

“Love-patriarchalism” in the New Testament in light of ethnography

Yolanda Dreyer

Department of Practical Theology

University of Pretoria

Abstract

In this article the context of the first century Mediterranean social world will be discussed in order to explore the nature of the prevailing hierarchical system. This society was agrarian and patriarchal. Patriarchy presupposes a hierarchical societal structure. During the period of the early church a cultural shift from a simple to an advanced agrarian society, had already taken place. This influenced the nature of the hierarchical system. The article argues that the context of an advanced agrarian society should be taken into account when the ethic of the earliest Jesus movements is explained. This context is described from an ethnographical perspective. The article concludes with a reflection on Gerd Theissen’s concept of “love-patriarchalism” in the context of the shift from a simple to an advanced agrarian society.

1. THE PROBLEM: “NOT MANY POWERFUL”?

According to broad consensus in New Testament scholarship there were not many high-ranking people in the early Christian communities. The few Jesus followers who were socially prominent were also the leaders in the faith communities (see Maier 1991:35-39; Clarke 1993). The faith communities therefore conformed to the hierarchical structures in society by duplicating these institutions. The Jesus groups did not bring about radical change in this regard. Gerd Theissen (1982:107) building on the work of Ernst Troeltsch (1912), calls the social structure of the early faith communities “love-patriarchalism” and explains it as follows: “This love-patriarchalism takes social differences for granted but ameliorates them through an obligation of respect and love, an obligation imposed upon

those who are socially stronger. From the weaker are required subordination, fidelity, and esteem.” It must be taken into account that, according to Troeltsch and Theissen, the concept “love-patriarchalism” refers to a common social phenomenon and not to a distinctly Christian novelty.

Luise Schottroff, known for her feminist perspective on the social history of early Christianity, disputes the use of “love-patriarchalism” as an adequate description of the historical situation of the early Christian communities. Focussing on 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, she considers this to be “an historically inaccurate impression of the character of the early Christian communities” (Schottroff [1985] 1999:275). She argues that, in 1 Corinthians and also in other parts of the New Testament, the eschatological idea of the reversal of above and below was applied to the practical life of the early church: “The Christian community is the place where this reversal is already being lived out” (Schottroff 1999:285). High-ranking, powerful and rich Christians gave up their privilege (Schottroff 1999:281), whereas those of lower social status who had lived in poverty “were able ... to obtain justice, self-worth and education” (Schottroff 1999:283).

Schottroff’s view of the early Christian “community of the poor” may be seen as too idealised. On the other hand it is possible that traditional scholarship portrays the early faith community through the lenses of the scholars’ own modern historical assumptions concerning society, politics and economics. Schottroff’s criticism of the scholarly consensus provides an incentive to assess the cultural background of the New Testament anew.

The reversal of poor and rich is central to Jesus’ message. According to Schottroff (1999:283) this is abundantly clear in the Synoptic Gospels. In another article I discussed the different ideological points of view of the Synoptic Gospels and their perspectives on Jesus and women who formed part of the marginalized people in his society (see Dreyer 2002). The findings indicate that there is no common vision of Jesus and marginalized people in the three gospels. Within the common Mediterranean social world each gospel has an own distinctive view on this matter. Luke was less egalitarian than Mark (cf D’Angelo 1999:176), but in Mark’s story world one can still see how “patriarchal culture silences women” (Phillips 2001:234). In Matthew this imbalance is

even worse. Though his vision was inclusive, Matthew’s perspective on women was to keep them subordinate in a male dominated hierarchy (cf Anderson 2001:44).

In this article the context of the first century Mediterranean social world will be discussed in order to explore the nature of the hierarchical system which prevailed. This society was agrarian and patriarchal. Patriarchy presupposes a hierarchical societal structure. During the period of the early church a cultural shift from a simple to an advanced agrarian society had already taken place. This influenced the nature of the hierarchical system. The concept “love-patriarchalism” fits into an advanced agrarian society. It can, however, vary from more to less “egalitarian” to “inequality”. The consequence of Schottroff’s view would be that this hierarchical system was transformed under Christian influence into a fully egalitarian structure in the church of the New Testament. The question is whether this would be at all possible in an agrarian society. The context of an advanced agrarian society should be taken into account when the ethic of the earliest Jesus groups is explained. The article will conclude with a reflection on Theissen’s concept of “love-patriarchalism”, called “the democratization of an ancient aristocratic ethic” in a later work (Theissen [1999] 1999:82), in light of the shift from a simple to an advanced agrarian society.

In a following article Schottroff’s criticism of Theissen will be considered by means of a reflection on the development within early Christianity from a Pauline “egalitarianism” to a post-Pauline “inequality”.

2. ETHNOGRAPHY VERSUS IDEOGRAPHY

In order to escape ethnocentrism a theologian and an exegete should avoid the hermeneutical fallacy of misplaced historical concreteness. Ethnocentrism overlooks cultural distances between ancient and modern societies or the cultural differences among cultures in a given period. This fallacy leads to misplaced historical concreteness when modern conditions are ascribed to a premodern situation such as the first-century Mediterranean social world. The concretisation of egalitarianism in present-day male dominated church and society could be such a tempting ideal.

The agrarian conditions of the people to whom the Bible refers should be clearly distinguished from those of people in modern society in order to separate the conditions

of these two groups (or individuals) in a responsible cross-cultural ethnographical way. Ethnography presupposes a phenomenological approach to the Bible. The phenomenological approach aims to understand the meaning of events and interactions of people in specific social situations (see Van der Merwe 1996:284). The study of the Bible from a sociological perspective investigates "... the regularities in social conduct that are due neither to psychological traits of individuals nor to their rational economic decisions but that are produced by the social conditions in which they find themselves" (Blau & Moore 1970:1). However, it is important to distinguish between a phenomenological-sociological approach and historiography. Historiography is interested in the "ideographical" (see Mandelbaum 1977:4-14). It describes what is definite and historically unrelated in the sense of uniqueness and particularity. The phenomenological approach, on the other hand, is interested in "ideal types", in other words what happens again and again. Culture is researched as a social system

The traditional historical approach in Biblical scholarship has focused on the individuals (the author or addressee[s]), events and social institution(s) (*Sitze im Leben*) that gave birth to the texts. However, the traditional historical approach does not investigate the relationships between text and social context, ideas and the behaviour of communities, social realities and the symbolic universe. The symbolic universe functions as a "sacred canopy" (see Berger & Luckmann 1975) to legitimate belief systems, cultural systems and ideologies, as well as social, economic and power structures (see Elliott 1993:13). "This means [referring to Theissen 1979:35-54] that it [New Testament sociology] is not interested in the individual case as what is typical, repeated, and general, and that it looks for structural relations that are valid for several situations, rather than analysing the singular and unique circumstances of a particular situation" (Holmberg 1990:10). In order to understand these structural relations that are valid for several situations, the dialectic between societal relations and the "sacred canopy" should be taken into account. The social structures and rituals as well as religious symbols represented this culture. Agrarian culture, however, underwent a shift which decisively influenced both social structures and the symbolic universe.

3. A SHIFT FROM A SIMPLE TO AN ADVANCED AGRARIAN SOCIETY

The following short comparison between *simple* and *advanced agrarian* societies relies chiefly on the macrosociological work of Lenski, Nolan and Lenski ([1970] 1995). Agrarian societies were preceded by two other phases, the hunting and gathering, and the horticultural phases (see Lenski *et al* 1995:84-85). The contribution of this article is to bring together the relevant information extending throughout Lenski's description of human societies and to elaborate on it with insights from other Biblical scholars.

One of the most important technological advances in simple agrarian societies was the plough. This innovation had crucial consequences for social interaction. Soil could be turned much deeper with a plough than with a hoe. That helped to control weeds and the problem of impoverished soil. With the plough and animal power larger fields could be cultivated which led to greater productivity. Though the plough in itself was not a necessity for the development of literacy, urbanism and imperialism, these phenomena are more frequently found in agrarian than in horticultural societies: "... agriculture, by increasing productivity, greatly increased the *probability* of their occurrence" (Lenski *et al* 1995:177). In the advanced agrarian societies the most important technological development was the smelting of iron (cf Muhly [1973] 1976). In simple agrarian societies the use of iron was limited to the élite classes, but in advanced agrarian societies iron was also used for ordinary tools (Lenski *et al* 1995:189-190). What was valuable to the élite now also became a valuable commodity for the peasantry. The hierarchical social system, however, did not change.

The plough made the production of surplus food possible (cf Thompson 1999:160). Population growth increased as a result of increased productivity. With the possibility of greater production arable land became a desirable commodity and that led to conflict among groups competing for land (see Davies [1991:4, 10-12, 37-77] with regard to the development of the twelve tribes of Israel into a unity – cf also Lemche 1996:98-107). Lemche (1996:106) refers to it as a "Retribalisationsprozeß". According to Walsh (1987:86) "Israel was the product of a decentralizing, 'retribalizing' social movement. It represented a reaction against centralized control." Already in simple agrarian societies, fairly large cities and towns came into existence (cf Lemche 1996:98-

109). "Ein Stamm mag nomadisch oder ortsgebunden sein, oder beides gleichzeitig" (Lemche 1996:105). The population of advanced agrarian societies was even larger (cf Lemche 1996:98-109; Thompson 1999:128).

When the numbers of people were small, simple kinship ties and informal measures were sufficient to organize and administrate societies. However, when the population increased naturally and as a result of conquests, these measures of organization were no longer adequate. As the administration of societies became more complex governmental bureaucracies developed on different levels (cf Redman 1978). Some officials (e g, priests, court prophets and scribes) were the administrators of the royal courts whereas others were in charge of the administration of districts and provinces, villages and towns. Lesser officials assisted officials. As the administration developed it became necessary to keep written records (Lenski *et al* 1995:181). People with the skills and training to fulfill the function of scribes were sought after. Jamieson-Drake (1991:35, 37) sees writing as an instrument of control: "In the first place, we would expect writing to function in a context of administrative control, whether economic, social, or political." By means of writing, economic and social transactions could be monitored and the élite living in the cities could exercise control over the peasant population and their agricultural produce.

With the development of bureaucracies the need of a legal system became more pressing (see Thompson 1999:177). In simple societies blood revenge by relatives was the way in which justice was dispensed. Later, arbitration was sought as a more orderly way of administering justice. Existing village leaders normally fulfilled the function of arbiter as part of their responsibilities. When government officials were sent to take over legal functions, they were often unfamiliar with local legal customs and the need for formal codes of law arose (Lenski *et al* 1995:180-184). Government held advanced agrarian societies together. The interests of a small élite group were the driving force behind government systems. The challenge of the government was to keep discontented peasants at bay and to maintain control over vanquished groups. A hereditary king or emperor mostly ruled advanced agrarian societies. Government consisting only of a small ruling élite ruled the least powerful and least developed agrarian societies. "The prevalence of monarchical government seems to have been the result of the militaristic

and exploitative character of societies at this level" (Lenski *et al* 1995:205). Struggles for control among the powerful were frequent and often bloody. Competing for goods, be it power (among the élite) or land (among the peasants), was confined to class boundaries, since the different classes lived in virtually different worlds.

Political power was sought after for the gains it could bring, not because political office was seen as an opportunity to serve the people: "... the office of king or emperor was the *supreme prize*" (Lenski *et al* 1995: 207). Political power was, therefore, used for the enhancement of own status and riches rather than to improve the living conditions of the people. This approach to government is referred to as the *proprietary theory of the state* where the state is seen as belonging to the rulers and therefore they could use it to their own advantage (Lenski *et al* 1995:208 note 115). "Putting together the evidence from many sources, it appears that the combined income of the ruler and the governing class in most advanced agrarian societies equaled *not less than half of the total national income*, even though they numbered two percent or less of the population" (Lenski *et al* 1995:208 note 120).

In simple agrarian societies, the standardized media of exchange were commodities such as for instance a specific quantity of a specific grain. As this method of bartering was not very practical, especially as far as absentee landlords were concerned (distance was a factor), a system of metal coinage, especially silver and copper was introduced. Metals were hard to come by and were only used for important transactions. Later, as metal became more available, small units of standardized weight and size became more common. Monetary systems emerged when the governments took over the manufacture and control of the metal coins at the end of the simple agrarian era. Money facilitated greater productivity, since excess goods could be sold. This expanded the market and there was an increased demand for goods and a merchant class came into being. Merchants bought and sold according to the demand. They also created demand by bringing new available goods to the attention of people. Money affected not only the economy, but also the social and psychological aspects of life: "In the long run, a money economy subverts many of the values of simpler societies, especially the cooperative tendencies of extended kin systems. It fosters instead a more individualistic, rationalistic, and competitive approach to life, and lays a foundation for many of the attitudes and

values that characterize modern industrial societies” (Lenski *et al* 1995:184). Writing and money were invented as media for the control of the scarce resources through power and the unequal distribution of authority. With the shift from simple to advanced agrarian societies, hierarchy increased, became more complex and led to greater inequality. This was the situation during the first century when the New Testament was written.

In advanced agrarian societies economics and politics were linked to the extent that those with political power also dominated the economic system (cf Thompson 1999:130-154). The ways in which resources were put to use “were determined less by the forces of supply and demand than by arbitrary decisions of the political élite. These were command economies, not market economies” (Lenski *et al* 1995:196). The movement of goods in this system was from smaller units like villages such as Nazareth (see Murphy-O’Connor [1980] 1998:374-377), Capernaum (see Loffredal [1993] 1997:18) and cities such as Sepphoris (see Weiss, Netzer & Tsuk 1996) and Tiberias (see Murphy-O’Connor 1998:455-460), to larger units such as counties (e g the area around the See of Galilee, Lower Galilee and Upper Galilee), regions (e g Galilee, Judea, Samaria) and lastly to the national level (Palestine) (see esp Duling 1999:156-175). The movement of goods was stimulated chiefly by taxation, but also by rents, tithes and religious offerings, as well as profits. “This helped to transfer the economic surplus from the peasant producers to the urban-based governing class, its allies and their dependents” (Lenski *et al* 1995:197). In most advanced agrarian societies the governing élite owned not only most of the land, but also owned a substantial number of the peasants who worked the land. These workers were often slaves or serfs of the landholders. Those who still had their freedom were heavily burdened by taxes. All of this contributed to a very low standard of living for most of the people in advanced agrarian societies (see Fiensy 1991:75-118).

A smaller nation (*ethnos*) like Israel was often conquered by large “conquest states” such as Assyria, Babilon, Persia, Macedonia and Rome. The rise of “conquest states” coincided with the emergence of “universal religions”. In older religions or ethnic faiths the gods were bound to specific territories and were worshipped by the people who lived there (see Thompson 1999:168-178). During the era of advanced

agrarian societies new religions proclaiming a message they regarded as "universal", emerged. The religions often transcended societal boundaries (Lenski *et al* 1995:209). The universal vision of these religions and the building of empires were two of the factors which brought people of different ethnic groups together. The beginning of this process was characterized by conflict as in the case of the Israelite and Hellenistic religions coming together. In the first phase of the advanced agrarian society religious and political leaders worked closely together. In uprisings and protests of the common people the priestly class would side with the ruling class affirming their God-given right to rule and chastising the protesters for their rebellion "against God" (cf Horsley 1995:42). In return the religious leaders received financial support. In a later phase this contributed to a consolidation of loyalties in smaller units such as villages and household communities. The peasantry now expected messianic saviours to come from the population rather than from the élite (see Horsley & Hanson 1985). This would have been the context in which a concept such as "love-patriarchalism" could make sense. The patron-client relationship manifested more prominently within the structures of households and village communities than between royalty and peasantry. God is increasingly seen as "Father" rather than "King". Amid all these changes, what remained were agrarian culture, patriarchy and hierarchy.

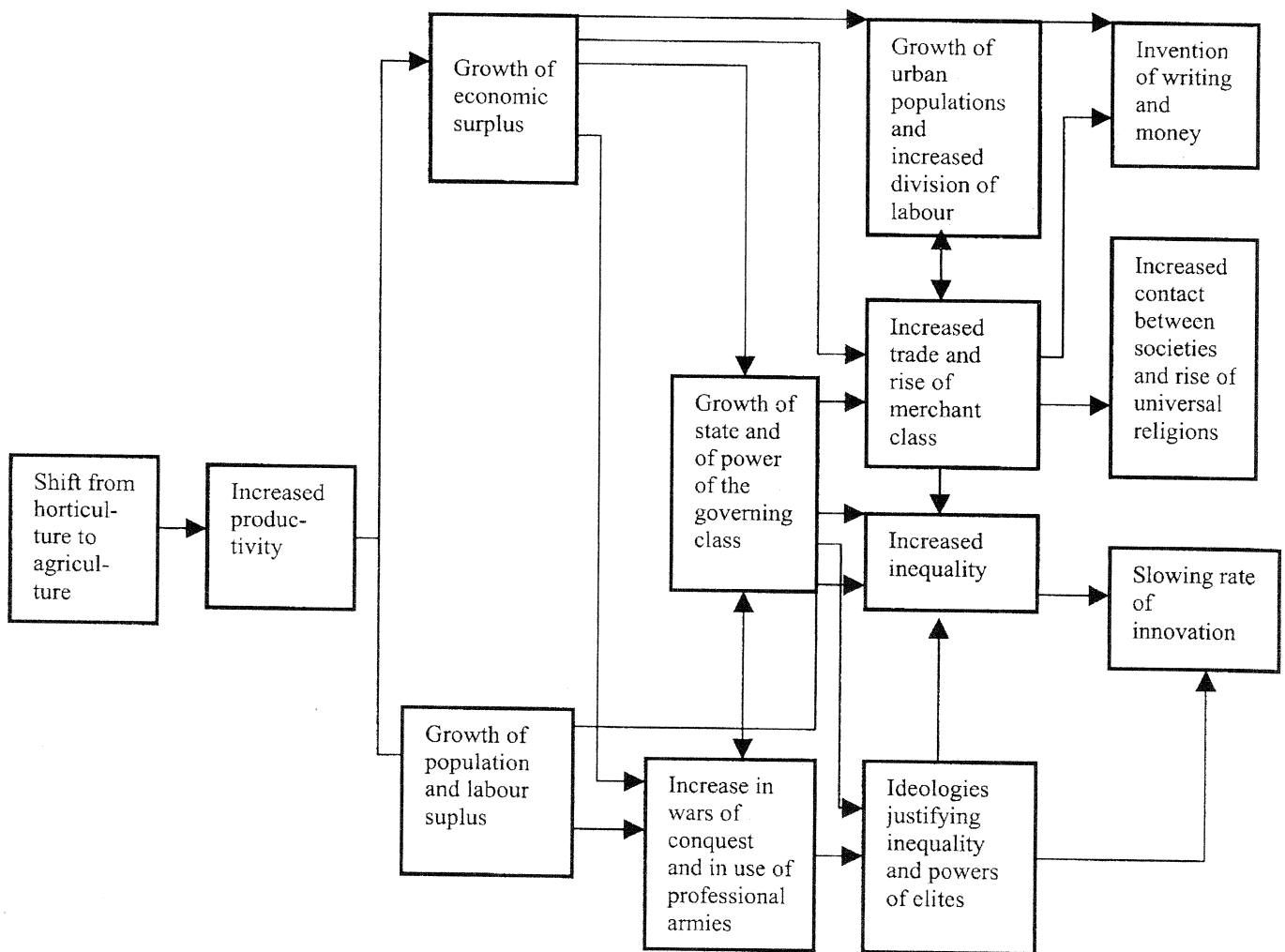
As agrarian societies expanded, rulers like emperors, kings and local leaders on the national level, employed officials as *retainers* to support their position of privilege and power. These retainers mediated the interests of the rulers on the grassroots level. Among the retainers were officials such as military personnel, tax collectors, priests and scribes (see Stegemann & Stegemann 1995:77-78). The task of the retainers was the administration of the financial and political affairs of the upper class and to impose the will of the upper classes on the common people. The retainers were, therefore, not on the same level as the ordinary masses. They had higher status and were better off economically. As with nearly all social distinctions, the boundaries between the lower retainers and the upper peasantry, as well as between the lower aristocrats and the retainers, were vague (Fiensy 1991:162). Fiensy (1991:160-161) considers officials on the border of aristocracy to be part of the "élite class". "Government" by officials, however, does not mean that kinship ties became less important. Fiensy (1991:146) refers as follows to the

changes that came about on the level of kinship: “We can only speculate about the changes in kinship relations brought on by the Hellenistic and later Roman changes in land tenure [I]t seems likely that the extended family, the *beth av*, began breaking up in the Hellenistic period, but the process may have lasted into the Mishnaic age.”

Because of the enduring importance of kinship, nepotism was acceptable in advanced agrarian societies. The family remained the basic unit of economic organization and business was a family venture. In rural areas the peasant family was the basic work unit (Lenski *et al* 1995:213). Because of its economic importance marriage was arranged and not left to the choice of the couple (cf Malina [1981] 1993:159-161). In these arrangements family, economic and status concerns was the primary focus. Though “love-patriarchalism” became a common concept within the advanced agrarian society, male dominance was the rule within families and this reflected the authoritarian structures of society (cf Lenski *et al* 1995:214).

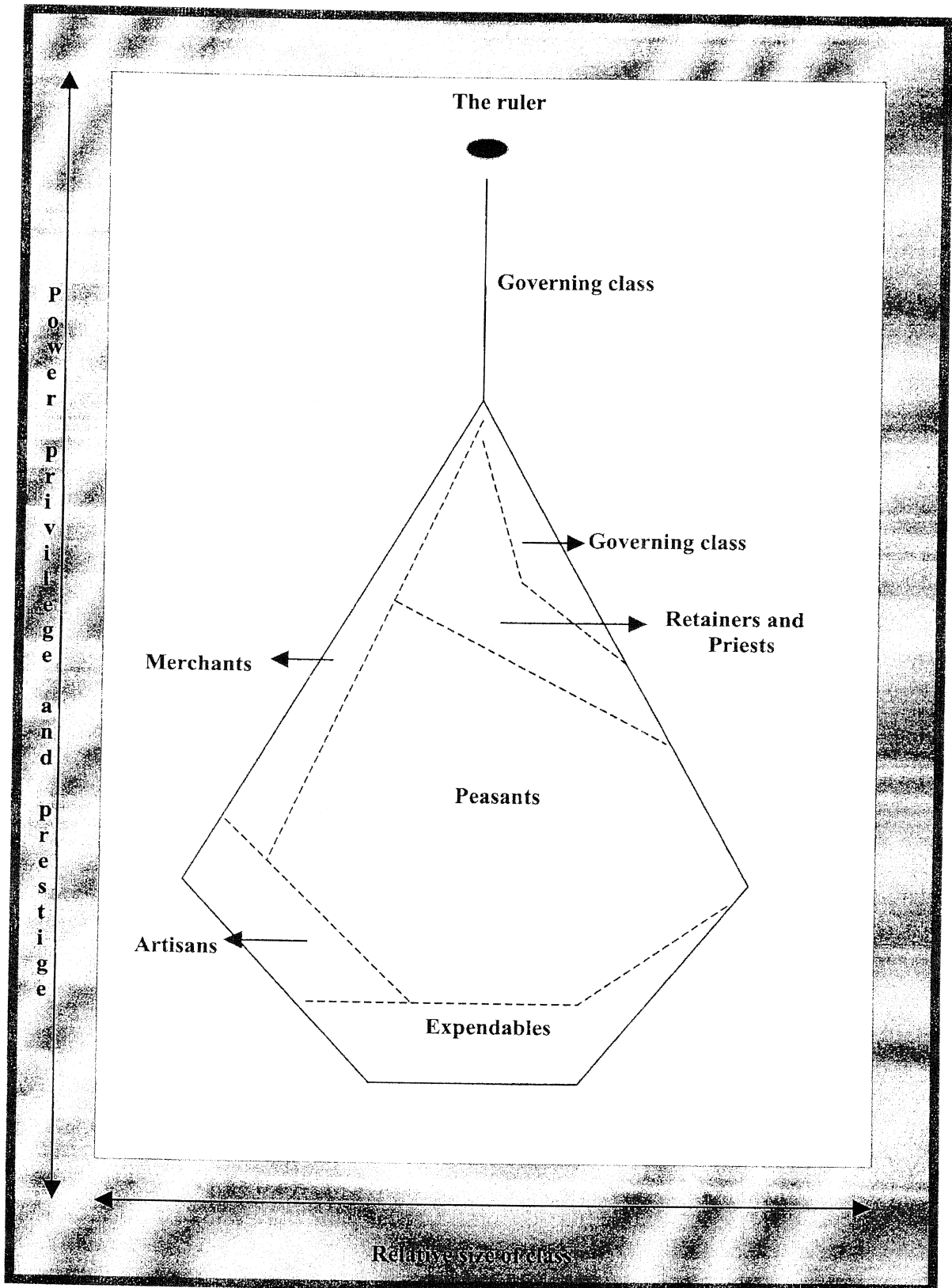
Inequality among people was similar in simple and advanced agrarian societies: a small ruling class exercised control over large numbers of peasants. The system of stratification did, however, become more complex in advanced agrarian societies. In these societies more people occupied positions between the ruling class and the peasants. They often owned more wealth and property than members of the ruling class. A small number of peasants also succeeded in acquiring some wealth. On the other hand, members of the aristocracy (the ruling class) sometimes lost their wealth, mostly on account of situations of conflict.

Conflict in an agrarian context is related to the phenomenon known as “limited goods” (see Oakman 1996:136; Hanson & Oakman 1998:99-129; Malina 1993:90-116) and the demands of the élite that the peasants should produce greater surpluses. A larger economic surplus led to an expansion of the state and the power of the ruling class. Increasing inequality among people led to the development of ideologies in the symbolic universe to justify inequality (cf Lenski *et al* 1995:221; see Lenski 1966; 1985:89-116). The following sketch (taken from Lenski *et al* 1995:222) illustrates the effects of the shift from a horticultural to an agrarian society:



Model of the effects of the shift from horticulture to agriculture

The arrows in the sketch demonstrate the dynamics of the cultural shifts from simple to advanced agrarian societies. The result of military conquests was that the peasants were no longer only subjected to local leaders, but also to alien rulers and their officials. This led to increased inequality, higher taxes and a fear of foreign ideologies. The New Testament attests to the conflicts caused by military subjection and the occupation of Israel by first the Greeks and then the Romans. The class structure of advanced agrarian societies can be illustrated as follows (this sketch is taken from Gerhard Lenski *et al* 1995:217; cf Stegemann & Stegemann 1995:127; Fiensy 1991:158; Duling & Perrin 1994:49-50, 141-142; Crossan 1994:24-28, 83):



Model of the class structure of advanced agrarian societies

According to this sketch the majority of the population consisted of peasants while the governing class and their retainers made up only a small percentage of the population. On account of purity ideology the phenomenon of social outcasts was a reality. For these “impure” people there was no place in society. Groups such as merchants and artisans were intermediaries between the peasants and the governing class. The sketch indicates that power, prestige and privilege were restricted to a small number of people in the highest echelons of the social hierarchy.

4. READING THE JESUS TRADITION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF “LOVE-PATRIARCHALISM”

Knowledge of the structure of village and household administration in rural Galilee is necessary in order to understand the context of Jesus’ message. It can be presupposed that the transmitters of the Jesus traditions had an intimate knowledge of his frame of reference. They would know that, when Jesus spoke of God, it would be in terms of the structure of village and household administration in an advanced agrarian context rather than in terms of the power structures of the emperor in a simple agrarian society. Kinship structures established in the villages and households of first-century Galilee had already advanced from simple agrarian to advanced agrarian. In the process of encountering God through Jesus, the followers of Jesus transferred the symbols he used for God to Jesus himself. These symbols and the values Jesus envisioned came from the realm of an advanced agrarian culture embedded in kinship structures.

The basic values of a group reflect its deepest convictions. Formally these values are articulated in the texts of the community. Theissen (1999:81) states in this regard that “basic values prove to be *basic* values by shaping other values and norms. They serve as meta-values and meta-norms for other ethical statements” (Theissen’s italics). He considers humility (the renunciation of status) and love, for example, to be basic values of the early Jesus groups. These basic values shape all relationships. As far as the relationship with the neighbour is concerned, the boundaries between in-group and out-group (horizontal boundaries) and those between higher and lower status positions (vertical boundaries) are crossed. In Theissen’s (1999:81) view “this twofold crossing of boundaries can be demonstrated throughout the primitive Christian ethic, even where

there is no direct mention of either love or humility". The crossing of the vertical boundaries (of position and status) takes an interesting turn in Christian ethic. The ideas of neighbourliness and humility come from the lower echelons of society. But in the Jesus movements people who live according to these values are given high status by God. So a value from below makes it to the sphere of status and position. The opposite also happens. The values of the ethic of rule found among the upper classes are made accessible to the common people. Theissen (1999:82) calls it the "'democratization' of an ancient aristocratic ethic". Applied to the Jesus tradition as it was lived in a patriarchal society it can be referred to as "love-patriarchalism". Jesus' vision influenced relationships and interaction between people, but it did not change the culture. Jesus and his followers often borrowed from their patriarchal culture embedded in village and household structures in order to articulate their vision.

The Jesus saying that it is better to give than to receive (Acts 20:35) was a "general *maxim of benefactors* in antiquity and ... it can first be demonstrated as a maxim for royal disposition and behaviour" (Theissen 1999:90; cf also Theissen 1995a:195-215). It was an aristocratic value to be a benefactor to the people and to use one's wealth for the benefit of the community (cf Bolkestein [1939] 1967). Patrons did good works for those whose loyalty they wanted to secure and as a means to demonstrate their position and status in society. The fame their good works brought them would ensure that they would be remembered and praised even after their death. Their benevolence did, however, not extend to the poor. In the Christian ethic this value from above, an aristocratic value, met with the value of neighbourliness, a value from below, a value of the little people, and the fusion of the two became a Christian value. This is an example of "love-patriarchalism" within the Christian community.

Though a common social phenomenon, "love-patriarchalism in the Christian context did have a distinctive element, which was not the absence of hierarchy, but inclusive love: "It is now to provide for all in a communitarian fellowship in which all support one another Christ himself becomes the primal model of a renunciation of power and a criticism of the powerful. He is the power of God which revealed itself in the cross as 'weakness'." And so also "Christ himself becomes the primal model for the

renunciation of possessions” (Theissen 1999:91, 98; cf Hengel 1974:60-73; Theissen 1995b:689-711).

Schottroff disagrees with Theissen who describes early Christian ethic in terms of the concept “love-patriarchalism”. According to her Christian love rules out patriarchalism. However, it was demonstrated that inclusivity – the crossing of the insider-outsider boundaries – is the distinctive Christian addition to the concept of “love-patriarchalism”. In a hierarchical agrarian system the absence of patriarchy is unthinkable. This included the early Christian communities who made the love of Jesus part of their lives and communities.

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