



The land is ours, not yours: Land as life and end of life in the parables of the Galilean¹

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Abstract

The parables told by Jesus the Galilean, when read from a realistic perspective, can be seen as a window to the exploitative socio-economic, political, and religious situation of the peasantry in first-century Roman Palestine. The Galilean's parables picture this exploitative world, and also speak of ways to address the societal ills of his day. In an agrarian world, land meant life. For most of the peasantry, however, this was not the case anymore. In reaction to this situation, Jesus proclaimed the possibility of a world in which the land, especially its produce, belongs to everyone. This world he called the kingdom of God, a different kind of world, a world ruled by God's generosity and goodness. In this world, everybody has enough.

Keywords

parables; historical Jesus; land; kingdom of God

Introduction

In the early first century of Roman-Palestine land, for some, meant life, and for some it meant the end of meaningful life. The kingdom of the Temple, based on an exclusive purity system, confiscated peasant land as a form of religious "punishment". The kingdom of Rome, on the other hand,

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was very systematic in land expropriation. Land conquered meant that the land belongs to them. Peasants or small landholders, therefore, had to pay rent to live on their ancestral lots. Added to this was different levels of taxes, including what was known as the so-called “surplus of the harvest”. If these demands were not met, loans, at very high interest rates with land as collateral, were readily available. Normally, these loans were nothing more than a death sentence for the peasantry. Loans meant the eventual confiscation of land. As a systematic process, confiscated plots were bundled together and turned into large estates, and traditional farming with wheat, figs, and olives were replaced by vine dressing aimed at producing wine for the export market. The change from subsistence farming to profit driven farming had a devastating effect on peasant families. Landowners became tenants, tenants became day labourers, and day labourers ended up as beggars. The parables of Jesus do not only describe these social-economic changes; it also provided remedies, as actions of the kingdom of God, to address poverty, exclusion, and exploitation. To this, we now turn.

1. Who owns the land?

1.1 Peasants – the land is ours

The Palestinian² peasants (Ιουδαῖοι)³ who owned and worked small plots believed that Yahweh drove the nations out of Canaan to provide Israel with a promised land. The land belonged to Yahweh (Gen 35:12; Lev 25:23), and Yahweh, therefore, was responsible for deciding who would dwell in the promised land.⁴ The land, from the point of view of the peasantry, thus was given to them by Yahweh (Ex 6:3, 8; Nm 33:53; Lev 1:21; and Dt 17:14), and they had the privilege to work the land as tenants of Yahweh (Lev 25:23).⁵

2 The designation Palestine is used here as it was the term used by the Greeks and Romans in the time of Jesus to describe the area between Egypt and Syria (see Duff 2017:7).

3 In the time of Jesus, the term Ιουδαῖοι referred to both nationality (territory) and cultural practices. The latter included religious practices (see Van Eck 2014:58–59).

4 “YHWH is the one who owns the land. No one can alienate any portion of YHWH’s land by selling it, exchanging it, or transferring permanent tenure to others. YHWH controls the use of the land, ownership of the land, tenancy on the land, conditions of land use ... In short, YHWH is the owner and custodian of the land” (Habel 1995:98).

5 “The extent of YHWH’s own land promised to Israel seems to correspond to the territories that YHWH allocates to the designated families of Israel; YHWH’s land is the cluster of family lots to which ancestral families can lay claim” (Habel 1995:59).

Yahweh promised that the land always will yield fruit and that there would be no hunger (L 25:19), and as long as they obeyed his commandments, the land would stay in their possession and in the possession of their children (and their children; see Gen 48:4; Dt 1:8, 8:1).⁶ Theirs' was a land in which they would eat bread without scarcity and would lack nothing (Dt 8:9–10; Ps 85:12; see Van Eck 2016:57). With this belief, the peasant smallholders tilled the soil, with the main crops being wheat, barley, olives for oil, figs, and grapes for wine.

The peasantry normally organized themselves in nucleated villages, located in the midst of fields that included the smallholdings of individual peasants and the common land that belonged to the village (Van Eck 2016:238–239). Villages were normally organized along kinship lines, comprising of members of one (or more) extended families (Oakman 2008:149). Village economy was focused on agriculture and domestic need, and under normal circumstances was able to support a lifestyle normally above the level of subsistence. Since the “system of tithes and other agricultural offerings had been devised to underline Yahweh’s ultimate ownership of the land,” the peasantry had no problem, even in the cases of little surplus, with the tithes and offerings dedicated to the temple (Freyne 2004:46). The land belonged to Yahweh, they tilled the land as tenants of Yahweh and therefore were more than willing to give back to Yahweh as was stipulated.

1.2 Rome – it belongs to us

The Roman Empire was an advanced agrarian⁷ empire with its wealth and power based in land. The elite did not rule by democratic elections, but by

6 See Brueggemann (1977:48), who describes the land as a pure gift (“radical grace”) from Yahweh (see also Habel 1995:39). Habel formulates the relationship between gift, satiation, and commandment as follows: “YHWH is identified (in Dt 12–26) as the owner of the land in which Israel is to live under the polity or *torah* outlined in *Deuteronomy*” (*emphasis in the original*).

7 Van Eck (2016:21) describes an advanced agrarian society as follows: “Advanced agrarian societies had two main characteristics: It was aristocratic in nature, and the main ‘economic’ activity was the working of the land (agriculture). Society was divided into the *haves* (rulers) and the *have-nots* (the ruled). The ruling class (elite) comprised of more or less 2 percent of the population and lived in the cities, while the rest of the population, the peasants (the ruled or non-elite), lived in rural areas. No middle class existed. Although comprising only 2 percent of the population, the elite controlled most of the wealth (up to 65 percent) by controlling and exploiting the land and sea; its produce and its cultivators (the peasantry and fishermen) whose labor created the

the ability to take, hold, and exploit land. The possession of land, by force, was seen by the aristocracy as a right (Lintott 1999:30; Carter 2006:3). Conquered land, according to the Romans, was their land,⁸ and they treated controlled land as their personal estate to confiscate, distribute, redistribute, disperse, and use as they deemed fit.⁹

In 63 BCE, after Rome's initial conquest of Judea, Galilee, and other parts of Palestine, the Romans laid the Judeans and Galileans under tribute, requiring a quarter of the harvest every second year (roughly 12.5 percent per year; see Josephus, *Ant.* 14.202–203). In 47 BCE, when Herod the Great came into power, he very soon extorted a tax levy of hundred talents from the Galileans. In 37 BCE Herod the Great was appointed as the client king of Rome as “the king of the Judeans”, and from Sepphoris, in collaboration with the Herodians, ruled and taxed Galilee. After his death in 4 BCE, Herod Antipas became client king (tetrarch) of Galilee, and implemented a “policy of urbanization, establishing cities as a way of controlling and exploiting the countryside” (Horsley 2009:87). Antipas immediately rebuilt Sepphoris from where the peasant farmers were taxed, and in 17 CE built Tiberias to administer the taxation of the fishing industry around the Sea of Galilee (see Van Eck 2016: 24).

produce. The elite had contempt for manual labor, and thus exploited cheap labor with slaves and tenant farmers. Local, regional and imperial elites imposed tributes, taxes, and rents, extracting wealth from non-elites by taxing the production, distribution and consumption of goods ... The elite thus lived at the expense of the non-elite.”

- 8 Numismatic evidence, especially from the “golden age” period of Augustus, for example, communicated that the land belonged to Rome. Coins minted by Augustus depicts him as a single ear of corn or a grain bundle with three, four, or even six ears of corn, with the word ΚΑΙΣΑ[ΡΩΣ] located to the right and left of the image. What the coin is communicating is clear; it is the emperor who is identified with the harvest, and it is the emperor who feeds his subjects. A coin minted by Tiberius (dated 29 CE) depicts an altar from the imperial cult with grain and wine, which indicates that, according to Roman propaganda, the fruit of the land belongs to the rulers of the country. The same image is also depicted on a coin minted by Vespasian in 77–78 CE (see Weissenrieder 2008:501–508; Van Eck 2009:58–59).
- 9 Livy in this regard states that the land of other nations has a fixed boundary, but that the circuit of Rome represents the circuit of the world (*Romanae spatium est urbis et orbis idem*; see Livy, *Hist. of Rome* 1.16 [Foster, LCL]). See also Wood (2015:82–95), who describes in detail, as part of what he calls the sovereign narrative of Rome, the Roman Empire as the ruler of the kings of the earth, namely that all that conquered land belonged to them.

The peasantry was burdened by at least three levels of taxation: the Roman tribute,¹⁰ taxes to Herod (and the local elite), and the tithes and offerings demanded by the temple elite (see below). The Roman tribute consisted of the *tributum soli* (land tax) and the *tributum capitis* (poll tax), while the local elite extracted tolls, rents, and customs taxes. Because of this heavy tax burden, peasant farmers more than often fell into debt, and the Roman and Herodian elite used this situation of the peasants to offer them loans (with an interest rate up to 20 percent) with their small plots as collateral.¹¹ In most cases, peasants holding loans could not keep up with payments, which meant the expropriation of their ancestral inherited land. The elite transformed foreclosed land into large estates that focused on commercial farming and enriched themselves by using former peasant landowners as tenants or day labourers to work their land (see Van Eck 2016:56).¹² In Galilee, especially, agriculture was commercialized; which in turn led to a monetization of the economy. Subsistence farming (polycropping) was replaced by monoculture (esp. viticulture),¹³ which in turn had a profound effect on the structure and nature of labour (see Kloppenborg 2006:278–312).

10 The many silos containing grain for the Roman tribute found in upper Galilee (in Gischala), in the south at Beth Shearim, as well as the vaults in the lower city of Sepphoris, are evidence of the economic structure in which Rome demanded and the peasant farmers rendered up tribute and taxes (see Josephus, *Life* 71, 118–119).

11 “The peasant village in Palestine during the early decades of the first century was under increasing stress. The cumulative effects of Herodian rule, combined with the rigors of Roman colonialism and the demands of the Temple hierarchy, had taken their toll. The monetization and commercialization of the local economy had led to increasingly predatory relationships between elites and peasants ... [T]here is evidence for rising debt and defaults on loans; accompanied by the hostile takeover of peasant small-holdings and the reduction of peasants to more dependent economic statuses. These practices can be traced back to the fact that elites made loans to peasants and held their land as collateral” (Herzog 1998:206).

12 Archeological evidence, passages from Josephus, and the *Parables of Enoch* (1 En. 37–71; written in Galilee in the time of Herod the Great or in the early decades of the first century) indicate that “during Antipas’s reign more and more of the land in the Judean hill country was transformed into large estates owned by absentee landlords”, that “most of the cultivatable land in Galilee was owned by the elite and worked by tenants”. “When it is taken into consideration that the great plain just south of Galilee had long ago become royal land (owned by the Herodian elite or retired Roman soldiers), it is clear that less and less land in Judea belonged to the peasantry” (Van 2016:27, 28).

13 Owners of large estates increased their tenure “through foreclosures on loans, leading to hostile takeovers of peasant farms. When possible the land so annexed was converted into vineyards so it could produce a product with a higher return than the mixed grains grown by subsistence peasant farmers” (Herzog 1994:85). See Kloppenborg (2006:560–

1.3 The temple – no, to us¹⁴

In 6 CE, after disposing Archelaus as ethnarch over Judea, Samaria, and Idumea, Augustus incorporated these regions into the Roman province of Judea, administrated by Syria. Since Rome, where possible, favoured “indirect rule”¹⁵ – local leaders ruling on behalf of the Empire while being allowed the use of temples and the practicing of cults/religions – Judea now was ruled by the priestly aristocracy centred in the temple in Jerusalem, Controlled by the prefect of Judea (e.g., Pontius Pilate in the time of Jesus), they had to maintain order and collect the Roman tribute. The high priestly elite favoured the “Great Tradition”,¹⁶ a reading of the Torah that served their own interests to preserve their power and privilege (Herzog 2005:59), and always, as Roman clients, took the side of Rome when conflicts arose between Judeans and Rome.

Like the Roman and Herodian elite, the priestly elite accumulated wealth through tithes and offerings (claiming up to 23 percent of a peasant’s harvest) and added peasant land to their estates by investing in loans to the poor at up to 20 percent interest with the clear intention of foreclosing on their debtors when they could not repay their debts.¹⁷ These loans were

561, 570), who has indicated, by using available documented papyri viticulture was associated with wealth and the wealthy

- 14 The description below of the role the temple aristocracy played in exploiting the peasantry aiming to expropriate their land, is taken from Van Eck (2014b:109–113) and Van Eck (2016:25–27).
- 15 Indirect rule was an “old and long-standing principle of Roman policy, [to] employ kings amongst the instruments of the servitude” (Tacitus, *Agr.* 14.1, cited in Horsley 2011:34). Indirect rule, moreover, had the advantage that it “provided a bridge of legitimation that enabled an empire to divide and rule” (Horsley 1993:9). Normally, popular resentment was deflected to the local aristocracy (in this case the temple elite in Judea), while the imperial rulers remained remote or “invisible”, seemingly not involved.
- 16 As coined by Redfield (1956:41), the Little Tradition gave expression to the culture and traditions passed on among the unlettered (peasants) of village communities (i.e., what is important for them), while the Great Tradition expressed the learned culture cultivated among the elite in schools and temples. The Great Tradition that emanated from the temple elite in Jerusalem focused on an interpretation of the Torah that emphasized purity and tithing, a reading that served the interests of the elite, while the Little Tradition, as practiced by the peasantry, focused on the prophetic traditions of prophets like Elijah and Elisha and emphasized the remission of debt, justice towards the poor, and the withholding of taxes and tithes (see Herzog 2005:59–60, 176–177).
- 17 See Fiensy (1991:21–60), who indicates that, apart from Herod and his retainers (Local elite, soldiers, administrators and officers), various individuals belonging to the Jewish

made possible especially by the surplus funds created by resources coming from diaspora communities (the temple tax). In their accumulation of wealth and land, the priestly elite ignored the widening gap between the rich elite and the poor peasantry.¹⁸ As noted by Horsley (2011:36), the priestly elite even “maintained private gangs of strongmen, apparently for their own security, as well as to implement their predatory appropriation of people’s crops”.¹⁹ Not surprising, the Babylonian Talmud (see *b. Pesah. 57a*; see also *y. Menah. 13:21*) six centuries later recorded the popular memory of their exploitation of the peasantry as follows:

Woe is me because of the house of Boethus,
woe is me because of their staves!

Woe is me because of the house of Hanin,
woe is me because of their whisperings!

Woe is me because of the house of Kathros,
woe is me because of their pens!

Woe is me because of the house of Ishmael the son of Phabi,
woe is me because of their fists!

For they are high priests,

aristocracy (including people from influential priestly families) owned large portions of land in Judea and Galilee.

- 18 Peasants who owned and farmed land mostly merely survived at the level of subsistence. To survive, they had to produce for subsistence, seed for planting the next crop, feed for livestock, and the reservation of some produce to use as trade (for acquiring equipment, utensils, or food that the family did not produce). To this expense were added rent, the so-called “surplus of the harvest”, and taxes levied by the Roman and Herodian elite (35 to 40 percent of the annual harvest), social obligations such as participation in weddings or local festivals, and the religious dues (e.g., offerings, tithes, and taxes) claimed by the Temple elite. A peasant family most probably therefore only had as little as 20 percent of their annual produce available for subsistence (see Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:390–391; Oakman 2008:148–149).
- 19 In this regard, Josephus (*Ant.* 20.206–207) reports the following: The high priest Ananias “had servants who were very wicked, who joined themselves to the boldest sort of the people, and went to the threshing floors, and took away the tithes that belonged to the priests by violence and did not refrain from beating such as would not give these tithes to them. So the other high priests acted in the like manner, as did his servants, without anyone being able to prohibit them; so that [some of the] priests, who were supported in olden days by those tithes, died for lack of food”.

and their sons are (temple) treasurers,
 and their sons-in-law are trustees,
 and their servants beat the people with staves (*B. Pesa.ḥ 57a*)

From the above, it is clear that the Temple, as the peasantry and Rome, lay claim to the land. The land had to provide tithes and offerings, which included inter alia the *terumah* (a heave offering), and a specific portion of the harvest (one-fortieth to one eightieth; (see Freyne 1980:278). As such, the Temple functioned as a centralized economic institution that contributed to peasant farmers falling into debt. And when the land (read peasants) could not pay their dues anymore, the Temple elite lay claim to the land in the disguise of loans. Also for them, land meant life.

1.4 The peasants – not to us anymore, it belongs to them

From the peasantry's point of view, the land belonged to Yahweh and was given to them by Yahweh. As the system of tithes and offerings underlined Yahweh's ultimate ownership of the land, those who tilled the soil had no problem with the tithes and offerings expected by the Temple. The land belonged to Yahweh, they tilled the land as tenants of Yahweh and therefore were more than willing to give back to Yahweh as was stipulated. Outsiders, however, and their own (Temple elite), by means of layers of taxes, tithes and offerings, and unconventional means, became the controlling force of most private land and its fruit. This created a situation that left the peasantry on the edge of destitution, and the loss of land led to the loss of the peasant's place in the traditional social structure. Landowners (see Mk 4:3–9) became tenants (Mk 12:1–12), tenants eventually became day laborers (Mt 20:1–16), and with limited work available, ended up as beggars in the cities (Lk 16:19–21). This is the world the parables of Jesus describe.

2. Land and the parables

2.1 Heavy meanings, not heavenly meanings

The parables of Jesus the Galilean, as employed by the gospel's writers, are allegorical-theological applications of stories told by Jesus in a different place and time. By importing theology into stories that was not about God but God's estate (Funk 2007:90), the original intent and meaning of Jesus'

stories, in as far it can be determined, “got lost in translation” (Van Eck 2015:1–10, see also Hedrick 2004:39). As a result, a peasant smallholder sowing his land became Jesus preaching the gospel (the Sower; Mk 4:3b–8//Mt 13:3b–8//Lk 8:5–8a), an impure kingdom became an eschatological kingdom (the Mustard Seed; Mk 4:31–32//Mat 13:31b–32//Lk 13:19), protesting tenants the temple elite (the Tenants; Mk 12:1b–8//Mt 21:33b–39//Lk 20:9b–15a), a shepherd looking for a lost sheep Jesus looking for lost sinners (the Lost Sheep; Q 15:4–6), an elite inviting the social and religious impure to his table a futuristic eschatological meal (the Feast; Q 14:6b–23, *Gos. Thom.* 64:1), the owner of a vineyard God who dishes out grace abundantly (the Workers in the Vineyard; Mt 20:1–15), a king who forgives debt God who forgives sins (the Unmerciful Servant; Mt 18:23–34), an unorthodox father (and mother) God who accepts back the sinner (the Prodigal Son; Lk 15:11b–32), and a slave who protests against exploitation the proverbial black sheep in the family (the Minas; Q 19:12b–24, 270).

While it is indeed the case that in the interpretations of Jesus’ parables by the evangelists and the contemporary church theology trump realism, in the stories told by Jesus, realism trumped theology (Hedrick 2004:39). The parables of the historical Jesus,²⁰ as put by Herzog (1994:3), “were not earthly stories with heavenly meanings, but earthly stories with heavy meanings.” Jesus had no doctrine of God, and when he told his parables made no theological statements, never used abstract language, did not cite Scripture, and made no personal confessions.²¹ In his parables a lost sheep is a lost sheep (and not a lost sinner); a king releasing debt an earthly king and not God forgiving sins; a woman looking for a lost coin a peasant woman and not God diligently looking for lost sinners; day labourers being hired to work in a vineyard by a vineyard owner not God who invites Gentiles to become part of the kingdom; and a peasant farmer sowing seed literal seed, and not Jesus preaching (sowing) the word. As such, Jesus’ parables did not have theological meanings. Rather, his parables give evidence *inter alia* of

20 The term historical Jesus refers to the life, words, and deeds of Jesus the Galilean in 27–30 CE. The life, words, and deeds of the historical Jesus are retold in the Synoptic gospels through the theological (redactional) lens of each gospel writer.

21 “Few nowadays would defend the proposition that Jesus was an allegorist, speaking in one discursive realm but in fact intending to evoke other discursive realms, for example, salvation history or the care of the soul” (Kloppenborg 2014:490).

the socio-economic and political realities of his time, stories, in terms of Dodd's (1961:5) well-known definition of a parable, drawn from common life. At word was a social prophet occupying the dirt roads of Galilee, not the Jesus occupying the pages of the gospels as interpreted by the gospel writers.

2.2 These parables are mine, and those are not

Before looking at the way in which the parables describe the socio-economic realities and changes connected to land in first-century Roman-Palestine, as well as the way in which the parables suggest remedies to these changes – as actions of the kingdom of God – it is necessary to identify which parables should be included in this description. How many parables did Jesus tell? The answer to this question will depend on how one defines the term “parable”,²² if parables in non-canonical literature are included or not, if one supports the existence of Q, and what set of criteria are being used to identify the authentic parables of Jesus.²³ Based on these points of departure, estimates of the number of parables told by Jesus ranges from thirty odd to as many as ninety plus.²⁴ This article considers thirty-three parables²⁵ as most probably going back to the historical Jesus, including

22 See, for example, the different definitions of Manson (1945:65), Hunter (1960:8), Dodd (1961:5), Stein (1981:22), Scott (1989:8), Hultgren (2000:3), Snodgrass (2008:9), Zimmermann (2015:137), Van Eck (2016:36), and Roth (2018:17).

23 With regards to the latter, space does not allow a discussion on the different criteria that are being used, or the arguments of those who oppose the use of these criteria, opting for a “memory approach. For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Van Eck (2015b:1–10; 2016:6–11).

24 Funk, Scott & Butts (1988:26–27), for example, list thirty-three parables they believe go back to Jesus. In their list, the parable of the Feast (Lk 14:16b–23) and the Wedding Banquet (Mt 22:2–13) are seen as two versions of the same parable, as is the case with the parable of the Talents (Lk 19:13, 15–24) and the Pounds (Mt 25:14–21b). They also include three parables only attested to the *Gospel of Thomas* (*Gos. Thom.* 21:1–2 [Little Children in the Field]; *Gos. Thom.* 97 [Empty Jar]; *Gos. Thom.* 98 [Assassin]), and three parables from the *Apocryphon of James* (*Ap. Jas.* 6:9–10 [Date Palm]; *Ap. Jas.* 6:11 [Grain of Wheat]; *Ap. Jas.* 8:3 [Ear of Grain]). In his count, Snodgrass (2008:22) treats the Feast, Wedding Banquet, Talents and Pounds as separate parables, and treats thirty-three parables, stating that certain shorten parables are not treated. In Zimmermann's (2007) compendium, ninety-eight parables are discussed (including twenty-four parables from Q, fifteen from John, and eight from the *agrapha*), and in Roth's (2018:20) study of the parables in Q twenty-four parables are rendered as belonging to Q.

25 The Sower (Mk 4:3b–8//Mt 13:3b–8//Lk 8:5–8a, also in *Gos. Thom.* 9 and *1 Clem.* 24:5), Mustard Seed (Mk 4:31–32//Mat 13:31b–32//Lk 13:19, also in *Gos. Thom.* 20:2), the

three parables from the triple tradition, five from Q, two from Mark, seven from Matthew, ten from Luke, three from the *Gospel of Thomas*, and three from the *Apocryphon of James*. These parables carry the “voice print” of Jesus (see Funk 2006:171–176), not only describing the everyday life of first-century Mediterranean peasants but also offering them a different way of looking at their everyday experiences.

2.3 Opening a window to the realities of the land

Read as realistic stories, the parables are a window to the realities linked to land in the first half of the first century in Roman Palestine. This was the time of Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE) and Tiberius (14–27 CE), Herod the Great (37–4 BCE) and Herod Antipas (4 BCE–39 CE). The land “belonged” to Rome, and the Temple was claiming its share. Taxes levied by the Roman and Herodian elite came down to more or less 35 to 40 percent of the annual harvest, to which was added the so-called “surplus of the harvest”. Tithes and offerings claimed by the Temple elite came down to more or less 20 percent of the annual harvest. When other social obligations are added, a peasant family most probably only had as little as 20 percent of their annual produce available for subsistence and preparations for next year’s harvest. It was a struggle to stay on a level of subsistence. Most peasants ran into debt, took up loans at a rate of up to 48%²⁶ to cover all obligations, and eventually lost their ancestral plots.

Tenants (Mk 12:1b–8//Mt 21:33b–39//Lk 20:9b–15a, also in *Gos. Thom.* 65 and 66), the Friend at Midnight (Lk 11:5–8); the Leaven (Q 13:20b–21, also in *Gos. Thom.* 96:1), Lost Sheep (Q 15:4–6; also, in *Gos. Thom.* 107), Lost Coin (Q 15:8–9), the Feast (Q 14:6b–23 also in *Gos. Thom.* 64:1), the Minas (Q 19:12b–24, 27, also in *Gos. Naz.* 18), the Returning Master (Mk 13:34–36, also in *Did.* 16:1a), the Seed and Harvest (Mk 4:26b–29, also in *Gos. Thom.* 21:4), the Workers in the Vineyard (Mt 20:1–15), the Treasure (Mt 13:44, also in *Gos. Thom.* 109), Pearl (Mt 13:45–46, also in *Gos. Thom.* 76:1), the Unmerciful Servant (Mt 18:23–34), Planted Weeds (Mt 13:24b–30, also in *Gos. Thom.* 57), the Fishnet (Mt 13:47–48, also in *Gos. Thom.* 8:1), the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30b–35), the Dishonest Steward (Lk 16:1–8a), Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11b–32), Unjust Judge (Lk 18:2–5), Rich Farmer (Lk 12:16b–20, also in *Gos. Thom.* 63:1), the Pharisee and Publican (Lk 18:10–14a), the Barren Tree (Lk 13:6b–9), Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–26), the Tower Builder (Lk 14:28–30), the Warrior King (Lk 14:31–32), Little Children in the Field (*Gos. Thom.* 21:1–2), the Empty Jar (*Gos. Thom.* 97), the Assasin (*Gos. Thom.* 98), the Date Palm (*Ap. Jas.* 6:9–10), Grain of Wheat (*Ap. Jas.* 6:11), and Ear of Grain (*Ap. Jas.* 8:3).

26 “During the republic and the early years of the empire, most of these taxes were collected by tax farmers.... They contracted with the government to raise the taxes of a particular area and to collect a fee for this service. The fee, however, was only part of

The parables, first, describe the agrarian life of the peasantry: peasants owning and working the land (Mk 4:3b–8, Lk 15:11b–32), sowing for the next harvest (Mk 4:3b–8, 26; Mt 13:24), attending to crops while growing (Mk 4:26b–29; *Ap. Jas.* 8:3;), removing weed (Mt 13:31), and bringing in the harvest (Mk 4:29; *Ap. Jas.* 6:11). This was life for the peasant in first-century Roman-Palestine, looked at from below (i.e., for the perspective of the peasantry).

The parables, however, also give evidence to what it is to look at occupied first-century Roman-Palestine from above (i.e., from the perspective of the elite). To start, the parables give evidence to the patronage system of Rome that gave clients access to land and taxes. The parable of the Minas (Q 19:12b–24, 27) describes an event during which a man of noble birth went to a distant country to bid for the appointment as king. This story most probably describes Archelaus' request directed at Augustus in Rome to be appointed as king in the place of Herod the Great. Archelaus, we know, was appointed as ethnarch over Samaria, Judea, and Idumea, including the cities Caesarea and Jaffa from 6 BCE to 4 CE. The parable poignantly describes him as someone who take out what you did not put in and reap what he did not sow (Q 19:21–22). This is a clear reference to claiming taxes and the so-called “surplus of the harvest. The activities of the servants, turning one mina respectively into ten and five minas most probably refers to the extending of loans to the peasantry at very high rates, and their respective appointment over ten and five cities as the appointment of tax collectors (*publican*; see Van Eck 2016:290–291).²⁷ This parable, as Rohrbaugh (1993:35) has described it, indeed must have been a “text of terror” for any peasant listening to it.

The parables also give evidence to expropriated peasant smallholding transformed into large estates owned by absentee landlords and worked by tenants who most probably worked the land they previously owned. The

the profit. Since many agricultural taxes were collected in kind, publicans made large profits by reselling the goods collected or by hoarding them until the price rose ... When a farmer could not pay his taxes, publicans would offer to lend him money at 12 to 48 percent. Such loans grew rapidly as interest and new tax liabilities accumulated, and eventually the land was confiscated by the publicans” (Gonzales 2002:38).

27 See also the parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Mt 18:23–34), in which the unforgiving servant most probably was a tax farmer (see Van Eck 2016:177).

parables of the Minas (Q 19:12b–24, 27), the Returning Master (Mk 13:34–36), the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–26), the Tenants (Mk 12:1b–8), the Workers in the Vineyard (Mt 20:1–15), and Dishonest Steward (Lk 16:1–8a) all attest in some way or other to rich and absentee landlords who owned large estates converted to inter alia to viticulture dedicated to the production of export crops. All these parables seem to take for granted a system of land tenure in which most of the productive land was held by large-scale (elite) owners.

In the parable of the Feast (Q 14:6b–23), for example, an elite owned a piece of land so large that he needed five yoke of oxen to plough it, that is, most probably 50 hectares in size (see Van Eck 2016:107). In the parable of the Rich Farmer (Lk 12:16b–20), the owner’s harvest was so large that he had to tear down his barns and built larger ones. This is clearly not a picture of a peasant farmer living at the level of subsistence and combined with the fact that the elite despised productive and manual labour (see Sirach 38:25–34; Cicero, *Off.* 1.150, in Van Eck 2016:21; see also Carter 2006:9), this parable, like the parable Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–26), gives evidence to the consumptious lifestyles of the rich elite (eating and drinking or making merry)²⁸ at the cost of the peasantry. Also, since farming on large estates replaced in most cases the traditional focus on wheat, maize, olives, and figs, it was not out of the ordinary to find, as in the case of the parable of the Barren Tree (Lk 13:6b–9), a barren fig tree in a vineyard; the focus now was on the latter, and not on subsistence farming with figs.

Linked to subsistence farming being replaced by commercial trade was mercantilism. Apart from also owning large parts of expropriated land, merchants were seen as evil and thieves because they assisted the movement of goods accumulated through forced extraction of goods, cash crops, and commercial farming. Their trade was experienced by the peasantry as socially destructive and a threat to the community and merchants were considered as being part of the apparatus of the political ancient economy of the first-century Roman Empire (see Van Eck 2016:222). The parable of

28 The expression “to make merry” (εὐφραίνω), also used in the parable of the Prodigal (Lk 15:23, 24 and 32), means “to make a feast.” As put by Scott (1989:149): “It entails a feast well beyond those occasional celebrations that enlivened the otherwise boring and monotonous existence of Mediterranean peasants”.

the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30b–35) and the parable of Pearl (Mt 13:45–46) therefore may seem to be innocent, but in fact shows the ugly face of an exploitative economy to the detriment of the peasant farmer.

As indicated above, peasant farmers who lost their land in many cases became tenants on land previously owned. Some parables, like the parables of the Tenants (Mk 12:1b–8) and the Dishonest Steward (Lk 16:1–8a) give evidence to this. Tenancy in the Tenants is clear, and in the parable of the Dishonest Steward the debtors whose debt are reduced, based on the extent of their debt, most probably must have been tenants (see Van Eck 2017:176–177).

The parable of the Sower (Mk 4:3b–8), finally, maybe describes the first-century socio-economic, religious, and political realities of Roman Palestine in which the peasant farmer had to survive, the best. In the Sower, a peasant farmer still owns his land and goes out to sow for the next harvest. What happens to the seed he is sowing?²⁹ The first part of the seed falls on the road. For the peasantry, roads symbolised the part of the harvest claimed by the Roman and Herodian elite in the form of tax, tribute, and rents (paid in kind), or goods sold to local markets to be able to pay taxes or rents in the form of money. Roads, for the peasant farmer, symbolised pressure and exploitation, silos and vaults, trade, and markets, enabling the elite to siphon wealth out of the hands of peasant farmers. The second part of the seed falls on rocky places. Why? Most probably because the elite owned all the good cultivatable land. Some parts of the harvest will thus reap no gain; it already belongs to elite. A third part of the harvest, the seed that falls among the horns, is also given up. The thorns will grow up and choke the seed, it will yield no grain, because it will go the Temple elite. Thorns, especially in the Old Testament, is commonly used to describe the wicked, the enemies of God, and the godless (see, e.g., Nu 33:55; 2 Sam 23:6), hinting at the temple hierarchy. Seed falling among thorns thus hints at its inevitable fate: this part of the harvest will be choked by the Temple elite.

29 For a detailed description of what happens to the seed that is being sowed in the parable, see Van Eck (2016:56–59).

This situation, as described above, left the peasant farmer and his family with as little as 20 percent of their annual produce available for subsistence and sowing for the next harvest. It was a struggle to stay on a level of subsistence, most peasants ran into debt, took up loans which they could not repay, and lost their land. This was the first step of a too “normal” downward spiral: a sower (Mk 4:3–9) became a tenant (Mk 12:1–12), tenants normally did not make it (see again the debt accumulated by tenants in the Dishonest Steward) and became day labourers (Mt 20:1–16), and with limited work available, ended up as the proverbial Lazarus in front of the gate of a rich absentee landlord making merry (Lk 16:19–21).

3. Sharing the land and its resources to the benefit of all – the parables of a social prophet from Galilee

How did Jesus address the exploitative situation of the hearers of his parables in the socio-economic, political, and religious situation in 27–30 CE? The hearers of Jesus’ parables, as can be inferred from the content of his parables, included the elite and non-elite (peasantry). In his stories, Jesus called upon all his hearers to act in specific ways to address issues such as privilege, poverty, exploitation, levels of subsistence, and the exclusion from resources.

Jesus, first, called unto the peasantry, in their dire circumstances, to share what they have. In the parable of the Sower (Mk 4:3b–8), Jesus not only tells what happens with the harvest but also about what can happen with the harvest. A fourth part of the seed falls on good soil and produces an extraordinary large crop. Why? Because when this part that does belong to the peasant are shared with those who also barely live above a level of subsistence, it proverbially yields a harvest of thirty-, sixty- and a hundredfold. When what one has is shared with others, the kingdom becomes visible. That is why the kingdom is “good news to the poor (Luke 4:18), the place where the hungry will have a feast (Q 6:21), where those who weep will laugh (Q 6:21), where bread is provided day by day (Q 11:3), where everyone who asks receives (Q 11:10) – a place where one does not have to worry about what one is going to eat (Q 12:22)” (Van Eck 2016:61). Sharing is also the topic in the parables of the Lost Sheep (Q 15:4–6) and the Lost Coin (Q 15:8–9). In both these parables, the shepherd and the woman take a chance to lose

even more by looking for what has been lost. In both cases, a change taken pays off, and in both cases, everybody can celebrate and has enough to eat (see Van Eck 2016:132–139; Van Eck 2019:1–12).³⁰ In the parables of the Workers in the Vineyard (Mt 20:1–15) and the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11b–32) sharing is also referred to, albeit from a different perspective. When a landowner pays co-workers the same wage although they did not toil in the sun for the same number of hours, one should be happy for their sake. And when a father decides to receive younger brother back with joy and celebration, one should join the celebrations. Finally, one should not treat a village friend, in the same way, the peasantry, as clients are being treated by the patron elite. It is shameful to practice balanced reciprocity (*quid pro quo*) like the elite – always expecting something back for a favour given – when a friend at midnight is in need to give another friend something to eat (see the parable of the Friend at Midnight; Lk 11:5–8).

Jesus parables also calls on the elite to share what they have and others not. He, therefore, told stories about patrons who give as many day labourers as possible work and pays them all a wage that will enable them to feed their families (the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard; Mt 20:1–15); a patron who, after being shunned by his peers, invites the non-elite staying in the streets and alleys of the city, and those who had to live outside the city walls (e.g., prostitutes, beggars, tanners and other social outcasts such as lepers) to share in his abundance on the table (the parable of the Feast; Q 14:6b–23); a merchant stopped being a merchant and thus stopped exploiting the peasantry (the Pearl; Mt 13:45–46), and a merchant assisting a wounded man lying in a ditch (the Good Samaritan; Lk 10:30b–35); and a judge extending legal protection to vulnerable woman (the Unjust Judge; Lk 18:2–5). On the opposite, Jesus also told stories to criticise those who have and do not want to share: a rich fool accumulating at the cost of the peasantry (the Rich Farmer; Lk 12:16b–20), and a rich man making merry while neglecting the poor and downtrodden at his front gate (the Rich Man and Lazarus; Lk 16:19–26).

30 This is also an undertone in the parable of the Returning Master (Mk 13:34–36 and *par.*); the responsible steward is the one who gives servants their rations at the proper time (see Lk 12:42).

Another topic of Jesus' parables in addressing the ills of the peasantry was his call to release debt and refraining from the use of violence. In the parables of the Unmerciful Servant (Mt 18:23–34) and the Dishonest Steward (Lk 16:1–8a) a king and a landowner acquires honour for releasing debt, and in the Tenants (*Gos. Thom.* 65) the vineyard owner refrains from violence to secure ownership of his vineyard.

Finally, Jesus also applauded those who were willing to resist the exploitation of the peasantry. In the parable of the Minas (Q 19:12b–24, 27), when not read from an ethnocentric and anachronistic perspective, the third slave is commended for not partaking in the exploitation of the poor.

Concluding remarks

In the 27–30 CE exploitative situation in Roman Palestine Jesus spoke in his parables of a new and different world which he called the kingdom of God. His parables were political stories about God's kingdom, stories of a different world, of the way things ought to be when life is "ruled by God's generosity and goodness" (Hoover 2001:92). As social prophet, he re-envisioned his actual world in wholly unaccustomed ways and offered his hearers an alternative world to the world created by the Roman elite, by privilege and power, by tradition and custom, by the religious authorities, by temple rituals, and by sacred texts. The land, Jesus proclaimed, especially its produce, belongs to everyone. Authentic life means to share what one has and to take responsibility for the well-being of those excluded from what others take as granted.

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