HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

Grace in Second Clement: Priority, incongruity, superabundance, and reciprocity

Authors:
Devin Arinder[1]
Ernest van Eck[1]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Devin Arinder,
devin.arinder@tuks.co.za

Dates:
Received: 05 Mar. 2026
Accepted: 12 Apr. 2026
Published: 11 May 2026

How to cite this article:
Arinder, D. & Van Eck, E., 2026, 'Grace in Second Clement: Priority, incongruity, superabundance, and reciprocity', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 82(1), a11354. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v82i1.11354

Copyright:
© 2026. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Read online:
Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This article explores the concept of grace in the so-called Second Letter of Clement. Using John Barclay's taxonomy as a heuristic, the article aims to challenge the notion originally advanced by T.F. Torrance that the discourse lacks any discernible and appropriate understanding of grace. Instead, the analysis reveals that the often-overlooked Apostolic Father evidences grace in at least four ways regarding the gift of salvation: Priority, incongruity, superabundance, and most prominently, reciprocity (circularity). These 'perfections' or emphases establish a hierarchy of grace within the overall message, reflecting the communicative goal to evoke a just behavioural response to the gift of salvation. As a corollary, then, the discourse is further situated within a patronage framework that highlights the reciprocal facet of grace prevalent in early Christianity.

Contribution: The article outlines a hierarchy of grace in a document that was previously doubted to lack it, thereby strengthening Second Clement's position within a patronage framework and promoting the reciprocal facet of grace in early Christianity.

Keywords: Second Clement; grace; Apostolic Fathers; early Christianity; priority; incongruity; superabundance; reciprocity.

Introduction

Among scholars of the Apostolic Fathers, the so-called Second Letter of Clement has received less attention than its counterparts in the already understudied corpus. Although many reasons could be proposed for this neglect, one is the influential study by the eminent theologian Torrance (1996), *Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers*. It is there that Torrance concluded that *Second Clement's* supposed moralism 'does not leave any room for a doctrine of grace', a designation that its most recent commentator, Varner (2020:42), surmises has 'especially in evangelical circles, coloured an approach to the document for decades' (see also Tuckett 2012:79, n. 27).[1] Torrance's (1996) dismissive assessment is represented in the following more extensive remark:

> All that Christ has done, apparently, is to bring to men the expectation of salvation for which they may hope if they live righteously and fulfil all God's commandments. It is not enough to call him Lord, says the preacher; that will not save. Believers must learn to lead a holy and righteous life and regard the things of the world as not their own, otherwise nothing can deliver them from eternal punishment. (p. 129)

Given the doctrinal significance of 'grace' for post-Reformation scholars and Christianity more generally, it is perhaps no surprise that a document seemingly lacking it would be sidelined (cf. Harrison 2017:xxi–xxviii). After all, in what is often considered the earliest surviving sermon outside the New Testament, the concept is only scantily mentioned (i.e. 2 Clem 1.4, 13.4). How could a sermon or homily not even mention such a foundational concept as grace to the Christian faith?[2] Yet, Torrance's work and subsequent ones that dismissed the document on moralistic or 'legalistic' grounds appeared well before Barclay's (2015) landmark study (cf. Bultmann 2007:169–171). One of many well-received contributions from this work was the realisation that grace was widespread throughout the ancient world, especially in Second-Temple Judaism, but not 'everywhere the same' (see Barclay 2015:6; cf. Wyman 2025:21). Torrance's inevitable mistake lies in assuming an exclusive binary: Grace is either present or absent. But as this study contends and as Barclay's challenger, Mitchell (2017) agrees:

> [*I*]t is not enough to study 'grace' with a simple 'grace present, grace absent' pair of options, but instead one must look at grace under what sorts of definition (or roles). (p. 309)

1. Most recently, Arnold (2025:341–342) has critiqued Torrance's study but not grace directly; rather, he addresses his soteriology more broadly, focusing on justification and the relation between faith and works.

2. Although the document's sermonic or homiletic status remains a fairly widespread assumption (e.g. Arnold 2025:323; ed. Foster 2025:282), this is becoming a less-held position (see Kelhoffer 2015:83–108, 2025:66–67; Tuckett 2012:18–26).

By utilising John Barclay's six so-called 'perfections' of grace as a heuristic device, that is precisely what this article aims to do for *Second Clement* – namely, uncover the ways grace may be present in the discourse. The thesis is that grace is not only present, but also present in four ways relative to the gift of salvation: (1) as initiated by God and Christ; (2) as incongruous with the worth of the audience and the author; (3) as superabundant; and (4) as reciprocal in its obligations. These 'perfections', in turn, ultimately support Clement's communicative goal of evoking a response from his audience to salvation, further contributing to the ongoing reframing in Clementine scholarship of the discourse within a patron-client framework (see e.g. Kelhoffer 2013; Varner 2020).[3]

The subsequent exploration unfolds in two main stages. Firstly, Barclay's perfections of grace are established as the primary methodological framework for examining the document. Such discussion is crucial for situating grace within its ancient context as a viable concept for the discourse. Secondly, the four previously mentioned perfections are examined in order: (1) priority; (2) incongruity; (3) superabundance; and (4) reciprocity (circularity). Finally, a concluding section synthesises the findings by presenting a hierarchy of grace in the discourse along with brief implications for understanding the document's place in the early Christian movement.

Clement's social context of grace[4]

As a fundamental point of departure, it is well recognised that the concept of 'grace' in the ancient world was not primarily a theological or religious one, despite its modern connotations. Instead, it is less abstract and more basic usage, as DeSilva (2022:107) avers, was 'to speak of reciprocity among human beings and between mortals and God'. That is, the concept of grace and her lexical instantiations (e.g. χάρις, χαρίζομαι, δώρημα) were primarily relational terms, used within contexts or more specifically, semantic frames of the same to denote benefaction, gift or favour whether material or immaterial (e.g. services) (see e.g. Gygax 2013:46). Harrison's (2017) extensive study demonstrates as much, reflecting in his wide-ranging survey of inscriptions (e.g. honorific decrees), papyri, Second-Temple Jewish literature, Septuagint (LXX) and early philosophers, among others (see also e.g. Danker 1982).

More focused and frequently cited treatments on gift-giving include *De Beneficiis* [On Benefits] by the philosopher Seneca and *De Officiis* [On Duties] by the Roman orator Cicero. Seneca, in particular, idealised the relational outcomes of gift-giving dynamics, somewhat famously referring to them as the 'chief bond of society' (Seneca, *Ben*. 1.4.2). What Seneca understood was that the practice of gift-giving was vital for maintaining relationships, which may be why early Christians naturally adopted the concept to express their relationships with one another and with their God.[5]

The basic relational evocations of grace are especially relevant to *Second Clement*, since, as mentioned previously, the document has recently been reframed on the terms of patronage. As several recognise, it is not unreasonable to say that patronage, or more broadly 'benefaction', served as the default cultural experience for conventionalising gift-giving dynamics and thus, consequently, the associated semantics of grace (see e.g. Barclay 2015:35–39; DeSilva 1999). Furthermore, as Wyman (2025:21) recently quipped in a play on Barclay's line, 'benefaction is everywhere but not everywhere the same'.[6] In an earlier article by the present authors, it was shown that a discourse-level patron-client frame could elicit coherence from Clement's message (Arinder & Van Eck 2026). A higher-resourced 'patron' role, filled by God and Christ, and a dependent 'client' role, filled by the audience and author, can account for all the main entities spanning the scope of the discourse. Such re-framing provides a strong basis that grace is embedded in the document, even though terms like χάρις [grace], δωρεά [gift], and their cognates only occur precisely twice (2 Clem 1.4, 13.4).[7] The frame, in a sense, enables Clement to discuss grace without overtly doing so because it is inherent to the patron-client frame itself, which crucially *does* have recurring lexical symbols within its own semantic domain.[8] However, the mere presence of grace in *Second Clement* should be a relatively unsurprising baseline; the more critical question this article considers is in what form or 'perfection' is that grace expressed?

Borrowing from Burke (1954, 1966), Barclay uses the term 'perfection' to capture the various ways grace instantiates. A 'perfection' so defined 'refers to the tendency to draw out a concept to its endpoint or extreme, whether for definitional clarity or for ideological advantage' (Barclay 2015:67). In essence, it represents the tendency for authors to stress or draw attention to one or more facets of grace for their communicative purposes. There is a question, however, as with any taxonomic attempt, as to whether the definition can, in fact, accurately detect the targeted phenomenon. This is the basic question posed by Mitchell (2017), who first questions why it is assumed authors must necessarily push any given facet of grace to its endpoint or extreme and

3.For the sake of expediency, the author is referred to as 'Clement' throughout with a recognition that much uncertainty remains regarding the external circumstances of the document (see e.g. Peters 2021:202–203).

4.The heading 'social context of grace' parallels the sub-title of a chapter in DeSilva (2022:96).

5.Harrison (2017:2) makes a similar point in his introduction. It is not insignificant that Paul in particular, *chooses* χάρις [grace] instead of ἔλεος [mercy] as his default marker of human and divine beneficence, especially when forms of ἔλεος/ἐλεάω were the term typically used in the LXX for God's covenantal beneficence (i.e. חֶסֶד).

6.At times, 'patronage' and 'benefaction' may seem to be used interchangeably (see e.g. Neyrey 2005). However, 'benefaction' can be distinguished from patronage based on scale, anonymity, and public-facing nature. Patronage can be considered a type of benefaction involving a more personal and durative relational aspect (see DeSilva 2022:103; Saller 2002:1). Both, however, are forms of asymmetrical reciprocity between two unequal parties (see Crook 2020:45–47).

7.Importantly, however, the first instance, a verb form of χαρίζομαι (i.e. ἐχαρίσατο), contributes to a concentration of surface forms within the semantic domain of patronage at the outset of the discourse that serve to activate the patron-client frame. There, Clement proclaims, 'For he (i.e. Christ), gave us the light' (2 Clem 1.4). Any translation from *Second Clement* is original unless otherwise indicated.

8.These include, for example, forms of λαμβάνω (2 Clem1.2, 1.5, 8.4, 11.7, 16.1), δίδωμι (2 Clem 1.3, 1.5, 2.1, 8.5, 9.7, 9.10, 15.4, 17.7), ὀφείλω (2 Clem 1.3, 4.3), μισθόν (2 Clem 1.5, 3.3, 9.5, 11.5, 15.1), and as discussed below, forms of ἀντιμισθία (2 Clem 1.3, 1.5, 9.7, 11.6, 15.2) (see Arinder & Van Eck 2026:4; Elliott 2003:152).

second, whether the categories are granular enough to sufficiently taxonomise all the possible ways that the concept of grace might manifest.[9]

To Mitchell's concerns, more recent developments in communicative theory may provide some additional elucidation and support for the use of the categories. In particular, the communicative principle of relevance from relevance theory identifies authors' natural proclivity to construct messages with 'optimal relevance'. In other words, communicators, of all types, naturally, though not always successfully, construe their messages in accord with their intended effect on the recipient (see Clark 2013:98–104; Evans 2019:380–382).[10] What this means is that since communicative intent is the motivating force, it may or may not be necessary to draw any particular concept out to its 'endpoint'; rather, such rhetorical strategies, if present, are contingent upon the author's broader communicative goals. Put differently, the author's motivation to perfect a particular facet of grace is not constrained solely to 'definitional clarity' or 'ideological advantage', as Mitchell intuits, but rather more broadly, the communicative intent motivating the message. This relevance approach to communication can then explain why Barclay (2017:337) finds discourses about divine gifts to demonstrate a penchant towards perfection; likely, it is because gods are naturally perceived as superseding human gift-giving capacity and power. While he agrees that the categories may be too simplistic to capture all possible instantiations of the concept, he nevertheless maintains that the categories provide an effective set of lenses for uncovering how an author construes grace in a *particular text*. This article concurs, and still a slight refinement may be offered: Once a particular perfection of grace is identified, an author's use of the concept may be further specified with a discourse-relevant goal. In this way, too, the six perfections below are not intended to determine source dependence but rather serve as heuristic categories to explore how grace is used in accordance with Clement's overall aim of evoking a response to salvation:

- **Superabundance:** Grace as extravagant and immeasurable in scale, significance or duration (e.g. huge, lavish, unceasing, long-lasting, etc.) (Barclay 2015:70–71, 2020:13–14)
- **Singularity:** Grace as inherently good and benevolent; the giver's sole modus operandi is categorically good and benevolent (Barclay 2015:70–71, 2020:14)
- **Priority:** Grace as initiated and unobliged by a prior gift (Barclay 2015:71–72, 2020:14–15)
- **Incongruity:** Grace as unconditioned and unaligned with the worth of the recipient (2015:72–73, 2020:15)
- **Efficacy:** Grace as sufficient for enabling the achievement of its purposes and intent (Barclay 2015:73–74, 2020:15–16)
- **Reciprocity (circularity):** Grace not as 'unconditional' but as expectant of some kind of return (Barclay 2015:74–75, 2020:16–18)

9.Mitchell's (2017:314) counterproposal is a 'series of tensions along a spectrum of ideals that are constantly being negotiated in a variety of ways and relations across a dynamic temporal field in cultural forms in the ancient Mediterranean'.

10.The precise 'communicative principle of relevance' is formulated as 'every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance' (Sperber & Wilson 1995:260).

Perfections of grace

Clement does not explicitly draw attention to the 'efficacy' or 'singularity' of the gift, and thus, with the methodological framing in place, it is to the other four facets that the analysis now turns: (1) priority; (2) incongruity; (3) superabundance; and (4) reciprocity (circularity).

Priority

The initial chapter of *Second Clement* sets the trajectory for the rest of the message. Without any of the typical epistolary prescripts, the discourse launches into what has been aptly referred to as 'one of the highest christological claims in the entire corpus of the Apostolic Fathers' (Arnold 2025:323). Clement proclaims:

> [1]Brothers and sisters, in this way, it is necessary for us to think about Jesus Christ as [*we do*] of God, as 'Judge of the living and the dead.' And it is necessary for us not to trivialise our salvation. (2 Clem 1.1)

Observably, these opening statements establish the main topics of the discourse, which remain within his purview throughout. Quite literally, in keeping with the temporal criteria of the priority facet of grace, the discourse begins with the two gift-giving patrons: Christ and, by implication, God. Still to come, further explicit evidence of Christ's unprompted gift appears later in this initial section. Consider the more extended quote, whose resonances will be revisited in other facets as well:

> For he gave us the light. As a father, he called us sons. When we were perishing, he saved us. Therefore, what praise should we give him, or what repayment for what we have received? We were maimed in our understanding, worshipping stones and wood and gold and silver and copper, the products of men, and our whole life was nothing except dead. Therefore, having been surrounded in darkness and [*our*] vision full of mist, by his will, we saw again, putting off that cloud which had covered us. For he had mercy on us and being moved to compassion, he saved [*us*], despite seeing in us much deception and destruction and without any hope of salvation, except what comes from him. For, he called us, who did not exist, and willed out of what was not – us. (2 Clem 1.4–8)

Since priority concerns the timing of the giver's actions, the determining question is *when* the audience was given the light, *when* they were called, and ultimately, *when* they were 'saved'. Given that the most explicit linguistic expression of the gift is forms of σῳζω [save], from an exegetical perspective, it should be noted that both instances (2 Clem 1.4, 1.7) are preceded by participles functioning as circumstantial frames (i.e. 'ἀπολλυμένους', 'σπλαγχνισθείσ'). Positioned before the main verb (i.e. ἔσωσεν), these participles serve, as Runge (2010:250) states, to 'set the stage for the main action that follows'. Namely, prior to being saved, the audience and Clement himself (i.e. 'we') *were perishing* (2 Clem 1.4, cf. 1.6,

2.7, 15.1, 17.1), and Christ, *having been moved to compassion*, acted to save them (2 Clem 1.7). From these two instances alone, then, it can be inferred that nothing on the audience's part pre-empted their own salvation. They are instead inscribed as the patients rather than the agents of divine initiative. This point is no less clear in the final sentence of the closing chapter, where Clement states, 'he called us, *who did not exist*, and willed out of what was not – us' (2 Clem 1.8, emphasis added).

It is so apparent in the opening chapter of the discourse that salvation was uninitiated that one might rhetorically wonder how it could be otherwise. After all, it is in this first chapter where Torrance (1996:132) concedes some 'genuine Christian thought'. Nevertheless, one may point out that although the priority of grace is ostensibly present, it is not as foregrounded as it could be throughout the rest of the discourse (cf. Eph 1:4–5; see Goodrich 2023:108–109). That is, the author does not continually revisit or emphasise the priority of salvation, and yet, its unprovoked nature remains presupposed after its initial declaration (i.e. 2 Clem 1.4; cf. Barclay 2020:73). This is particularly the case in the periodic reminder of the audience's 'calling'. At the start of the fifth chapter, it is Christ who again 'called' the audience (2 Clem 5.1); in the tenth, it is the Father (2 Clem 10.1); and in the sixteenth, it is God once more (2 Clem 16.1; see also 2 Clem 1.2, 2.7, 3.1, 9.3, 9.5).[11] In each case, the audience is the one who is called, subtly tying back to the first chapter and simultaneously dispelling notions of moralism since they did not 'work' to gain Christ and God's favour. At the same time, that unbalanced contribution to the relationship exemplifies an asymmetry typical of patron–client relationships (see e.g. Crook 2020:45; Saller 2002:1). The under-resourced clients are mismatched in relation to their supreme patron, as especially comes to the fore in the next facet of incongruity.

Incongruity

Going hand in hand with the priority of grace is the fact that the gift of salvation was incongruous with the audience's own merit or worthiness. Despite being understood as a central, if not defining, facet of the Pauline message of grace, one should not presume *a priori* incongruity to be the *sine qua non* of all early Christian expressions of the same (see e.g. Goodrich 2023:106; see also Chester 2025:215–216). Thiessen (2022), for example, argues that Luke's depiction of Cornelius in Acts appears to suggest that his character in some sense merited the subsequent gift of the Holy Spirit (see Ac 10:23–48). Nevertheless, as will be shown, there is an utter mismatch between Clement's gift of salvation and the worth of the recipients in line with Paul's own emphases (e.g. Rm 5).

Not completely unlike modern financial investment strategies, in the ancient world, it was prudent to select recipients who could in some way make the effort worthwhile for the giver (see e.g. DeSilva 2022:111–112). Often this was calculated on account of the recipient's likelihood to reciprocate, in short, reflecting the need for the value of the recipient to be 'congruent' with the value of the giver and gift (see e.g. Barclay 2015:25).[12] What is found, however, throughout *Second Clement* is precisely the opposite. Again, beginning in the critical opening chapter, the author elaborates at great length on their prior state and condition, effectively underscoring their unworthiness. They were, as already mentioned, 'perishing' (2 Clem 1.4), and accompanying their demise was a dire state of confusion. They were, as he says, 'maimed' [πηροί] in their understanding and worshippers of idols, and as a result (i.e. οὖν) were 'surrounded in darkness' with their vision 'full of mist' before being rescued (2 Clem 1.6). Lest the audience forget, the audience is reminded once more in the final sentence that this saving was despite seeing in them 'much deception and destruction' (2 Clem 1.7).

Their prior state is summarily likened to 'death' [θάνατος] (2 Clem 1.6), a prior nonexistence (2 Clem 1.8) that starkly foils the life-giving power of the patrons (cf. Rm 4:18–25). Not only is God the 'Father of Truth' (2 Clem 3.1) to their confusion, but both God and Christ are those who subsequently have the power to bestow life eternal. For example, the church is likened to a 'barren' woman before children were 'given' [δοθῆναι] to her on account of their faith (i.e. 2 Clem 2.1–3; cf. Is 54:1 LXX).[13] Correspondingly, later there is an exhortation to choose to be from the 'church of life' (2 Clem 14.1). Moreover, God 'the Father', at one point, is characterised as a medical doctor who heals (2 Clem 9.7). This depiction arrives just after Clement's most explicit statement on the matter:

> So then, brothers and sisters, having done the will of the Father (i.e. God) and having kept the flesh pure and having observed the commands of the Lord (i.e. Christ), we will receive eternal life. (2 Clem 8.4)

The examples accumulate over the course of the message, contrasting the life-giving patrons with the necrotic state of the clients and demonstrating the asymmetrical relationship through an imbalance in the most precious resource: Life itself. For a God who expects a just behavioural response in return, these clients appear a most risky investment. Still, as latent in the injunction immediately above, the incongruence between the audience and the giver with the gift is decidedly penultimate. Throughout, the author encourages the audience to become, in a sense, 'congruent' with the value of the gift. At a particularly prominent point in the discourse, Clement urges the audience to 'compete' [ἀγωνίζομαι] in an 'imperishable' [ἄφθαρτον] competition for a crown – a kind of

11. That both God and Christ, at different places, share a 'calling' function, evidences their overlapping patron role in the overall discourse (see Arinder & Van Eck 2026:5).

12. Gygax (2013) says, particularly in ancient Greece, 'there was little ambiguity about the fact that gifts required gifts, and not just any gifts but equivalent gifts, that is gifts that, evaluated from the perspective of the costs for the reciprocating group or person and the giver's risks and benefits, represented equivalent acts of generosity and solidarity'.

13. Question exists as to the precise nature and referent of 'church' [ἐκκλησία] in this section (see e.g. Kelhoffer 2016:274–275; Lindemann 1992:204; Pratscher 2007:77; Tuckett 2012:141–144; Vall 2025:366; Varner 2020:58–59). Whether the lexeme represents a local or global community, what's crucial for this article is that the audience understands themselves as part of that entity.

epithet for the rewards of future salvation, which undoubtedly entails eternal life (2 Clem 7.1–3; cf. 1 Cor 9:24–27; see Varner 2020:81–85).[14] In this way, too, the incongruence of the gift is not 'perfected', to the extent that it is, merely for perfection's sake, but rather to motivate a response and support Clement's overall communicative goal. Although they may be most unworthy now, therein lies an opportunity ahead to 'take on the straight path' (2 Clem 7.3), become 'just' (2 Clem 11.1), and consequently reap the full benefits of the patron–client relationship. This present incongruity, paired with incentivised congruity, encapsulates the message in what several see as the concluding self-reflection of the discourse:

> For also I myself am utterly sinful and have not yet fled temptation, but while still being surrounded by the tools of the devil, I am eager to pursue righteousness, so that I may at least be able to come near it, being in fear of the coming judgement (2 Clem 18.2).[15]

Superabundance

Even if less perfected than either the priority or incongruity facets, once the dramatic mismatch between the audience and author with God and Christ is grasped, the superabundance of the gift emerges most intuitively. Since the gift of salvation is unprompted (i.e. priority) and unaligned with the merit of Clement and the audience (i.e. incongruent), it is therefore already by default 'superabundant'. That is to say, the gift is already lavish and extravagant, nearly beyond imagination for such unworthy recipients. In a most fundamental way, the gift is *at least* twofold in its accentuations. Not only are the clients originally saved through the initiation of the relationship, but if the relationship is sustained, they will invoke a second gift: Deliverance from future judgement (see 2 Clem 17.1–6; cf. 6.7; cf. Torrance 1996:128). In this way, the presumption of a superabundant giver already plays a pivotal role in Clement's purpose of evoking a response.

Yet, beyond this wider instantiation, the facet surfaces in at least two specific places in the discourse. Firstly, directly after encouraging his audience to 'pursue virtue' (2 Clem 10.1), 'leave behind evil' (2 Clem 10.1) and 'flee ungodliness' (2 Clem 10.1), he warns of those who prefer the 'current pleasures to the coming promise' (2 Clem 10.3). This is because, as he explains, 'they do not know what great torment the present pleasure brings and what enjoyment the coming promise brings' (2 Clem 10.4). In short, they fail to recognise the superabundant nature of the giver. What might these elusive promises entail? Clement never fully divulges, but he does tease if they respond appropriately to the gift of salvation, 'they will receive the promises that "ear has not heard, nor eye seen, nor has entered the human heart"' (2 Clem 11.7; cf. Is 64.3 LXX; 1 Cor 2:9). The extravagance, it seems, is beyond natural human perception, reflecting the gift's immeasurable scale. In the second specific instance of superabundance, he similarly previews:

> So great is the life and immortality this flesh is able to share in when the Holy Spirit is joined with it; no one is able to express or to speak what the Lord has prepared for his chosen ones. (2 Clem 14.5)

Although commentators express uncertainty, a few see this concealed description as completing the earlier remark on promise (i.e. 2 Clem 11.7; see e.g. Pratscher 2007:189; Tuckett 2012:258). From a discourse standpoint, this aligns most coherently with Clement's overall message. Like the other facets, this 'perfection' aims to motivate the audience's response. Clement renders clear that the benefits of maintaining the patron-client relationship extend well beyond future deliverance from judgement. Why would the audience not seek to respond?

Reciprocity (circularity)

If any facet of grace in *Second Clement* warrants a fully 'perfected' status, it is that of the circularity of the gift. While many, including Barclay, have laboured to demonstrate that a return was innate to gift-giving practices, Clement explicates the dynamic, perhaps more thoroughly than many other early Christian writings (see e.g. Gygax 2013:45–46). One already recognised distinctive feature of *Second Clement* is the concept of 'repayment', reflected in lexemes of the otherwise quite rare ἀντιμισθία [repayment] (see Kelhoffer 2013). Although it appears only twice in the New Testament (Rm 1:27; 2 Cor 6:13), noun forms occur five times throughout this single discourse – the only such occurrences in the entire AF corpus (i.e. 2 Clem 1.3, 1.5, 9.7, 11.6, 15.2).[16] From the outset, then, this evidence hints at Clement's tendency to 'perfect' the concept rather than leave it more implicit. From the perspective of relevance theory, it can be inferred that this is precisely because the concept holds particular pertinence to his overall communicative purpose.

As Clement implores from the start of the discourse, the audience has unnecessarily 'trivialised' the gift of salvation (2 Clem 1.1). That is, they have made light of it and suppressed its significance. Thus, it is no surprise that the first instance of repayment appears early on in the message. After his initial exposition of salvation, Clement asks rhetorically: 'Therefore, what repayment will we give him?' (2 Clem 1.3). Keen readers should not dismiss the choice of linguistic construction as inconsequential for discerning Clement's emphases. Instead, such rhetorical questions provide linguistic clues precisely because they function as what Runge (2010:64–66) calls 'forward-pointing' devices. They effectively steer the audience's response and direct their attention – 'Or what fruit is worthy of that which he has given us? And what *holy works* do we owe him?' (2 Clem 1.3, emphasis added). It is through their 'holy works' [καρπὸν ἄξιον] that the audience is obligated to repay the patron; they

14.A concentration of six hortatory subjunctive forms in 2 Clement 7.1–3, combined with the disruption in information flow following a primarily expository section (2 Clem 6.3–9), suggests this represents a peak of the hortatory discourse (see Longacre & Hwang 2012:173). According to Gathercole (2023:44), the imagery of competition to express salvation for the righteous was not all uncommon, particularly in early Jewish writings (see e.g. *T. Job* 4.4–11).

15.Several Clementine scholars regard the final two chapters (19–20) as unoriginal (see e.g. Kelhoffer 2018; Lindemann 1992:255–256; Pratscher 2007:18–21).

16.Kelhoffer (2013:441) says the prefix ἀντί is 'emblematic of a reciprocal transaction'.

are to reciprocate the gift through their embodied virtue. Similarly, another instance of 'repayment' appears in a second rhetorical question. Clement reiterates, 'What praise should we give him, or what *repayment* for what we have received?' (2 Clem 1.5, emphasis added). These questions, posed in a parallel manner to emphasise their importance, highlight his primary concern: Their response to the gift of salvation.

This theme of reciprocity continues throughout the other instances of ἀντιμισθία [repayment]. Whereas initial instances directed repayment to Christ, repayment is later conceptualised as a return to God, the great healer (2 Clem 9.7). Again, Clement utilises a forward-pointing question to advance his point. Repayment of 'what kind?', he asks, before proceeding to answer: 'change from a sincere heart' (2 Clem 9.7). The audience is then later reminded of the overall circular dynamic of the relationship: 'For faithful is the one who promised to repay each for their works' (2 Clem 11.6). The final instance of ἀντιμισθία provides clear finality: 'For this is the repayment we have to repay the God who created us: If the one who speaks and hears both speaks and hears with faith and love' (2 Clem 15.2). Apparently, in Clement's economy of salvation, reciprocity is expected through just behaviour.

Apart from the distinctive 'repayment' language in the surface structure, this facet of grace can also be recognised on a broader conceptual level. In fact, a key point of the discourse is that the audience and the author's eschatological fate rest on their ability to offer a return to the patrons. Ultimately, those who do not succeed will not receive a reward in an imperishable 'crown' (2 Clem 7.3) and evade future judgement (2 Clem 17.1–6; see also 4.1). As Clement asks at one point, 'who will be our advocate if we are not found having holy and just works?' (2 Clem 6.9). Some scholars have understood the occasion of the document as a kind of doctrinal polemic, especially in an anti-gnostic direction (e.g. Donfried 1974). However, based on the perfection of the circularity of the gift of salvation throughout the document, the 'doctrinal' issue, if it exists, could just as well be seen as a misunderstanding of salvation and thus grace, whether or not that misunderstanding had any 'gnostic' influence. Fundamentally, the audience must grasp that great gifts obligate a responsibility to return. This is ultimately what it means to 'trivialise' salvation (2 Clem 1.1), 'think little' of Jesus (2 Clem 1.2), and why a 'change in mindset' is necessary lest judgement ensue (see 2 Clem 8.1–3, 9.8, 13.1, 15.1, 16.1, 17.1).

Conclusion

Altogether, while many aspects of *Second Clement* will likely continue to elude scholars' preferred precision, one aspect should not: That the document is saturated with grace. Despite Torrance's dismissive assessment, grace is not only present but present in *at least* four of John Barclay's 'perfections': Priority, incongruity, superabundance and reciprocity. Naturally, not all facets of grace are 'perfected' to the same degree in the discourse, and at last, a hierarchy of grace can be outlined based on the analysis above. At the lowest level is the facet of superabundance. While the extravagance and exuberant scale of the gift are undoubtedly evident, especially in the previewed outcome of God's preparations for his beloved recipients (2 Clem 11.7, 14.5), it remains only minimally 'perfected'. More prominent are the priority and incongruity of salvation. God and Christ acted first (i.e. priority) to rescue the audience and author from their rather inopportune state (i.e. incongruence) (e.g. 2 Clem 1.4–8). In this way, both reach a comparable level of perfection within the overall message, but the latter surpasses the former due to its close connection with the maximally perfected reciprocal facet. By repeatedly urging a just behavioural response to salvation, Clement effectively beckons the audience to become 'congruent' with the gift by embodying the character of their patrons (e.g. 2 Clem 1.3, 1.5). What Clement does not explicate is whether the gift itself achieves this goal (i.e. efficacy) or whether the givers are always inherently benevolent and good (i.e. singularity). This, of course, does not mean these facets are outside Clement's understanding of grace, nor that these perfections are not implicated or assumed in his message; it simply indicates that, as a natural communicator, they did not serve his ultimate aim of evoking a reciprocal response.

One of Mitchell's (2017:315) suggested categories in response to Barclay's heuristic is 'gift as entailing obligation', of which *Second Clement* could be seen as the prototypical representative. Therein, readers will not encounter a Western idealised 'pure' gift that expects no response, but rather a salvation that arrives 'unconditioned' yet not 'unconditional' or free from obligation (see Barclay 2017:332; see also Crook 2013:69–73). It can be seen that Torrance's essentialisation of the non-circularity of grace proved to be detrimental not only to the other facets of grace, but also to seeing grace as a whole in the document. *Second Clement* is not an opaque moralistic test of early Christianity, but one that fits naturally as a testament to grace within a system of divine patronage – a now regularly recognised feature of early Christianity. As such, it deserves more careful study as an authentic expression of grace in the early Christian movement.

Acknowledgement

This article is based on research originally conducted as part of Devin Arinder's doctoral thesis titled 'Discourse as Reciprocity: A Cognitively Informed Text-Linguistic Analysis of Second Clement', submitted to the Department of New Testament and Related Literature, University of Pretoria, in 2026. The thesis was supervised by Ernest Van Eck. The manuscript has since been revised and adapted for journal publication. The original thesis is currently unpublished and was not publicly available online at the time of publishing this article.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Devin Arinder: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. Ernest Van Eck: Supervision. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Pretoria Research Ethics Committee (No. T008/24).

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The authors declare that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

Arinder, D. & Van Eck, E., 2026, 'An apostolic enigma? Dispelling the incoherence of Second Clement through the patron–client frame', *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 82(1), a11027. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v82i1.11027

Arnold, B., 2025, 'Soteriology in the apostolic fathers', in P. Foster (ed.), *The apostolic fathers*, pp. 319–344, Zondervan Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.

Barclay, J.M.G., 2015, *Paul and the gift*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Barclay, J.M.G., 2017, 'The gift and its perfections: A response to Joel Marcus and Margaret Mitchell', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 39(3), 331–344. https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X17689991

Barclay, J.M.G., 2020, *Paul and the power of grace*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Burke, K., 1954, *Permanence and change: An anatomy of purpose*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Burke, K., 1966, *Language as symbolic action: Essays on life, literature, and method*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Bultmann, R., 2007, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1, Baylor University Press, Waco, TX.

Chester, S.J., 2025, *Paul through the eyes of the reformers: Living under grace*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Clark, B., 2013, *Relevance theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Crook, Z.A., 2013, 'Fictive giftship and fictive friendship in Greco-Roman society', in M.L. Satlow (ed.), *The gift in antiquity*, pp. 61–76, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA.

Crook, Z.A., 2020, 'Patronage', in Z.A. Crook (ed.), *The ancient Mediterranean social world: A sourcebook*, pp. 45–58, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Danker, F.W., 1982, Benefactor: *Epigraphic study of a Graeco-Roman and new testament semantic field*, Clayton Publishing House, St. Louis, MO.

DeSilva, D.A., 1999, 'Patronage and reciprocity: The context of grace in the New Testament', *Ashland Theological Journal* 31, 32–84.

DeSilva, D.A., 2022, *Honor, patronage, kinship, and purity: Unlocking new testament culture*, 2nd edn., IVP Academic, Downers Grove, IL.

Donfried, K.P., 1974, *The setting of Second Clement in early Christianity*, Brill, Leiden.

Elliott, J.H., 2003, 'Patronage and clientage', in R.L. Rohrbaugh (ed.), *The social sciences and new testament interpretation*, pp. 144–168, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA.

Evans, V., 2019, *Cognitive linguistics: A complete guide*, 2nd edn., Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Foster, P. (ed.), 2025, 'Christological perspectives in the Apostolic Fathers', in *The Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 277–318, Zondervan Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.

Gathercole, S., 2023, 'Gift and reward', in E. Adams, D. Bertschmann, S.J. Chester, J.A. Linebaugh & T.D. Still (eds.), *The new perspective on grace: Paul and the gospel after Paul and the gift*, pp. 34–48, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Goodrich, J.K., 2023, 'According to the riches of his grace', in E. Adams, D. Bertschmann, S.J. Chester, J.A. Linebaugh & T.D. Still (eds.), *The new perspective on grace: Paul and the gospel after Paul and the gift*, pp. 105–125, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Gygax, M.D., 2013, 'Gift-giving and power relationships in Greek social praxis and public discourse', in M.L. Satlow (ed.), *The gift in antiquity*, pp. 45–60, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA.

Harrison, J.R., 2017, *Paul's language of grace in its Graeco-Roman context*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR.

Kelhoffer, J.A., 2013, 'Reciprocity as salvation: Christ as salvific patron and the corresponding "payback" expected of Christ's earthly clients according to the second letter of clement', *New Testament Studies* 59(3), 433–456. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688512000380

Kelhoffer, J.A., 2015, 'If Second Clement really were a "sermon," how would we know, and why would we care?: Prolegomena to analyses of the writing's genre and community', in M. Grundeken & J. Verheyden (eds.), *Early Christian communities between ideal and reality*, pp. 83–108, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.

Kelhoffer, J.A., 2016, 'Pigeonholing a prooftexter?: The citations in 2 Clement 2 and their allegedly "Gnostic" background', *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 107(2), 266–295. https://doi.org/10.1515/znw-2016-0014

Kelhoffer, J.A., 2018, 'How did Second Clement originally end?: A study of 2 clement 19–20 and the imitation of both first and Second Clement', *Early Christianity* 9(4), 432–483. https://doi.org/10.1628/ec-2018-0031

Kelhoffer, J.A., 2025, 'Second Clement', in P. Foster (ed.), *The apostolic fathers*, pp. 65–80, Zondervan Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.

Lindemann, A., 1992, *Die clemensbriefe* [The letters of Clement], Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.

Longacre, R.E. & Hwang, S.J.J., 2012, *Holistic discourse analysis*, 2nd edn., SIL International, Dallas, TX.

Mitchell, M.M., 2017, 'Gift histories', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 39(3), 304–323. https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X17689989

Neyrey, J.H., 2005, 'God, benefactor and patron: The major cultural model for interpreting the deity in Greco-Roman antiquity', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27(4), 465–492. https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X05055749

Peters, J., 2021, '1 and 2 clement', in M.F. Bird & S.D. Harrower (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to the Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 186–207, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Pratscher, W., 2007, *Der Zweite Clemensbrief* [The Second Epistle of Clement], Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.

Runge, S.E., 2010, *Discourse grammar of the Greek New Testament: A practical introduction for teaching and exegesis*, Lexham Press, Bellingham, WA.

Saller, R.P., 2002, *Personal patronage under the early empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Sperber, D. & Wilson, D., 1995, *Relevance: Communication and cognition*, 2nd edn., Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge.

Thiessen, M., 2022, 'A worthy Cornelius and divine grace: Complicating John Barclay's Paul and the gift', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 84(3), 462–479. https://doi.org/10.1353/cbq.2022.0090

Torrance, T.F., 1996, *The doctrine of grace in the Apostolic Fathers*, Wipf and Stock, Eugene, OR.

Tuckett, C.M., 2012, *2 Clement: Introduction, text, and commentary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Vall, G., 2025, 'Ecclesiology in the Apostolic Fathers', in P. Foster (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 345–371, Zondervan Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.

Varner, W., 2020, *Second Clement: An introductory commentary*, Cascade Books, Eugene, OR.

Wyman, D., 2025, *Benefaction in Galatians*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.