customary nuances that characterise different African societies, they acknowledge that any analysis of African thought, traditions or practices must be contextually situated. This approach ensures a more precise and nuanced engagement with the complexities of African identities and experiences.

The merit of this reciprocity may be judged by some of the extant evidence as found in (traditional) societies, which suggests that such a relationship pervades and, indeed, 'structures' the worldview in which patronage plays a pivotal role. For instance, Esler (1994:1–9) observes that Lucan narrative appears to be derived from an existing social order ('patronage'), which is often maintained by a reciprocal system where (a client) approaches the patron for favours, resolving social injustices and guaranteeing that both sides' demands are satisfied (Esler 1994; see also Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003).

We may also note that the concept of social structure is central to discussions on human–divine relationships, particularly with its emphasis on reciprocity. McGrath (1994:209) observes that the fundamental notion of God as a person implies that he is a being with whom we can relate, and this relationship is akin to that which we might have with a fellow human being. According to Winter (1994:10–21), first-century Christians were part of families, groups and cities long before they embraced the teachings of the gospel. They were raised in cultures with deep-rooted customs and institutions that relied on patronage to ensure the well-being of their citizens. Patronage refers to this cultural structure of power exchange, which served as the primary means for individuals to obtain protection, services, job opportunities and professional growth.

But the point of departure here is that this type of relationship can only be established by adopting a voluntary reciprocation of χάρις and gift. Patrons and clients are brought together in a reciprocal relationship. According to Winter (1994:124), the early Christians 'were members of households, associations, and cities in first-century Roman Palestine before they embraced the preaching of the Gospel'. They had been raised in cultures with long-standing customs and institutions that relied on patronage to ensure the well-being of their citizenry. Patron–client relationships are the term used to describe this cultural structure of power exchange. It served as the main channel for individuals to obtain protection, products, job chances and professional development.

It is against this large backdrop that Randee Ijatuyi-Morphe (2011:397) argues that patronage has 'socio-economics roots in every society of the world'. Patronage in some parts, if not all of Africa, is evident in a concept called godfatherism; a system in which a man of immense wealth secures political posts, school admission, job opportunities, road construction, water supply, security, education, electricity and other positions for his dependents by using his position of riches and influence (Albert 2005; Familusi 2012; Omobowale 2006; Omobowale & Olutayo 2006). Ijatuyi-Morphe (2011:397), for instance, avers that a patron in Africa is like a 'paterfamilias (head) of the house (hold)' where the welfare of the family becomes his responsibility. He goes on to describe a godfather in ancient Roman society, a godfather refers to a member of the congregation who unites the 'members of the [*extended*] family in his role as husband, father, master, and patron'. The term paterfamilias provides our immediate link to χάρις and reciprocation of gift in Luke 8:1–3.

Grace and reciprocation of a gift in Luke

It is customary to treat Luke's mention of Jesus and the women in Luke 8:1–3 prospectively in relation to the Greco-Roman culture of patronage; however, it has also been studied retrospectively, with respect to Luke's medical background. We shall be guided by both, and much more. Given also the salient features of patronage in the Greco-Roman world and biblical antiquity, we propose to re-examine the text accordingly.

Contextual considerations

Reciprocal relationship occurs in the larger narrative context of Luke 8:1–3, framed as it is upon the graciousness of Jesus to the poor, weak, women and marginalised (cf. Lk 11:5–8; 12:16b–20; 14:16–23; 15:11b–32; 16:19–31; 18:2–5; 19:1–10; 19:12b–27) (see DeSilva 2000). In addition, the narrative in Luke 8:1–3 echoes other episodes within Luke, outside the above narrative frame. The theme of patronage echoes deep within the scriptural traditions of Israel. Given this webbed context for Luke, we will explore in this section the interpretation of this pericope (Osborne 2019:19).

In its narrative context, Jesus' ministry in Galilee is characterised by preaching, teaching and the performance of miracles. It is here that the οἱ δώδεκα (12 disciples) were first chosen to accompany him (Lk 8:1). During this phase of ministry, Mary, Joanna, and Susanna joined and all of them engaged in their pre-commission ministry (Lk 8:3). Luke's description of these women as those who have been healed of evil spirits and sickness is no doubt also reflective of their new identity as followers of Jesus in their mission (Lk 8:2). That new identity is now closely defined more precisely by τεθεραπευμέναι. During this phase of ministry, the three women also joined the duo from Galilee, as 'they were contributing to their support out of their private means' (Lk 8:3). Thus, we are alerted to the women with a 'nickname' (so in its origin, Lk 8:2–ἀσθενής). Luke's switch then to the benefaction of the women in Luke 8:3 would seem to have been prepared for – however feebly. While these passages support the idea that reciprocal relationships are prevalent in ancient Roman Palestine, it can be argued that these women's acts of generosity in Luke 8:1–3 are responses to Jesus' gift.

Nominated for divine grace verse 1

It is at this level of interpretation that verse 1 echoes with patronage too loud to be heard. The echoes are those of the Jesus movement – nomination and selection of οἱ δώδεκα into his lordship. In this pericope, Luke portrays echoes of patronage in Jesus' movement via his selection of servants, which itself coheres with the existing reciprocal relationships of his time. The point here is that, given the context of reciprocal relationships, we may reasonably see behind the Lucan text – a recurrence of the theme or even that Jesus is depicted as a patron. We will return to this point presently.

Scholars have typically noted Jesus' status (patron of the kingdom of God) as Jesus' patronage. For example, Elliot (2008) notes that Luke aligns Jesus with the Roman patronage and the temple elite, a 'deeply exploitative nature of the tribute- and slave-based economy'. While insightful, this opinion does not get to the heart of Luke's depiction of Jesus' patronage in the text.

Now, in verse 1, several things are brought to bear on the nature of the narrative of Jesus' nomination of disciples in Galilee. There is attention given to names and subsequently professions of the disciples in the Lucan narrative: Peter (also formerly Simon) and his brother Andrew, John and James – the fishermen. By referring to fishermen as his disciples, this move might be viewed as being in opposition to the religious elite's and Rome's sponsorship patronage (cf. Mk 1:16–20). However, it is tax collectors and fishermen who occupy centre stage in Jesus' patronage.

Jesus' patronage is also extended to the most vulnerable and marginalised persons in first-century Mediterranean society, namely women (v. 2). Ernest Van Eck (2012:10) notes that 'because of its patriarchal social structure, women and children in the 1st-century Mediterranean world were treated as property'. In the first century, men were viewed as having honour, while women belonged in the category of shame. As a result, women were referred to as ἀσθενής (those without sufficient strength) and had little standing in the family or community (Malina & Rohrbaugh's 2003).

There may be more to be gained by asking why Jesus had hitherto nominated the social outcast and the vulnerable for divine χάρις in his patronage movement. The answer, Van Eck (2012:11) thinks is, 'Jesus, through his patronage, creates an inclusive community for outsiders by remedying the inadequacies of Rome and the temple elite within the overarching quality of kinship'. Indeed, Van Eck notes that being part of this patronage of the kingdom of God is not 'hereditary or based on blood […] but is to do the will of the Father' (cf. Mk 3:35), which follows from being loyal to its patron and his mission (to have πίστις).

Be that as it may, what emerges clearly from Jesus' nomination of his disciples for divine χάρις in verse 1, it seems to me, is Jesus' passion and fervour for a new system of patronage, whose members are still benefactors in Luke's day, one that did not rely exclusively on patron assistance for the well-being of its customers. The emergent patronage to which Jesus' movement gave rise, no doubt, also had roots in his mission goal as the Messiah. While Van Eck's argument holds a degree of validity, a closer examination of the concept of divine χάρις and gift-giving in verse 2 is warranted.

Divine grace received verse 2

In the preceding section, we alluded to Jesus' patronage in ancient Roman society. The nomination of his clients is mostly comprehended under the ubiquitous notion of patronage, with its accompanying grace and divine gifts

for the weak, and this is how the Roman patronage, for instance, has largely been contrasted in the past century. A key issue that often surfaces here concerns the divine χάρις and gift-giving in verse 2. Natividad (2016) notes that Luke begins by listing three women who were cured of different illnesses:

> Mary Magdalene who had been released of seven demons, Joanna, whose illness is not specified, but who is identified as the wife of one in Herod's employ, and Susanna for whom we are not told anything more. (p. 5)

With respect to divine χάρις and gift-giving to these women, Van Eck (2012) explains:

> By healing the demon-possessed, he cushions the vagaries created by the gospel of Rome and breaks the control this gospel had on Rome's subordinates. Interestingly, the exorcised demons exactly know who Jesus is – the [*master*] and Son of God […] In defeating the demons or evil spirits, the […] [*Lucan*] Jesus is defeating Rome, and because of this, is being hailed as the Son of God, the one in whom real power and influence reside. (p. 11)

Thus, we may safely conclude with Van Eck (2012) that the Lucan Jesus establishes himself as the 'true patron of God and declares the temple and its ideology as obsolete or authentic power and influence reside in Jesus', at least for clients, as one whose possession of power seems to most scholars to be undisputable.

Green (1997:315) sees a patronage feature in the names by which Jesus is called – 'Master (v.24) and Son of God (v.28) – are not without their significance … and their recognition of his redemptive authority'. The reciprocal relationship that existed in ancient Rome, between a patron and a client, warrants the concept of the name master in a legal sense – a word that describes lordship over someone. Green observes that in the first century, the Roman patronage was to keep those women as slaves to their activities, and thereby prevent people from experiencing true faith and, thus, from being saved. Thus, Jesus' patronage is characterised by divine χάρις and gift-giving of freedom from diabolic activity to the experience of salvation shown through exorcism and physical healing.

We seem, then, to have come full circle in trying to show how the early Christians might have defined themselves in relation to the Greco-Roman patronage, which is deeply rooted in an exploitation – and slave-based economy (Elliott 2008). It appears to me that the patronage envisaged here would have been occasioned instead by the contrasting patronage of the kingdom of God. Significant in this kind of relationship is divine grace and the gift of freedom and salvation that is accompanied by both spiritual and physical healing (v.2).

Thus, in adopting the patronage of the kingdom of God, the early Christians should have understood that the appropriate human response to divine favour and grace is appreciation. Let us proceed to see how divine grace and gift-giving are reciprocated in loyalty and gratitude.

Divine grace reciprocated in gratitude verse 3

The appropriate human response to divine grace is discussed in this section. While this passage supports the idea that Jesus' grace is unmerited, it is commonly believed that if it is indeed God's gift, it requires no reciprocation. Engberg-Pedersen (2008:15–44) notes that divine grace and gift-giving are entirely void of self-regard. Several scholars broadly offered different interpretations of the Greek verb διακονέω in verse 3 – a verb that describes the response of the women to divine gift-giving. To begin with, Oropeza (2014) elucidates that:

> [*S*]ocietal [*structures*] related to gift-giving and the expectation…of reciprocity for [*the women*] would seem to play a prominent role related to [*Luke's*] understanding of grace. If [*these women*] were raised on the Greco-Roman system of gift-giving and reciprocity, they would seem to comprehend grace as benefaction. (p. 64)

Oropeza (2014) further elucidates that these women 'do not seem to operate with overt distinctions between spiritual and material benefaction'.

Perhaps, more significantly, DeSilva's (2000:141–151) depiction also suggests that giving back to the heavenly donor via acts of kindness and good deeds is one way that gratitude manifests itself. These deeds:

> [*A*]re not offered to gain favour from God, but nevertheless they must be offered in grateful response to God. To refuse these is to refuse the patron (who gave his all for us) the return he specially requests from us. if Jesus gave his life for us, we fall short of a fair return unless we live our lives for him (2 Cor 5;14–15; Gl 2:20).

Therefore, it is essential that we build on these ideas by analysing Luke's conception of grace in light of the women's reciprocity and benefaction in the present narrative. Collins (1990) argues that:

> [*T*]he use of δηαθνλία [*to describe the women's act of service*] in isolation does not say much in the Greek language about the status or specific task of the person involved in it, the context is extremely significant. (p. 81)

The verb διακονέω could mean different things in different contexts. For example, Reta Haltman Finger (2007:257) gives nuances of this verb in Acts 6:1–6, 'there is a ministry that involves tables and a ministry that involves speaking'. This seeming ambiguity of the verb appears to have given rise to the need for a correlation between the person involved in the action and the context of the text. This is explained by the phrase: 'who were contributing to their support out of their private means' (v.3). The key issue here centres on the question of the link between their contribution to the support of whom and how such may be comprehended through patronage.

Scholars have noted the several ambiguities surrounding the rendition of the verb διακονέω, and Sandiyagu and Virginia (2017:296–347) offer several attempts to deal with the above issue. Of interest here is analysing the word 'διακονέω', Sandiyagu and Virginia argue against a proclivity to view the women's service as table service and demonstrate how Luke is portraying them as benefactresses. They judge that what the

women did was to respond to divine gift-giving by supporting and seeking the welfare of the movement that saved them. However, Elizabeth Schűssler Fiorenza (1987:288) also points out that in Luke 8:1–3, the 12 are reliant on the women's financial assistance because they abandoned their jobs to follow Jesus (p. 5:11, e.g. Peter, James and John). The διακονέω of the ladies is probably economic in character in this situation.

We should, however, caution that the women not only reciprocated divine grace with gratitude as benefactresses but also demonstrated loyalty as disciples. Indeed, such women were not disciples in name, but they were in reality. John P. Meier (1994) concludes regarding the women as disciples, thus:

> Certainly, the reality rather than the label would have been what caught most people's attention […] Yet, scandal or no scandal, Jesus allowed them to follow and serve him. Whatever the vocabulary, the most probable conclusion is that Jesus viewed and treated these women as disciples. (p. 80)

While beneficial at times, it is essential to strictly differentiate between being benefactors of the Jesus movement and being disciples of Jesus. Overcoming this distinction also depends on how one evaluates the cultural orientation of early Christians. Aside from seeking the welfare of the Jesus movement, it is clear that loyalty to women is inseparable from the women themselves; the patriarchal culture of ancient Rome barely allowed women to serve as patrons. While the women continued to support the ministry of Jesus as benefactors, they were not living as patrons according to the culture in their time. Rather, Luke posits that the women's act of benefaction is driven by Jesus' liberating mission. And both were vindicated from their old self – it is not as though the reciprocation is an attempt to pay for the divine gift.

Perhaps more significantly, Luke used benefaction language to illustrate how Jesus taught Christians in first-century Roman Palestine to be benefactors and active citizens, considering the tradition of patron–client relationships in the region. He also proposed that Jesus' teachings emphasised civic obligation. While Roman patronage was often viewed in terms of dependency and an inability to fulfil civic duties, Luke defined Jesus' patronage more narrowly. He aimed to correct early Christians' reliance on patrons, encouraging them to feel the responsibility of seeking the welfare of their city.

Reflection on patronage, χάρις and reciprocation in South African and Nigerian contexts

The concept of patronage and reciprocal gift-giving in Luke 8:1–3 resonates intensely with African social structures, where relational obligations, communal solidarity and the ethics of reciprocity remain foundational to societal interactions. In many African cultures, benefaction is rarely unidirectional; rather, it establishes a system of mutual exchange, where receiving a gift necessitates a response of loyalty, gratitude or continued relational engagement (Nyende 2018).

Patronage and communal ethics in African society

African traditional societies often operate within an intricate system of patron–client relationships, much like the Greco-Roman world (Magesa 2004). Chiefs, elders and community leaders function as benefactors who provide material support, protection and social standing to their people. In turn, recipients express their gratitude through allegiance, service or public acknowledgement of the benefactor's generosity (Adamo 2006). This dynamic mirrors the relationships in Luke 8:1–3, where Jesus is portrayed as the ultimate patron whose followers, particularly the women, reciprocate his beneficence through acts of service and material support.

Many religious scholars have asserted that Africa shares religious and cultural features in common with the Old Testament and/or Ancient Near East (OT and/or ANE) and ancient Roman Palestine (Reyburn 1960). Ijatuyi-Morphe (2008:93) notes that this claim seems so obvious that it hardly needs proof, yet surprisingly little attention has been given to critically analysing these shared features, particularly in modern biblical scholarship in the African soil. Whether one considers this omission a lacuna that needs to be filled, and how one should go about doing so, remains an open question.

Nevertheless, Ijatuyi-Morphe (2008:92) further observes that among the religious and cultural features Africa shares with biblical antiquity, African patronage stands out immediately, particularly in its dissemination into different institutions. Here, as in most things 'African' – patronage, godfatherism, nepotism, apprenticeship, discipleship, and mentorship relationships – much has been made of these phenomena. Their sheer presence throughout history and their continued relevance in most African social and religious institutions attest to the adaptability of African culture and its enduring significance in the lived experiences of African people.

Be that as it may, African patronage, distinguished by its composite nature – including godfatherism, nepotism, apprenticeship, discipleship, and mentorship – has defined most African societies and shaped their engagement with both the church and society. From this standpoint, African patronage bears remarkable similarities to the cultural context of the ancient Roman world in which Luke's Gospel was written. This connection necessitates a deeper examination of the concept of grace and reciprocation within African Christianity.

Theological implications: Divine patronage and χάρις

Within African theological discourse, the understanding of God as the supreme benefactor aligns with traditional views of divine favour (*chishima* in Bantu philosophy or *ebun* in Yoruba cosmology) (Bediako 2004). God's blessings, whether material or spiritual, require human acknowledgement and response. This theological paradigm is evident in Luke 8:1–3, where the women – having received divine χάρις – respond in gratitude and support for Jesus' ministry. Thus, African interpretations of χάρις emphasise the relational and

communal aspects of divine–human interaction rather than an abstract theological concept (Gathogo 2008).

We have drawn several significant conclusions from our study of Luke 8:1–3, including how Luke views χάρις, the exchange of gifts and how the African church ought to accept this culture. According to one theory, firstly, Luke and the women's understanding of grace is framed by the gift-giving customs that are common in their social environment. As a result of this training, they view God as the divine benefactor.

Secondly, they assume that grace as a gift ought to be reciprocated. The gift of salvation – that is, saving grace – is initiated by God through the Christ event. This gift is given to unworthy recipients. In order to demonstrate their appreciation, those who have been saved must now reverence God in both their words and deeds, be faithful and steadfast in their confidence in God and the gospel of Christ, and submit to the guidance of God's Spirit to live in holiness and carry out acts of love. Saving grace demands that one completely give up their lifestyle in order to follow Christ (2 Cor 5:14–21).

The challenge of the prosperity gospel and patronage

The contemporary prosperity gospel movement in South Africa and Nigeria often distorts the biblical patronage model by commercialising divine χάρις, reducing it to a transactional system where financial offerings are seen as mandatory reciprocation for divine blessings (Ukah 2020). While biblical patronage assumes a reciprocal relationship between benefactor and client, it does not endorse a commodified grace that demands financial remuneration (Kgatle 2021). Mosala (1989) critiques such theological misinterpretations, calling for a hermeneutic that resists economic exploitation under the guise of divine patronage.

Patronage, gender and the role of women

Luke 8:1–3 highlights women as active participants in reciprocal patronage. In many African cultures, women are central figures in sustaining social networks and religious communities, yet they are often marginalised in formal leadership structures (Oduyoye 1995). The narrative of women financially and materially supporting Jesus challenges patriarchal interpretations that confine women's roles to passive recipients of divine favour. Instead, it affirms women as active agents in sustaining religious movements, resonating with African women's theological reflections on economic justice and gender roles in Christian communities (Kanyoro 2002).

African ethics of gratitude and reciprocity

African ethics emphasise gratitude as an essential moral virtue (Ubuntu philosophy) (Ramose 2002). This principle aligns with the biblical concept of χάρις, where receiving divine beneficence necessitates a response of loyalty, faithfulness and service (Mazamisa 1987:1–10; see also, Mbiti 1975). Luke 8:1–3, when read through this lens, underlines the expectation that beneficiaries of divine patronage must actively engage in social and spiritual responsibilities rather than passively receiving grace.

Critical comparison of ancient and contemporary patron–client systems

The comparison between ancient Roman patron–client systems and those in contemporary African societies needs to be approached more critically. For purposes of this article, the comparison is between Nigeria and the South African context. While drawing parallels between the two is tempting, one must acknowledge the vast differences in their political, economic and cultural landscapes (Smith 2020:134). In ancient Rome, patron–client relationships were institutionalised and formalised, often taking the shape of legal contracts, public recognition and civic duties (Jones 2015:45). The patron, usually a wealthy and influential figure, had a clear, formal obligation to provide for the client, while the client was expected to offer loyalty and support, often in public and political spheres (Gibson 2017:123).

In contrast, modern African patron–client relationships tend to function less formally and more fluidly. These relationships are frequently embedded in kinship networks and informal social structures. While they might still involve political loyalty, patron–client ties in contemporary African societies are often shaped by ethnic, regional and local power dynamics rather than by a centralised system (Olatunji 2021:78). Therefore, the article should delve deeper into these differences – highlighting how modern patronage in Africa often intersects with both the legacy of colonialism and the ongoing struggles for resources, economic development and political representation (Chidubem 2018:56).

For instance, this article has investigated how patron–client relationships in contemporary African societies like Nigeria and South Africa are often a means of survival in contexts marked by poverty, political instability and the erosion of state services, which contrasts with the Roman system, which was more about maintaining social order and political stability within a relatively prosperous empire for the benefit of the minority elite group of that society (Carter 2008:1–14, see also Lee 2017:77). These contrasts attempted to give a sharper focus on how patron–clientism adapts to different historical and political contexts (Nguyen 2018:21).

Hermeneutical difference between ancient and contemporary cultures

Another critical point is the hermeneutical gap between the ancient and contemporary systems. The way patron–clientism is interpreted and understood today can be influenced by modern political ideologies, post-colonial struggles and socio-economic conditions that were not

present in ancient Rome (Mark 2016:45). Roman patron-clientism was structured within a broader system of public citizenship, where loyalty and support were often exchanged in formal settings like politics, public life and military service (Jones 2015:50). This system was not necessarily about addressing survival needs but rather about sustaining the status quo of a highly stratified society.

However, in some African communities (e.g. Nigeria and South Africa) today, patron–client relationships often exist in more informal spaces, such as within ethnic groups, local communities or through political party structures. These relationships are deeply tied to material needs, such as access to state resources, jobs and government services. Modern African patronage is also often linked to clientelistic politics, where political leaders provide material benefits in exchange for votes and loyalty (Smith 2020:134). Understanding these dynamics requires a hermeneutical shift incorporating contemporary socio-political issues into interpreting patron-clientism (Chidubem 2018:60).

So, this hermeneutical shift in interpreting patron-clientism involves moving beyond a purely historical or structural analysis of patronage systems to incorporate contemporary socio-political realities and the lived experiences of people in modern societies. This shift is essential in understanding how patron-client dynamics continue to operate in the complex socio-political environments of today's world, particularly in post-colonial Africa. Rather than merely relying on traditional, static interpretations of patron–client relationships as they appeared in ancient societies, this approach seeks to interpret these relationships through the lens of present-day challenges such as poverty, inequality, political instability and the struggle for democratic consolidation.

The idea of incorporating contemporary socio-political issues into the interpretation of patron-clientism underscores the importance of context in hermeneutics. In the case of modern African societies, it is essential to understand the historical, economic and cultural contexts that shape the form and function of patron–client relationships today. As Chidubem (2018:60) argues, patron–clientism in modern African politics cannot be fully understood without considering how it intersects with pressing contemporary issues such as neo-colonialism, economic dependency and ethnic politics. The dynamics of patron–client networks in Nigeria and South Africa, shaped by the legacies of colonial rule and the persistence of state weakness, demand a reinterpretation of patronage systems that takes into account their role in reinforcing political loyalty, managing resource distribution and maintaining political power in modern states.

Conclusion

The study likely concludes that Luke 8:1–3 reflects the dynamics of ancient patronage, where divine benefaction necessitates a response of gratitude and loyalty. It emphasises that the women, depicted as ἀσθενής (those without strength), were beneficiaries of Jesus' patronage and reciprocated through their service and support. The study emphasises that patron–client relationships were fundamental to ancient societies and remain relevant in contemporary African contexts, particularly in South Africa and Nigeria. Finally, it affirms that gratitude is the appropriate human response to divine gift-giving, reinforcing the theological and socio-cultural implications of patronage. African traditions of communal ethics, gratitude and patron–client dynamics provide a valuable interpretive framework for understanding the biblical text. The study further critiques prosperity gospel ideologies that commodify divine χάρις, advocating instead for a biblically grounded and contextually relevant theology that prioritises justice, equity and communal responsibility.

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Authors' contributions

M.H. and J.S.J. carried out the methodology, formal analysis, investigation and writing of the original draft. M.H. was responsible for resources, review and editing, and supervised the study. J.S.J. was responsible for conceptualisation.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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