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Luke and the margins: A South African anti-imperial perspective

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The Gospel of Luke offers profound resonance with the pressing socio-economic realities confronting marginalised communities in contemporary South Africa. Although set in a vastly different historical and cultural context, Luke's narrative portrays a society where a small elite controlled land and resources. At the same time, most of the population endured extreme poverty, debt, and a lack of access to productive land. This situation parallels the struggles of impoverished and landless individuals in contemporary South Africa, a country facing a complex interplay of governance issues. These include corruption, political interference, a lack of accountability and public participation, as well as structural challenges such as resource constraints, inadequate infrastructure, and capacity limitations. The enduring legacies of apartheid, urban-rural divides, and socio-economic inequalities continue to hinder development and service delivery, while obstructing the vision of a better life for all. This scenario is reminiscent of the 1st-century Roman Palestinian context, where a combination of political domination, economic oppression, and corrupt leadership marginalised ordinary citizens and perpetuated their poverty. Thus, the Gospel of Luke provides a valuable lens through which to examine both the legacies of colonial rule in 1st-century Palestine and the colonial and apartheid legacies left by the Dutch and British settlers in South Africa.

Contribution: This article reflects on the legacies of colonialism in 1st-century Palestine, juxtaposing these legacies with those of post-colonial and post-1994 democratic South Africa, positing Luke's Gospel as a hopeful text to the marginalised communities in both situations.

Keywords: Gospel of Luke; 1st-century Palestine; South Africa; elites; poverty; economy; colonialism; apartheid; land issues.

Introduction

Setting the context: Lukan narrative and historical context

The Gospel of Luke presents a distinct textual challenge due to its temporal disconnection from the socio-historical milieu of its audience. Luke's narrative situates Jesus within the Palestinian context, yet Luke was aware of the broader geopolitical reality of Palestine as part of the Roman Empire (Lk 2:4; Scheffler 2011:118). This disconnect complicates the effort to bridge the world of Luke's readers with the historical setting of Jesus – a challenge long recognised by scholars employing form and redaction criticism (Moxnes 1994:379). Luke constructs a literary world that necessitates an exploration of his time's social structures and values.

A fundamental assumption in scholarship is that Luke wrote for a specific audience with identifiable characteristics. The text provides implicit information about its intended readership, driving academic efforts to delineate the Lukan community (Johnson 2013:129–130). To contextualise Luke' s audience, scholars compare the narrative environment with the socio-historical landscape of the ancient Mediterranean. Such an approach enables a nuanced understanding of Luke's theological and social motifs, linking the textual representation to historical realities (Johnson 2013:130; Moxnes 1994:380).

Luke's universalist motif supports this endeavour, as his Gospel was not meant for a single locale but for a global audience. This universality, though, should not obscure the immediate socio-political context in which he wrote, since an investigation into the economic conditions of the Roman Empire is essential for understanding Luke's writing (Scheffler 2011:118).

Luke's audience resided in an urban, eastern Mediterranean setting shaped by Hellenistic social structures, including honour and patronage (Moxnes 1994:379). His Gospel constructs an alternative identity for a diverse Christian community within this Greco-Roman framework.

Indications of Luke's location emerge from textual evidence, such as descriptions of houses and terminology reflective of the Hellenic diaspora (Stegemann 1991:81–84). The Lukan community was embedded in urban life, characterised by the typical social hierarchies of Greco-Roman cities (Moxnes 1994:381; Stegemann 1991:26).

Luke's depiction of urban life illustrates significant social stratification, where a small elite class held economic, political, and religious authority. This elite controlled the city's land and economic resources, while most of the population consisted of non-elites engaged in menial labour or living in precarious economic conditions (Moxnes 1994:381–382). In Eastern Roman cities, governance remained in the hands of local aristocracies, although they were subordinate to Roman imperial rule (Moxnes 1994:382). Greco-Roman aristocratic values were deeply entrenched in these urban centres, influencing social interactions and economic relationships.

Empirical data indicate that the demographic Luke identifies as 'poor' comprises a substantial majority, ranging from 55% to 82% of the population (King 2019:171). Luke's portrayal of economic classes aligns with these figures, with the poor occupying the bottom rung of society and the wealthy upper echelons. The socio-economic landscape of Luke's world suggests that his audience primarily consisted of individuals living at subsistence levels, shaping the Gospel's economic themes and theological emphasis (Rogers 2019:37).

First-century Roman Palestine

The socio-economic conditions of 1st-century Palestine remain a topic of scholarly debate, approached through archaeological investigations and social-scientific modelling. While archaeology offers tangible artefacts to reconstruct economic realities, social-scientific models focus on systemic structures such as taxation, monetisation, and land tenure. Luff (2019:145) argues that archaeological evidence suggests a prosperous Galilee without widespread poverty, whereas other models depict rural populations struggling under economic disparity. A significant limitation of archaeological research is detecting poverty, given that wealth leaves tangible traces while the poverty left fewer material remains (Luff 2019:147).

Jeremias (1969) and Oakman (2018) contribute valuable perspectives on the power dynamics of the 1st-century Jewish society. Jeremias (1969) outlines the socio-economic stratification of Jerusalem, distinguishing between the wealthy merchants, middle-class artisans, and the lower classes, including enslaved people and day labourers. His work remains influential in Lukan scholarship, offering insights into economic transactions and temple patronage (Jeremias 1969:100–102). Oakman (2018) adopts a materialist approach, applying concepts such as limited good and honour to analyse power structures in the Mediterranean world. He highlights the role of tax collectors and local elites in shaping the economic landscape (Oakman 2018:97–105).

Further investigations into Galilean and Judean communities reveal a complex socio-economic hierarchy. Luff (2019) notes that some villages exhibited urban characteristics, challenging the conventional rural-urban dichotomy. Sites like Magdala demonstrate substantial economic activity, including industries such as olive oil production, flour milling and glass manufacturing, contradicting the notion that Galileans were exclusively agrarian (Luff 2019:179). Jerusalem and Mount Carmel, however, emerged as luxury centres, housing priestly aristocrats who enjoyed economic privilege through temple taxation and trade networks (Luff 2019:180).

The integration of Palestine into the Roman Empire intensified economic stratification. Josephus attributes the Jewish Revolt (66–74 CE) partly to social tensions between elites and the impoverished masses – a fact demonstrated by the destruction of debt records during the Jewish Revolt, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with the economic order (Josephus, *B.J.* 7:260–261; see Goodman 2002:16). Judean apocalyptic literature similarly critiques the exploitation of the lower classes, as this undermined the equal social structure of subsistence-based societies (cf. McLaren 1998:127–178). The priestly elites, closely allied with Roman authorities, facilitated Palestine's cultural and economic Romanisation while securing their interests (Keddie 2019:152). The Herodian dynasty was key in granting land to elites and fostering a class of wealthy landlords (Keddie 2019:17).

The temple economy significantly contributed to the wealth concentration among Jerusalem's elites. Herod's monumentalisation of the temple increased its economic significance, attracting pilgrims who spent substantial resources on sacrificial offerings and temple-related services (Keddie 2019:152–153). High priests operated within a Roman framework, enjoying privileges akin to provincial magistrates. This institutionalised inequality within the temple system reinforced economic disparities (Gordon 1990:241). Temple wealth accumulated through tithes, taxes, and trade, positioning priestly families as economic gatekeepers (Josephus 6:282; see Keddie 2019).

Under Roman rule, urbanisation introduced consumer-driven economies that marginalised rural producers, while benefiting elite rulers, precipitating increased peasant indebtedness due to fluctuating agricultural yields, forcing farmers to mortgage land to elites (cf. Horsley 2014:37–38). Debt servitude and land dispossession were common consequences of economic disparity.

Roman taxation policies imposed additional burdens on the peasant majority. Heavy taxation during the transition from the Republic to the Empire disproportionately affected non-elites, with local aristocrats securing tax exemptions and administrative control (Sullivan 1990; see Keddie 2019:112). Priestly elites benefited from Roman taxation and religious tithes, consolidating their wealth while rural populations struggled as the Roman taxation system disproportionately burdened the poor

while enriching the elite (Keddie 2019:128–129). High-ranking tax collectors, often linked to priestly families, amassed fortunes by overseeing economic transactions (Keddie 2019:141).

The archaeological record provides further insights into wealth disparity. Elite residences in Jerusalem featured Roman-style architecture, imported goods, and lavish decorations, reflecting their integration into the broader Mediterranean economy (Luff 2019:185). Taxation and trade networks reinforced elite dominance, with urban centres benefiting at the expense of rural producers (Keddie 2019:151).

Overall, the Roman imperial economy entrenched social stratification in Palestine. While economic growth benefited elites, most of the population remained marginalised. These realities contextualise Luke's emphasis on wealth renunciation and the 'good news to the poor', highlighting the socio-economic conditions that shaped early Christian thought.

The Roman imperial context of Luke

The New Testament, particularly Luke's Gospel, was written under Roman domination, where economic and social control was exercised through oppressive taxation and census-taking (Seo 2015). Luke's inclusion of this census in the nativity story (Lk 2:1–2) is significant, as it highlights economic exploitation under imperial rule (Wi 2017). Political struggle, social marginalisation, and physical and mental suffering are all linked to Luke's concern for the poor (Scheffler 2011). Wi (2017) posits that three principal concepts effectively characterise the socio-economic landscape of Roman Palestine: the concentration of land ownership, the escalation in the number of tenants and day labourers, and the pervasive indebtedness among the peasantry. According to Wi (2017), the profiling of landowners demonstrates that socioeconomic privilege was inextricably linked to political and religious authority, with the rise of massive estates and landowners mirrored by the rise of landlessness. The peasantry's over-indebtedness, caused by the ever-growing inequality between the wealthy landowners and landless peasants, resulted in a vicious economic cycle rooted in social, political, and religious factors, with the wealthy elites exploiting the poor in land tenure, turning them into debt slaves, tenants, or day labourers (Wi 2017).

Luke explicitly links Jesus's birth to the Roman taxation system. By underscoring the colonised Jewish population's socio-economic hardships, Luke's focus on wealth and poverty surpasses that of the other Gospels (cf. Pickett 2009:425). King (2019:40) demonstrates Luke's centring of the economic justice theme by revealing that nearly one-third of Luke's Gospel explicitly addresses economic matters, a proportion greater than in other synoptic traditions. Furthermore, many of Luke's economic references have no parallels in Matthew or Mark, making his economic critique a unique perspective (King 2019:43).

Luke is a counter-narrative against the backdrop of imperial society, subverting the dominant ethos and practices that underpin Greco-Roman society while presenting Jesus and his followers as representatives of a marginalised experience, advocating for a subaltern politics, namely the 'kingdom of God' (Pickett 2009:426).

Miller (2017) distinguishes between the 'conduct marginalised' (those like the tax collectors and prostitutes who are disdained and discarded by society due to their behaviour) and the 'condition marginalised' (those disdained and discarded by society because of their condition or station) in life. Women in general, and people experiencing poverty, specifically belonged to the latter category. Power dynamics are critical and must be considered when interpreting the Lukan text (Du Plessis 2010).

Luke's opinions on poverty are set against ancient Roman economics, obsessed with economic domination and expropriation of excess resources (cf. Scheffler 2011:117). Luke seeks to humanise the poor and disenfranchised whose dignity is violated by the active prevailing horrors of marginal existence in a hierarchical and stratified class-based society, immunised by the Roman imperial powers (Du Plessis 2010). Du Plessis (2010) sums up early Mediterranean societies as honour-shame-driven and controlled societies, enshrined in the patron-client paradigm with distinctions between the classes of haves and have-nots, valuable and worthless, rich and poor, significant and unimportant where dignity is not inherent in every human being, with power struggle between the several Empires that ruled the civilisation, as competing groups jostle constantly at odds with one another.

South African context

The weakness of most post-independence and post-liberation African countries has been the difficulty of fostering common citizenship between previous warring parties (Mamdani 1996). A collective South African sense of self has encountered hindrances due to racial disparities and the enduring consequences of the apartheid era, which result in many black individuals living in poverty while white individuals enjoy a superior economic status (Gumede 2021). This is because the twin pillars of the apartheid state, namely *colonial economic structures*, and its *dichotomised spatial structures*, were left intact at CODESA.

Mbeki (2004:29) characterises South Africa as a two nations country with two economies, with the first economy as modern and the primary source of the nation's wealth, actively integrated into the global market, resulting in a comparatively affluent white population that has access to advanced economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructures, irrespective of gender or geographic location. Conversely, the second economy (that poses a challenge to the first), often referred to as the marginalised economy, is defined by underdevelopment and contributes only a small fraction to the overall gross

domestic product (GDP). This latter economy predominantly impacts the black population, particularly women in rural areas, the broader black rural community, and individuals with disabilities, and results in making them face conditions of significant economic, physical, educational, communication, and infrastructural underdevelopment. This sector comprises a substantial segment of the population, particularly the most impoverished individuals in rural and urban areas. It remains structurally disconnected from the first economy and the global market, which hinders its ability to generate self-sustaining growth and development.

The historical development of South Africa mirrors that of other former settler colonies, where colonial occupation resulted in the systematic dispossession of indigenous communities (Delport & Lephakga 2016). The post-apartheid transition, particularly during the CODESA negotiations, prioritised political democratisation over radical socio-economic transformation. The National Party secured economic privileges for the white population, ensuring the persistence of structural inequalities (Adam & Moodley 1993). Although significant, the democratic transition, left major questions of social justice unresolved, leading to continued economic disparities (Szeftel 1994:458).

The legacies of colonialism, apartheid, and the transition to democracy have left South Africa with persistently high inequality since 1994. This posed into question the negotiated settlement at CODESA, which preserved the apartheid-era economic structures, disproportionately benefiting white South Africans while leaving black South Africans in systemic poverty. Despite political enfranchisement, the black majority continues to be excluded from economic participation, reinforcing patterns of inequality. The statistical data reflects the racialised economic divide, with over 90% of chronically poor individuals being black, in contrast to the predominantly economic elites that remain primarily white. Despite legislative efforts to address these issues, systemic inequality remains intact (Stats SA 2019).

Spatial inequality

Land dispossession has been central to South Africa's economic history. Apartheid-era policies created a dualistic agricultural system, benefiting white commercial farmers while marginalising black subsistence farmers, making post-apartheid South Africa's land ownership patterns highly skewed, with white South Africans continuing to own of the greater part of productive land. Since 1994, land reform initiatives, encompassing restitution, redistribution and tenure reform, have progressed slowly and have failed to achieve initial targets, such as the goal of redistributing 30% of the land (Nkwinti 2013). Numerous factors can be attributed to this failure, including the inadequate political will, ineffective implementation, and poor reform policy choices that hinder economic redress.

Critiques of these programmes highlight the limitations of the 'willing buyer, willing seller' market-based approach, inadequate post-settlement support that leads to project failures, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and the capture of benefits by elites (Muiu 2008:156). This slow pace continues to fuel extensive debates about mechanisms such as *expropriation without compensation* (EWC). The expropriation debate remains unresolved and leaves further exacerbating tensions over land distribution (Ntsebeza & Hall 2007).

The post-apartheid economic landscape of South Africa reflects enduring structural inequalities rooted in settler colonialism and apartheid. According to Netshitenzhe (2016; 2020), advancing socio-economic reform in South Africa after apartheid presents a complex and formidable challenge for the former liberation movement now in power. The country is characterised by deep historical divisions between the once-dominant white minority and the black majority, who have long endured systemic oppression. These efforts must unfold within the constraints of a small, globally integrated economy and a democratic capitalist framework, governed by a liberal constitution that guarantees equal rights for all. Nonetheless, Terreblanche (2002; 2012) asserts that achieving meaningful socio-economic justice is crucial for dismantling the entrenched inequalities that continue to shape South African society. While political democracy was achieved, economic transformation remains incomplete. Calls for an *Economic CODESA* reflect the need for a renewed socio-economic compact that addresses wealth redistribution and economic justice. Genuine reconciliation must accompany economic redress, including land reform, wealth redistribution, and structural changes to ownership patterns. The case of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1–10 offers a theological and moral precedent for restitution, emphasising that true justice requires material redress alongside symbolic reconciliation (Motuku 2023). A radical commitment to economic justice is necessary for South Africa to achieve genuine socio-economic equality and national unity.

Poverty and inequality

South Africa is often recognised as one of the world's most unequal countries, with inequality deeply rooted in racial disparity. Poverty remains a pressing concern, with Stats SA establishing the 2024 Upper-Bound Poverty Line at R1634 per person per month (Stats SA 2024). The challenge is compounded by high unemployment rates (45.5%), particularly among black youth (Stats SA 2024), which exacerbates poverty and social exclusion. South Africa continues to experience systemic social justice deficits and structural inequalities resulting from colonial and apartheid legacies, unfulfilled constitutional promises, and the failure of the democratic transition to translate the visionary ideals of a just and equitable society into reality (Madonsela, Quoted in Madonsela & Lourens 2019:17–18). The eradication of legal apartheid did not yield economic justice, nor address the critical issue of land redistribution (Madonsela 2024). This underscores the concept of 'unfinished business' in the liberation process, which is vital for analysing the ongoing

patterns of economic exploitation and land dispossession (Madonsela & Lourens 2019). Furthermore, it highlights the importance of a Lukan ethical framework that actively confronts and challenges these persistent structural injustices.

Reconciliation without justice

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), intended to reconcile South Africans but it neglected the issue of economic redress. The absence of mandatory reparations for the apartheid-era beneficiaries left black South Africans without tangible economic justice (Baron 2015). The TRC's failure to address structural economic inequalities led to what some scholars describe as *cheap reconciliation* – a process focused on symbolic gestures rather than material restitution (Boesak 2008). Many argue that genuine reconciliation in South Africa requires socio-economic restitution (Boesak 2008; Terreblanche 2012).

Skewed, unequal economic ownership patterns

Economic disparities in South Africa remain racialised. The democratic transition facilitated moderate economic growth, benefiting a small black elite but failing to alleviate widespread black poverty. Economic transformation policies, such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and affirmative action, have primarily benefited a small group of middle-class black individuals, leaving the majority economically marginalised. Post-apartheid South Africa continues to exhibit one of the world's highest levels of inequality, with persistent racial and class-based economic divides (Stats SA 2019).

Political economy and the role of capitalism

The persistence of white economic dominance, coupled with a globalised capitalist system, has limited the extent of economic transformation in South Africa (Terreblanche 2012). The political transition preserved capitalist structures, benefiting economic elites while maintaining deep socio-economic inequalities, resulting from the continued economic hegemony by a white minority, making South Africa's post-apartheid economy an ongoing experiment in compromise, making the notion of a decolonised post-apartheid South Africa a facade (cf. Terreblanche 2012).

Sins of ascendancy

Corruption and ineffective administration – particularly evident during the 'state capture' era – and limited state capacity present significant obstacles to development and the efficient delivery of services (Mamokhere 2023:2–3). The frequent and often volatile protests concerning service delivery throughout the country reflect deep public dissatisfaction with failures in local governance, including the lack of essential services such as water, sanitation, electricity, and housing, as well as a perceived erosion of the social contract between citizens and the government (Ragolane & Malatji 2024:371). The continuous hardships encountered by the urban poor are highlighted by grassroots movements that continue to fight against evictions and demand land, housing, and dignity, such as *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, which represents shack dwellers (Pithouse 2009:251).

Foundational paradigmatic and programmatic anti-imperial texts in Luke

Lukan freedom songs

True to the paradigmatic and programmatic nature of the salvation motif in Exodus, Zachariah, through the agency of the *Spirit*, envisaged a day in which Israel would be delivered from her colonising powers in the *Benedictus*. This would result in spiritual freedom from the Roman pantheon (Lk 1:74–75), social freedom from state interference in their domestic affairs (Lk 2:1–3), and political freedom from the brutal, oppressive Roman regime. It meant restoring the patriarchal land (Lk 1:71–73) and bringing economic freedom from Roman exploitation through taxation (Lk 2:1–3).

The *Magnificat* is a typical example of a concealed transcript or a politically unobtrusive written story, expressing resistance to the Roman government's intellectual, political, and ethical norms (Coles 2020). Green (1995:94) is right to suggest that a closer reading of Luke breeds an understanding that 'Salvation is pre-eminently, status reversal'. Coles (2020:58) rightfully perceives a motif of dissent in Luke's status reversal narratives, aimed at the 'promotion of an ideal of ontological, existential, and ethical justice for the marginal'.

The Baptist ethics

The genesis of John's ministry is carved within the historical-political setting of oppressive Rome with its client native collaborators. Luke positions the ministry of John within the geopolitical powers of his day (Wi 2017:127). By classifying the crowds who come to John's baptism according to their economic standing, Luke connects the historical-political situation with the socio-economic framework of his time (Wi 2017:128). The Baptist's message of 'good news to the poor' is carved in economic terms (King 2019:58). Luke thus alters John's preaching, giving primacy to socio-economic interests while relegating judgement to the background of his message (Scheffler 1990:21). Consequently, elimination of greedy exploitation resulting in acts of mercy and mutual sharing, crystallises the salvation of the poor in ordinary day to day life (Scheffler 1990:32). Luke does not only introduce the historical-political context for John's message through the inclusion of geo-political and local retainers in soldiers and tax-collectors, but with it, he reflects on their power abuse and economic exploitation (Wi 2017:130). The Gospel of Luke begins with an enthusiastic defence of God's preference for the poor (King 2019:74). Luke thus paints the hierarchical cycle of Roman economic exploitation and patronage network. This begins with the ruling Caesar, through the

imperial governors and to the local elite collaborators and retainers, to whom John calls for decisive action to radically improve the material conditions of the ordinary people as a mark of repentance. The only appropriate reaction, according to Luke, is a shift in behaviour that addresses 'specific social, moral, ethical, financial, and religious inequalities' (Pickett 2009:428).

The Nazareth manifesto

The Nazareth manifesto is a critical economic statement building on Mary's *Magnificat* as the foundational text, laying the seeds for the reversal motif. It credits God with authoring the reversals, changing Rome's empire into God's empire, while developing the reversal motif. The Lukan social justice concern in the salvation motif is embedded in the Isaianic text (particularly Is 44–66). It is echoed in the annunciation, *Magnificat*, *Benedictus* and Simeon's *Nunc dimittis* with Jesus in the Nazareth Manifesto, fulfilling justice and righteousness as a prophetic figure of Isaiah 61, the content of which demonstrates Jesus's concern for society's impoverished, marginalised and disenfranchised (cf. Afulike 2018:44).

In this first meeting, Jesus announces to his listeners that his entire ministry career will be devoted to economic redress and release from economic injustice (Pickett 2009:429).

Beatitudes

The essential theological component of Jesus's programme, apart from Nazareth's programmatic agenda (Lk 4:16–21), is Luke's Sermon on the Plain (Medina 2005:141). Accordingly, Luke canonised his hermeneutics, ethics, and theology in the Sermon on the Mount (Medina 2005:141–142). These teachings of Jesus are part of the narrative arc, laying the groundwork for a new social vision based on the divine generosity conveyed and exemplified by Jesus and other characters in the Gospel (Pickett 2009:430). The sermon prioritising the poor, marks Jesus's commitment to doing away with class distinctions and fostering equality in society (Ndekha 2020:7). The Sermon on the Plain is a good pledge to the poor and hungry, while the generosity of the audience is enlisted to address beggary and indebtedness (Lk 6:20–21), marking the beginning of Jesus's teaching of good news to the poor (King 2019:65).

Anti-imperial reading of Luke

Carter (2015) emphasises the subversive elements in Luke's text. Luke employs rhetorical strategies that subtly critique Rome while ensuring the survival of his community (Medina 2005).

Horsley (2004) suggests that Luke's use of 'Q' reflects peasant resistance, supporting the idea that Jesus's teachings were a veiled challenge to imperial rule. Luke does not explicitly call for revolt, but his Gospel offers an alternative vision of society, countering Rome's oppressive values with God's justice (Horsley 2004). Scott's theory of hidden transcripts helps reveal these underlying themes, showing that Luke's outwardly compliant language may conceal a more profound resistance (Coles 2020:42).

Luke's Gospel functions as a counter-narrative within the imperial context, presenting Jesus as a figure of resistance against Rome's socio-economic injustices (Pickett 2009:426). Medina (2005) argues that Luke's theology fosters colonial resistance, offering a complex response to Roman rule that incorporates both accommodation and defiance elements. His Gospel navigates life's challenges under imperial occupation, presenting an alternative framework for justice rooted in the Kingdom of God.

Luke focuses more on socio-political and economic concerns than any other New Testament writer (Scheffler 1990:21). Scholars highlight Luke's depiction of the Roman Empire's exploitative rule, particularly its oppressive taxation system and military dominance, which destabilised the Palestinian economy and led to widespread unrest, shaped by the contrasting ideologies of the ruling elite and the peasant masses (cf. Burrus 2009).

The Roman economy, centred on land ownership, created a stark economic divide between the elite and the working class, with the oligarchy accumulating wealth through heavy taxation, forcing peasants, artisans, and farmers into a cycle of exploitation. Scholars argue that Luke is less concerned with wealth and more with how it is acquired and used. His Gospel is incomprehensible outside the context of Roman rule, which serves as both its historical background and narrative framework (Seo 2015).

The influence of the Roman Empire permeates Luke's writings. He situates Jesus's ministry within the political structures of Roman rule (Carter 2015:202). The empire is not merely a backdrop but an active force that shaped socio-economic conditions.

A significant example is Luke's mention of the Roman census under Emperor Augustus, which increased taxation and social control (Seo 2015). Luke uniquely juxtaposes the birth of Jesus with this imperial taxation, reinforcing that Jesus's mission directly opposes the oppressive structures of the empire (Pickett 2009:424–425). While some scholars interpret the census as a sign of cooperation between God and Rome, Carter (2010:29) refutes this, asserting that it highlights imperial exploitation rather than divine endorsement.

Luke's interest in economic matters aligns with his theological message about the kingdom of God. Imperialism, driven by profit and wealth accumulation, often led to financial enslavement and resource exploitation (Perdue 2005:282). Scholars argue that Luke frames Jesus's ministry as a counter-narrative to imperial rule, advocating an alternative social order, underpinned by justice and compassion for the poor in the context of God's kingdom, presenting a stark contrast to the prevailing economic conditions of the Roman Empire (cf. Coleman 2019:6–7).

Luke's message of social justice is intertwined with the preaching of God's kingdom. His gospel promotes a vision of economic reversal, in which the oppressed find relief and the rich are warned about exploiting the poor (Afulike 2018). Luke's focus on economic justice shapes his portrayal of Jesus's mission, making it inseparable from the socio-political conditions of 1st-century Palestine (Burrus 2009). His frequent use of *salvation* underscores its political connotations, linking it to liberation from oppression rather than mere spiritual deliverance (Pickett 2009:426–427).

Medina (2005:4) describes Luke's approach to Rome as possessing 'internal multivocality', balancing critique and strategic accommodation. While some scholars argue that Luke was pro-Empire, Medina (2005) suggests that his language is a form of colonial rhetoric, subtly undermining imperial values from within. The anti-imperial perspective indicates that Luke's Gospel is a coded critique of Rome, employing hidden transcripts that resist imperial domination (Scott 1990). These hidden messages enabled oppressed communities to express dissent without directly provoking Rome's wrath (Diehl 2011:11).

Anti-imperial rhetorical techniques in Luke

Socio-economic and political reversal

Luke consistently critiques wealth accumulation and imperial exploitation. Luke's account of Jesus's ministry advocates for an economic reversal, where the poor receive justice and the powerful are held accountable (Carter 2010:29). The contrast between the Empire's economic system and the ethics of God's kingdom is a recurring theme in Luke's Gospel (Perdue 2005:282).

Luke's message aligns with ancient counter-cultural narratives that seek to challenge dominant power structures, constructing an alternative socio-political reality, portraying Jesus as an agent of divine justice, subverting the exploitative practices of Rome (Pickett 2009:425). The Gospel's opening chapters serve as a foundation for this anti-imperial critique, setting the stage for the broader themes of justice and economic transformation (Coleman 2019:6–7). This relevance to contemporary socio-political issues can engage and connect readers to the text.

Luke as a subversive hidden transcript

Luke employs literary techniques to challenge imperial rule while subtly avoiding confrontation (Medina 2005:4). Scholars argue that his use of politically charged language and counter-narratives reflects a form of coded resistance (Horsley 2004). The theory of 'hidden transcripts' (Scott 1990) suggests that subjugated communities often express dissent through veiled language, avoiding outright rebellion, while undermining oppressive systems (Diehl 2011:11). Luke thus employs a protest language of subversion to manoeuvre the complex world of marginal living, literarily and rhetorically, in a colonial context, while undermining the imperial value-system at the same time, negotiating survival from within that dominant value-system. This subversive nature of Luke's Gospel can inspire and empower readers to challenge oppressive systems.

Scott demonstrates that the reaction of subordinate, marginal, and disempowered people to dominance is much more than subservience or rebellion. Hidden transcripts do not conform to sociological and anthropological criteria, such as open rebellion and armed revolt, which are the only forms of resistance (Scott 1990). Hidden transcripts are *offstage* intermediate opportunities for the oppressed marginal peoples to state their true feelings and opinions about the status quo, often signifying that their perceived façade of compliance is simply a survival mechanism, and is not to be confused with acceptance of the dominant culture on the public stage. Scott's work has helped to recognise power relations and history in texts, unlocking new dimensions in New Testament approaches.

Luke's work subtly critiques the Roman rule, advocating for an alternative socio-economic order (Carter 2015). The concept of *religio licita* – the idea that Luke sought to present Christianity as a legal and acceptable faith under Rome – further complicates interpretations of his political stance. *Religio licita* was a term used in the Roman Empire to describe officially tolerated religions. There are scholars that argue that Luke's Gospel was written to position Christianity within this category.

Luke's Jesus as a theo-political liberator

Luke's Gospel portrays Jesus as a liberator, advocating for economic justice. The message of salvation in Luke emphasises societal transformation, where divine mercy corrects economic injustices and uplifts the poor (Wi 2017:5). Luke's repeated use of the term *salvation* carries socio-political implications, emphasising liberation from systemic oppression (Pickett 2009:426–427). The economic themes in Luke reflect the struggles of colonised people seeking justice under imperial rule (Medina 2005).

The role of John the Baptist in Luke's Gospel further highlights the economic and political dimensions of repentance. His preaching calls for ethical economic practices, warning against exploitation and urging wealth redistribution (Burrus 2009). This aligns with Luke's broader vision of an economy based on justice rather than imperial control (King 2019:72).

In Luke, the legitimacy of imperial rule is challenged as he presents a vision of a kingdom that counters Rome's values, emphasising service over dominance and economic justice over exploitation. Scholars argue that this represents a theological and political critique of the Empire, while Luke reinterprets imperial power through the lens of God's reign (Godawa 2009:115).

While some argue that Luke's Gospel conciliates with the Roman Empire, others suggest that its rhetoric subtly undermines imperial authority (Medina 2005). By depicting Jesus as a counter-king, Luke radically reimagines power structures, where the oppressed find justice and the elite face accountability (Horsley 2004).

Luke serves as a critique of the socio-economic inequalities imposed by the Roman Empire. Through literary subversion, hidden transcripts, and counter-narratives, Luke constructs a theological vision that challenges imperial authority while advocating for economic justice. His portrayal of Jesus as a liberator aligns with anti-imperial discourse, offering a vision of a society where wealth is redistributed and justice prevails. Luke is therefore not only a religious text but also a socio-political document that speaks to the realities of economic exploitation and the hope for a transformed society (Pickett 2009:426).

Application to the South African context

Rigid social hierarchies, imperial dominance, and economic inequality defined the Graeco-Roman society (Carter 2006). The Gospel of Luke underscores a counter-cultural emphasis on socio-economic justice within this sociopolitical framework, advocating for the interests of the poor, the marginalised, and oppressed. The Western tendency to separate the sacred from the secular, or to distinguish between personal sin and societal structures, is absent in Luke's understanding of salvation. According to Green (1997:25), Luke presents a holistic view in which salvation encompasses all aspects of life. As Marshall (1978:92) also affirms, Luke sees salvation's spiritual and political dimensions as inseparably intertwined.

Luke's narrative challenges the prevailing imperial ethos, which privileges elites and politically connected individuals at the expense of the broader populace. By reinterpreting the teachings of Jesus, Luke presents a radical critique of wealth accumulation, founded on exploitation, that particularly impacts rural peasant communities.

This Lukan critique transcends ancient Rome to engage with modern systems of economic injustice, exemplified by the colonial and apartheid-era arrangements, such as the 1910 Act of Union, which institutionalised wealth-sharing among Boer and Briton elites, while excluding the indigenous African majority. This critique remains relevant in the context of post-apartheid governance, where certain members of the new ruling elite perpetuate exploitative practices – including corruption, embezzlement, and mismanagement of public resources. Consequently, Luke's ethical vision is a prophetic indictment of historical and contemporary economic oppression systems.

These economic systems stubbornly persist in post-apartheid South Africa and are characterised by wealthy elites at the expense of disenfranchised communities. Post-apartheid South Africa continues to grapple with systemic inequalities, corruption, and economic exclusion of the majority population, bringing into focus Luke's radical message, epitomised by the story of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1–10), which advocates for wealth renunciation and justice for the poor, providing a theological critique of exploitative economic systems (Motuku 2023). This message remains relevant in addressing South Africa's unresolved socio-economic injustices. Despite the promise of democratic transformation post-1994, economic disparities remain entrenched due to the negotiated settlement at CODESA. The negotiations preserved the apartheid-era economic structures, allowing white elites to retain wealth and land while granting political power to the black majority (Meintjies 2013:2). As a result, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world. The privileged white minority continues to benefit from a first-world economy, while many black South Africans endure conditions characteristic of the developing world. The negotiated settlement failed to provide substantial economic redress, prompting calls for an 'economic CODESA' and a radical shift akin to Zacchaeus' restitution.

Scholars and commentators advocate for a renewed economic dialogue, often called an *Economic CODESA*. This initiative would seek to redress the socio-economic injustices left unresolved by the political transition (Motuku 2018). A model for this restitution can be drawn from Luke 19:1–10, where Zacchaeus' act of wealth renunciation is a paradigm for economic justice (Motuku 2023). White South Africans, who benefited from the apartheid-era privileges, must actively engage in restitution, while black South Africans should be included in national economic life as equal stakeholders.

While promoting national reconciliation, the TRC neglected the systemic socio-economic injustices faced by black communities, with its focus on individual human rights violations rather than broader economic reparations (Bowsher 2019). Forgiveness was emphasised without requiring white South Africans to engage in meaningful restitution. Luke's radical message suggests that true reconciliation must be accompanied by economic justice, requiring those who benefited from oppression to actively engage in restitution and redistribution (Boesak 2008:2).

The issue of land reform in South Africa transcends legal obligations; it is a moral imperative required for national identity, community wellbeing, and national stability. The story of Zacchaeus demonstrates that restitution should extend beyond legal frameworks into the realm of ethical responsibility. Under apartheid, black South Africans were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands, severing deep historical and cultural ties. Resolving the land question requires a conscientious moral response, ensuring equitable redistribution that acknowledges historical injustices.

Corporate entities, particularly those that benefited from the apartheid-era exploitation, must take responsibility for addressing economic disparities, including mining companies and multinational corporations that accumulated

vast wealth by exploiting cheap black labour. As such, they are morally obligated to invest in the socio-economic upliftment of disadvantaged communities. The state alone cannot rectify historical injustices; the private sector must actively foster economic equity. This aligns with Luke's message, which challenges the wealthy to divest their riches in service of the marginalised, giving substance to the popular view in antiquity that the rich become so at the expense of the poor and marginalised in society.

The post-apartheid government, dominated by the ANC, has struggled to implement meaningful socio-economic transformation. While political power shifted, economic power remained concentrated among white elites and a small black upper class (Bond 2006:153). Corruption and mismanagement have further exacerbated inequalities, hindering inclusive economic efforts (Gumede 2021). The adoption of neoliberal policies has failed to address poverty and unemployment, reinforcing economic exclusion. Luke's critique of wealth accumulation challenges the private sector and political elites to adopt policies prioritising the poor over self-enrichment.

Luke's Gospel presents a radical vision for an equitable society, urging those with wealth to renounce materialism and engage in solidarity with the poor. South Africa's socio-economic disparities necessitate a fundamental shift in moral consciousness among white and black South Africans alike to avoid the weaknesses of most post-war and post-conflict countries (cf. Mamdani 1996:1). White South Africans must move beyond guilt to active participation in economic justice. This entails supporting initiatives that foster long-term economic empowerment for historically marginalised communities rather than engaging in superficial acts of charity. True transformation requires a commitment to justice – this is the Lukan golden thread, culminating in Zacchaeus' wealth divestiture and fourfold restitution in Luke 19:1–10 (Motuku 2023). After meeting Jesus face to face, Zacchaeus anticipates Jesus's radical challenge and voluntarily chooses to correct his immoral ways by meting out justice for the victims of his economic fraud and exploitation. This is radical for a Graeco-Roman culture characterised by stratification, hierarchy, and imperialism. Luke thus prioritises socio-economic justice for the poor, the marginalised, and the occupied.

Conclusion

The influence of Rome over Judea finds resonance in the experiences of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa, both characterised by military dominance, political oppression, and economic exploitation. The extraction of surplus from peasants through taxes and rents in Luke's time mirrors the exploitation of black labour in colonial and apartheid South Africa; evident through discriminatory taxes, the migrant labour system, and land dispossession. The significance of land for survival, along with the trauma of losing it – whether through debt in Judea, or legal means in South Africa – lies at the core of the struggles faced by the oppressed in both contexts. Both narratives emphasise the stark divisions between the wealthy and the poor, often defined by prevailing power structures (Roman/elite vs peasant; white vs black). Local collaborators, such as tax collectors and elites cooperating with Rome, alongside resistors like Zealots and prophets in Luke's world, reflect the complex dynamics of collaboration and resistance in South Africa, encompassing peaceful protests and armed struggles.

The Gospel of Luke, deeply rooted in imperial domination and social inequality realities, maintains its relevance to the South African experience today. Themes such as unjust taxation, oppressive military and political control, economic exploitation, land dispossession and the resulting poverty and inequality resonate powerfully with South Africa's history of colonialism and apartheid, as well as its ongoing confrontations with these lasting legacies. Luke's focus on the marginalised, his critique of wealth acquired at the expense of the poor, and his portrayal of Jesus's mission to deliver *good news* and liberation, provide a theological framework through which South Africans have interpreted their struggles and aspirations for justice.

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