

# A PROPHET OF OLD: JESUS THE 'PUBLIC THEOLOGIAN'

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## ABSTRACT

In this article the argument is put forward that Jesus' parables portray him as a social prophet, as many of the issues addressed by Old Testament prophets (such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea) are common themes in Jesus' parables. As proof for and further elaboration on the abovementioned argument, two of these themes from Jesus' parables, religious inclusivity and social injustice, are discussed. It is concluded that if public theology is understood as public theologians doing theology in public, Jesus was a 'public theologian' *par excellence*.

## INTRODUCTION

Who was Jesus, the Galilean from Nazareth? Since Reimarus's (1694–1768) answer to this question in 1778,<sup>1</sup> scholars interested in the historical Jesus have answered this question in many different ways. According to Schweitzer (1906, [1968]), Jesus was the direct opposite of Reimarus's Jesus: Jesus was a typical Jewish apocalyptic who proclaimed a futuristic (heavenly) kingdom (see also Bornkamm 1960). Vermes (1973), on the other hand, sees Jesus as a Galilean Hasid (a holy man or rabbi in the charismatic tradition of Galilee), Brandon (1967) understands him as a Zealot-like Jewish revolutionary who had political aims, while Smith (1978) describes him as a miracle worker (magician). Since 1985<sup>2</sup> an abundance of divergent profiles of Jesus have been suggested by scholars. In these varied profiles, the Jesus who emerges is understood as anything from an itinerant, Cynic-like philosopher (Downing 1998; Mack 1998), a Jewish Mediterranean peasant (Crossan 1991), a Spirit-filled person or charismatic holy man (Borg 1994; Twelftree 1993; Vermez 1973), an eschatological prophet who announced the restoration of Israel in terms of a non-apocalyptic kingdom within space-time history (Allison 1998; Casey 1991; Sanders 1993; Wright 1992, 1996), a prophet of social change (Horsley & Hanson 1985, 1987; Kaylor 1994; Theissen 1987), a prophet and child of Sophia (Schüssler Fiorenza 1994), a marginal Jew (Meier 1991), a Jewish Messiah of sorts (Bockmuehl 1994; De Jonge 1991; Dunn 1992; Stuhlmacher 1993), a fatherless Jew (Van Aarde 2001) or a Galilean shamanic figure (Craffert 2008).

This article argues that the understanding of Jesus as a (ethical-eschatological) social prophet should be taken seriously.<sup>3</sup> First of all, it is clear that some of Jesus' contemporaries saw him as one of the 'ancient prophets' (Lk 9:19), such as John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah (Mk 8:28; Mt 16:14; Lk 9:19). Simon the Pharisee clearly assumes that Jesus is popularly held to be a prophet (Lk 7:39). When Jesus enters Jerusalem he is greeted as the 'prophet from Nazareth of Galilee' (Mt 21:11) and while Jesus is in Jerusalem the religious leaders cautiously plot his arrest because they fear the crowd that holds Jesus to be a prophet (Mt 21:46). Even members of Antipas's court thought that Jesus was one of the prophets of old (Mk 6:15; Lk 9:8). In the Emmaus narrative Jesus is referred to as a 'prophet mighty in word and deed' (Lk 24:19).<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the parables in the Synoptic Gospels (and the Gospel of Thomas) paint a picture of Jesus as a prophet of old. Many of the issues and themes addressed by Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea can be indicated in Jesus' parables. Two of these common themes, inclusivity (accommodation) and social injustice, will be attended to in this article. It will also be argued that Jesus, as social prophet during his public ministry, can be depicted as a 'public theologian' *par excellence*.

## JESUS AS SOCIAL PROPHET IN HIS PARABLES

The understanding of Jesus as a social prophet in his parables is based on a specific approach to the parables that operates from the following points of departure: First, Jesus told his parables in first-century Palestine (circa 27–30 AD), an advanced (aristocratic) agrarian society under the combined control of the Roman Empire and the Jewish aristocracy<sup>5</sup> (Judaea). Advanced agrarian societies were aristocratic in nature, with the working of the land (agriculture) as the main 'economic' activity. Society was divided into the *haves* (the ruling elite) and the *have-nots* (the ruled peasantry). Although comprising only two per cent of the population, the elite controlled most of the wealth (up to 65 per cent) by controlling and exploiting the land and sea, its produce and its cultivators (the peasantry and fishermen whose

1. According to Reimarus (in his *Fragments* published after his death by Lessing [1729–1781]), Jesus saw himself as a (political) kingly messiah and had the intention to establish an earthly kingdom during his lifetime by delivering his people from the bondage of Rome. Jesus thus was not the 'spiritual' messiah who died for the sins of humankind, was resurrected and will return in glory. This picture of Jesus, according to Reimarus, was an invention of his disciples after his death.

2. The year 1985 is seen as the year in which the so-called 'Third Quest or Renewed New Quest' (depending on the approach taken) for the historical Jesus started. This renewed interest in who the historical Jesus was gave rise to many (and varied) profiles of Jesus.

3. This statement does not exclude the possibility that Jesus most probably also was, for example, a healer and an exorcist. It simply states that at least one of Jesus' attributes was that of being a social prophet.

4. All of these materials take it for granted 'that Jesus was popularly acclaimed as a prophet or called a prophet by his opponents' (Herzog 2005:99), thus making it quite likely that Jesus was called a prophet during his lifetime. According to Wright (1996:162), it is unlikely that the early church invented the many sayings that call Jesus a prophet. The reason for this is that it is simply risky theologically to do so, since it might have appeared 'that he was simply being put on a level with all the other prophets'.

5. The Roman Empire favoured traditional forms of rule (indirect rule) and allowed the use of local temples or cults/religions.

labour created the produce). Local, regional and imperial elites imposed tributes, taxes, rent (e.g. Herod in Galilee) and tithes (e.g. the Jewish elite in Judaea), extracting wealth from non-elites by taxing the production, distribution and consumption of goods. In short, the elite lived at the expense of the non-elite. The elite ruled not because of democratic elections but rather through the use and abuse of power and the hereditary control of land. The rulers treated controlled (conquered) land as their personal estate to confiscate, distribute, redistribute and disperse as they deemed fit. The elite therefore shaped the social experience of the peasantry; social control was built on fear, and the relationship between the ruling elite and the ruled non-elite was one of power and exploitation.<sup>6</sup>

Because of the elite's exploitation of the non-elite, the peasantry in first-century Palestine lived on the verge of destitution. Palestine in the first century was part of the Roman Empire. Rome claimed sovereignty over land and sea: its yield, the distribution of its yield and its cultivators (the peasantry). This was done through a tributary system. The Roman tribute consisted of two basic forms, the *tributum soli* (land tax) and the *tributum capitis* (poll tax); non-payment of these taxes was seen as rebellion against Rome. Rome ruled Palestine through native collaborators from the elite who had the responsibility of paying the annual tribute, extracted from the peasantry, to Rome. During Jesus' public ministry this was the responsibility of Herod Antipas in Galilee and the temple authorities in Judaea and Samaria. The wealth that was required to support Herod's lavish lifestyle and his many building projects came from the peasantry by means of a second level of tribute and taxes: Antipas and the Herodian elite first of all claimed the so-called 'surplus of the harvest' and to this was added further tribute and taxes. This left the peasantry of Galilee in a very precarious situation where their level of subsistence was concerned. The only way to survive was to borrow from the elite and the elite were always willing to invest in these loans (with interest rates of up to 48 per cent); they knew that their debtors would not be able to repay their debts, which in turn gave them the opportunity to foreclose and add the peasants' land to their own estates (Goodman 1987). Peasants therefore lost their land and in a downward spiral became first tenants, then day labourers, then beggars.

The situation of the peasantry in Judaea was the same. In 6 AD, Augustus deposed Archelaus, declared Judaea and Samaria a Roman province (administered by Syria) and appointed the priestly aristocracy (centred in the temple in Jerusalem), under the control of a prefect (Pilate in the time of Jesus), to maintain order and collect the Roman tribute. The temple elite in Judaea were no different from those in Galilee. To keep their base of power (the temple system) intact, they added to the Roman tribute tithes, offerings and contributions during religious festivals. Even the peasants of Galilee were subject to this demand, although they lived outside the jurisdiction of Judaea. Peasants who could not pay were labelled unclean. Although the land (ideologically speaking) belonged to peasant smallholders who inherited their ancestral plots, the priestly elite also added peasants' land to their estates by investing in loans. The elite in Galilee and Judaea therefore became the controlling force of most private land. Small peasant farmers were increasingly replaced by large estates owned by the powerful and exploiting elite. All this left the peasantry 'on the edge of destitution, and often over the edge' (Borg 2006:227).<sup>8</sup>

6. For the salient features of advanced agrarian societies see inter alia Polanyi (1944), Lenski (1966), Carney (1975), Finley (1973), Oakman (1986, 2008), Fiensy (1991, 2007), Freyne (1992), Hanson and Oakman (1998), Rohrbach (1998), Stegemann and Stegemann (1999), Herzog (2005) and Carter (2006, 2008).

7. Interest rates up to 48 per cent are attested (Brutus' loan to Salamis; Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 5.21.10–12). In general, however, interest was limited to 12 per cent by edict, although rates of 20 per cent are also attested (see *P. Mur.* 114; *P. Mur.* 18; Kloppenborg 2009:4).

8. Chancey (2008:1–2) gives the following summary of a social-contextual reading of economic pressures on the peasantry in first-century Palestine that is worth noting: '[t]hese economic pressures are, in turn, often associated with the actions of Herod

In this exploitative situation, caused by the 'kingdom of Rome' and the 'kingdom of the temple', the central message of Jesus was the kingdom of God.<sup>9</sup> This kingdom was not a futuristic-apocalyptic reality (a position recently defended by Allison 1998) but was ethical-eschatological in content.<sup>10</sup> It was a kingdom here and now, a transformed world, a kingdom 'that challenged the kingdoms of this world' (Borg 2006:186), a kingdom that challenged the exploitative social and economic relations in Jesus' society (Moxnes 2003). This kingdom was 'the immediate reign of God that is now present in the potential of the human imagination to see the world differently and to act accordingly' (Patterson, in Miller 2001:71). This is also the point of view of Borg (2006), Cupitt (2001) and Funk (2007):

*Jesus' Kingdom had been ethical and this-worldly. It was about committing oneself ethically to life and to one's neighbour here and now, in this world, and in the present.*

(Cupitt 2001:55)

*The kingdom was for the earth, political and religious and involved a transformed world.*

(Borg 2006:186)

*[T]he kingdom of God was a kingdom of this world. Jesus always talked about God's reign in everyday, mundane terms – dinner parties, travellers being mugged, truant sons, laborers in a vineyard, the hungry and tearful.*

(Funk 2007:90)

From the above it is clear that Jesus' parables are not to be read for a view of the future or the end of time.<sup>11</sup> The parables should rather be interpreted as an imagined 'kingdom' (reality) in which different social relations and power structures operate.

As such, Jesus' parables were 'dangerous speech'. In a society in which politics and kinship were the only exclusive arenas of life (Malina 2001:15–16), any 'religious' statement was, in essence, political.<sup>12</sup> The aristocratic kingdom of Rome dealt with the non-elite through social institutions characterised by power and resource inequities (political economy). Jesus' parables,

(Footnote 8 cont...)

Antipas, particularly his rebuilding of Sepphoris and his foundation of Tiberias.... Antipas's creation of new cities placed new strains on the peasant majority of Galilee. The cities required a reorientation of the distribution of agricultural products; whereas farmers had once focused on growing crops for their own subsistence, they now had to produce surplus crops to feed the cities. Taxes and rents imposed by the parasitic cities and their elites combined to facilitate this transfer of foodstuffs. But taxes served not only to feed the cities; tax increases would have been necessary just to build them. The cities served as focal points for the collection of taxes not only for Antipas but also for Rome. To pay their taxes, peasants had to sell off their surplus for coins, and Antipas minted bronze coinage for just this purpose, to facilitate payment of taxes. These intertwining policies of taxation and monetization pushed family farmers beyond what they were able to produce, causing them to seek loans from city-based lenders and to sell their lands to city-dwelling estate owners. Some farmers became tenants on what had been their own lands, others were forced to become day laborers, others became artisans and craftsmen, others resorted to begging, and still others turned to social banditry. It is within this context of a debilitating economic crisis that we must place the historical Jesus, with his call for a different type of kingdom.'

9. See, for example, Borg (2006) and Hoover (2004): 'God and God's kingdom were at the center of Jesus' life and mission' (Borg 2006:165); 'The central idea or symbol of Jesus' teaching was the kingdom of God. ...The kingdom is what Jesus' teaching is and is also the goal he was aiming for' (Hoover 2004:18).

10. For the sake of clarity, I follow Crossan's definition of eschatology. According to Crossan, Jesus was eschatological but not apocalyptic. This 'odd' statement is clarified by Crossan's understanding of eschatology either being apocalyptic or ethical in character: ethical eschatology can be defined as transformative, social, active and durative, while apocalyptic eschatology refers to an eschatology that is destructive, material, passive and instantive (see Crossan 1999:257–292; Crossan, in Miller 2001:69).

11. One should also remember that Mediterranean people were rather markedly present orientated, with past second and future third (Malina 1989:1–31; see e.g. Matt 6:34). See also Kloppenborg (2009:5): 'For peasants, the future is tomorrow or the next harvest, not some distant *parousia*.'

12. All societies might be viewed as consisting of at least four social institutions: kinship, politics, economics and religion (Parsons 1960). While modern societies generally regard these four institutions as separate spheres of life, first-century Mediterranean people treated politics and kinship as the only exclusive arenas of life (Malina 2001:15–16). In the political sphere, therefore, there were political religion and political economy but no separate religion and economy. And in the kinship sphere, there were domestic (kinship) religion and domestic (kinship) economy but no separate religion and economy (Malina 1986:92–101, 1994:1–26).

conversely, 'were underwritten by culturally informed values that envisioned alternate institutions' (Oakman 2008:253).<sup>13</sup> For Jesus, this institution was the kingdom of God.

Moreover, when Jesus spoke in his parables about the presence of a new kingdom, other than the aristocratic kingdom of the Roman Empire, it was a political statement. When Jesus urged his hearers to be a community in which God's presence and not Rome's presence was fully established, a community in which there was justice for everyone (including one's enemy), a community that welcomed strangers (Bessler-Northcutt 2004:55), it was a political statement. When Jesus spoke of God's rule as a power opposed to the social order established in Rome (Oakman 2008:105), it was a political statement. When Jesus told stories that applauded members of the elite who practised generalised reciprocity (taking no account of exchanges or debt; Oakman 2008:105), it was a political statement. And when Jesus told stories that transgressed the purity rules of the temple, making impure leaven and mustard seed positive symbols for God's presence, it was also a political statement. As a matter of fact, any talk about values that envisioned an alternative for the power and privilege of Rome and the temple was political. Jesus' parables, therefore, were political. They were stories of social critique on the first century's oppressive political, religious and social context. To use the words of Schottroff (2006:103), they described not 'a specific historical event, but a political structure'. Jesus' parables, however, did not only speak out 'against the temple elite (the kingdom is impure) and the Roman Empire' (divide and conquer; Scott 2007:113–114). Criticism was also levelled at peasant interests (Oakman 2008:180); peasant villagers also had to overcome some of their own prejudices and interests (e.g. the unforgiving slave [Mt 18:23–34], the older brother in the prodigal son narrative [Lk 15:11–32] and the victim in the Samaritan narrative [Lk 10:30–35]). Herzog (1994:3) is therefore correct when he describes Jesus' parables as 'a form of social analysis'. Or in the words of Oakman (2008:296), '[t]he kingdom represents social challenge and transformation. Jesus' historical activity was essentially about politics and the restructuring of society, and not about religion or theology.'<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the parables of Jesus are not stories about God but stories about God's kingdom. There is a general tendency amongst parable scholars (see e.g. Snodgrass 2008:20)<sup>15</sup> to identify the actors or characters in the parables with God or even Jesus himself.<sup>16</sup> To read the parables from this perspective is to depict a Jesus who made theological statements and told stories about heaven. Jesus had no doctrine of God, made no

theological statements and never used abstract language. 'His parables are not stories of God – they are stories about God's estate' (Funk 2007:90). Or in the words of Herzog, 'the parables were not earthly stories with heavenly meanings, but earthly stories with heavy meanings' (1994:3). They are stories about 'the gory details of how oppression served the interests of the ruling class', exploring how human beings could respond to an exploitative and oppressed society created by the power and privilege of the elite (including the temple authorities).

From this perspective, the father in the parable of the prodigal son is a father who subverts the patriarchal system of his day. It is a story of how fathers who are part of the kingdom should treat their prodigal sons; it is a story that pictures a totally new understanding of what family entails. In the same way, the owner in the parable of the tenants in the vineyard is not God but rather a patron who treats his clients in a totally different way than is normally the case in the kingdom of Rome. In the parable of the workers in the vineyard the owner is someone who depicts a non-violent kingdom (see Van Eck 2008:909–936; 2008) and in the parable of the unforgiving servant the king is not God the 'heavy' but a king who exercises authority in a way befitting the kingdom of God (Beutner 2007:36).<sup>17</sup> The characters in the parables do not point to God. The parables point to the kingdom of God. Put differently, '[t]here is something about the parable as a whole that is like the kingdom of God' (McGaughy 2007:11).

To summarise, the parables picture Jesus as a social prophet. In first-century Palestine (circa 27–30 AD), the elite (Roman and Jewish) shaped the social experience of the peasantry, social control was built on fear and the relationship between the ruling elite and the ruled non-elite was one of power and exploitation. Because of this, the peasantry lived on the edge of destitution. In this exploitative situation, Jesus spoke in his parables of a new and different world: the (ethical-eschatological) kingdom of God. His parables were 'political' stories about God's kingdom, 'not earthly stories with heavenly meanings, but earthly stories with heavy meanings' (Herzog 1994:3), exploring how human beings could respond to an exploitative and oppressive society created by the power and privilege of the elite. In short, the parables of Jesus the social prophet were about the kingdom, a 'society' that posed a real threat to Rome's rule and put him in conflict with the religious authorities.

## SOCIAL INJUSTICE: INCLUSIVITY AND CRITIQUE

### Jesus and inclusivity

In his parables, Jesus frequently addressed two 'social illnesses' of his day: religious exclusivism (as advocated by the Jewish temple elite in their understanding of God in terms of his holiness; see Van Eck 1995:376–402) and social injustice (as practised by the Roman and Jewish elite; see again § 2). Contrary

13. For Jesus, God's rule was a power opposed to the social order established in Rome' (Oakman 2008:105). Jesus made use of kinship religion and kinship economy to address the exploitative political economy and political religion of Rome. In Jesus' parables he favoured a fictive family in which relations were modelled on those of close kin, with exchanges taking place through arrangements of generalised reciprocity, taking no account of exchanges or debt (Oakman 2008:105). Jesus' parables, urging for an alternative kinship economy that can be called the kingdom of God, were therefore political (Oakman 2008:97).

14. See also Carter (2008:199): 'In the ... first-century world, religion and politics did mix. Imperial politics, economics, societal structures, and religion were interwoven, each playing an interconnected part in the societal fabric and maintaining of elite control. Thus, to engage the gospels as religious texts concerned only with religious issues is a-historical and anachronistic. Our world is shaped by our western attempts to separate religion from the rest of life, and therefore we, when reading the gospels, arbitrarily select, detach, isolate, and elevate a religious aspect of the ... first-century world, while ignoring political, economic, and cultural factors and their interconnectedness.'

15. See, for example, Snodgrass (2008:20): 'Many parables are "monarchic"; i.e. they are dominated by the figure of a father, master, or king, who is generally an archetype for God. Some deny that these monarchic figures reference God ... and render Jesus' parables lame and ineffective.'

16. A few examples: In the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:23–34), the king who shows compassion towards a hugely indebted slave is a symbol for God (e.g. Hultgren 2000:27; Borg 2006:177); in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11–32), the father symbolises a compassionate God (e.g. Hultgren 2000:86; Borg 2006:17; Snodgrass 2008:128); in the parable of the leased tenants in the vineyard (Thomas 65:1–7; Lk 20:9–15; Mt 21:33–39; Mk 12:1–8), the owner is God and his son is Jesus (Bailey 2008:425); and in the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1–15), the owner again is a symbol for God and the steward is a symbol for Jesus (Hultgren 2000:36; Bailey 2008:364; Snodgrass 2008:20, 377).

17. In this parable God is not the 'heavy'. The moment God is cast outside the parable 'we are in a fresh position to understand the irony of Jesus when he speaks of God's domain in terms of a kingdom. If Jesus speaks ironically of the activity of God as kingdom, he may well mean "whatever else you think of, do not think of kingdom; think instead of its exact opposite." When this happens, the king in the story no longer has divine attributes; he is a mere mortal like the hearers and we and the hearers no longer feel compelled to automatically defend his every action as wise, reliable and irreversible. Think then of this king as an elite who usurped the land of the peasantry, much despised by them. Think then what Jesus wants to say about the way authority should be exercised in the kingdom of God (Beutner 2007:37). See also Verhoeven (2007:49) on the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1–15): '[t]hrough many centuries scholars have identified the owner as a God figure. The parable is not about God, but about God's kingdom. The parable is a clear response to a question Jesus' audience might have asked regularly: what is the kingdom of God like? Not: what is God like! According to Verhoeven (2007), this is also the case in the parables of the prodigal son and the Samaritan; the figures of the father and the Samaritan are all human beings whose behaviour is an example of human behaviour in God's kingdom. 'It is about the breaking down of conventional wisdom, the tearing apart of social boundaries and barriers, the display of unconditional love for the righteous and sinners alike, it is the breaking in of the kingdom of God!' (Verhoeven 2007:49).



to the Jewish temple elite's 'politics of holiness', Jesus advocated a 'politics of compassion' (Borg 1994:46–68), a kingdom that also included the socially impure (e.g. the lame, the blind, cripples, lepers and women). This message of Jesus is found, *inter alia*, in the parables of the mustard seed (Mk 4:30–32; Mt 13:31–32; Lk 13:18–19; GThom 20:1–4), the leaven (Mt 13:33; Lk 13:20–21; GThom 96:1–3) and the great banquet or dinner party (Lk 14:16–24; Mt 22:2–14; GThom 64).

In the parable of the mustard seed Jesus compares the kingdom of God with a man sowing a mustard seed in prepared soil,<sup>18</sup> the seed grows into a tree (or large bush) that becomes the nesting place (shelter) for the birds of the sky. This comparison of Jesus was, to say the least, shocking. It meant that the kingdom was impure and inclusive. Moreover, it implied that the kingdom of God had taken over the 'kingdom of the temple'. How does one come to this conclusion?

First of all, the kingdom is described as being present in the activity of a peasant in a rural area and not in the activities of the temple elite in Jerusalem. The kingdom has therefore shifted from the centre to the periphery, from the most holy (holy of the holies) to the least holy, the land of Israel (see *m. Kelim I*, 6–9).

Secondly, the mustard seed figures prominently in discussions of 'diverse kinds' regarding purity (Scott 1989:374). Fundamental to the purity code of Leviticus is that things that are not alike are not to be mixed (see Lv 19:19<sup>19</sup>; Scott 2001:37). Consequently planting a mustard seed in a garden<sup>20</sup> or in prepared soil with other weeds (clearly prohibited) means impurity. The kingdom of God is a mixed kingdom and therefore impure. With regard to impurity, the smallness of the mustard seed also comes into play. In Jewish sources (e.g. the Talmud), smallness is sometimes associated with unclean things.<sup>21</sup> But this is not all. The comparison of the kingdom with a mustard seed goes even further. The mustard plant is an annual plant, a weed, and grows wild.<sup>22</sup> After it has been planted, it spreads rapidly and cannot be stopped; it cannot be gotten rid of easily. So it becomes a nuisance.

It also takes over. This aspect of the mustard seed is evoked by the described result of its planting: it grows into a tree in which the birds of the sky make their nests. This image, according to Scott (2001:38–39), 'conjures up the mighty cedar of Lebanon' (see Ezk 17:22–23, 31:2–6; Dn 4:10–12; Ps 104:16–17). In these verses the mighty kingdoms of Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia as well as Israel are equated with the noble and mighty cedar. It is, however, in the mustard 'tree' that the birds of the sky come to nest. The comparison is clear: the mighty cedar has been replaced by something unclean.<sup>23</sup>

18. According to Luke 13:19 the mustard seed is planted in a garden, in the Gospel of Thomas 20:4 it falls on prepared soil, in Mark 4:31 it is sown on the ground and in Matthew 13:31 it is sown in a field. Much has been said in parable scholarship on these differences, especially with regard to the possible 'original reading' of this aspect of the parable (see e.g. Scott 1989:374–377). Although this question is indeed important, our interest here is the simple fact that the sower sows the seed consciously in prepared soil (either a cultivated field [see Oakman 2008:11] or a garden [Scott 1989:377]) with other seed.

19. 'Keep my decrees. Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material' (NIV; see also Dt 22:9–11).

20. Mishnah Kilayim 3.2 is clear on the fact that a mustard seed could not be planted in a garden: '[n]ot every kind of seed may be sown in a garden, but any kind of vegetable may be sown therein. Mustard and small beans are deemed a kind of seed and large beans a kind of vegetable' (*m Kil 3.2*, in Scott 1989:375).

21. 'The Daughters of Israel have undertaken to be so strict with themselves that if they see a drop of blood no bigger than a mustard seed they wait seven days after it' (*b. Ber. 31a*, in Scott 1989:377).

22. See Pliny (*Natural History*, 29.54.170, in Scott 2001:37): '[i]t grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.'

23. '[F]or Jesus ... God's empire is more pervasive than dominant. It is like a pungent weed that takes over everything and in which the birds of the sky van nest; it bears little if any resemblance to the mighty, majestic, and noble symbol of the empire of Israel or Caesar' (Scott 2001:39).

In its branches the birds of the sky, including the Gentiles,<sup>24</sup> will nest.

The comparison of the kingdom with a mustard seed has one final connotation: the mustard seed was also used for medicinal purposes, for the curing of illnesses (e.g. the bite of serpents, scorpion stings, fungi, inflammation, toothache, stomach problems and promotion of menstruation and urine; see Pliny, *Natural History*, 20.87.236–237 in Scott 1989:380). As such, the mustard seed (as the kingdom of God) will cure the 'illnesses' of the kingdoms of Rome and the temple.

In the parable of the leaven (Mt 13:33; Lk 13:20–21; GThom 96:1–3) the kingdom of God is also typified as unclean and inclusive. The parable is only a short 'one-liner' but explosive: the kingdom is like a woman who leavens flour until it is all leavened. Why is this explosive? Because the kingdom is blasphemously juxtaposed with leaven that is impure and unclean and, above all, this is all described as the doing of a woman. In short, the divine is identified with the unclean, the impure (see Scott 2007:99–101). Like the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the leaven starts with a shock. 'The very fact that the woman is making the bread herself indicates a rural, peasant background' (Scott 2001:25).<sup>25</sup> Again the kingdom is described as being present in the activity of a peasant in a rural area, not in the activities of the temple elite in Jerusalem.

Moreover, the presence of the kingdom is described in the activity of a peasant woman. In the first-century Mediterranean world, males were associated with purity and women with the religiously unclean. First-century Palestine was a patriarchal society in which women were seen as the mere property of the males to which they belonged or in which they were embedded.

[I]n ... a ... culture, where the principal symbolization of social relations was in terms of kinship the social structure was patriarchal. The father was the head of the family, in no uncertain terms; ... in such traditional patriarchal societies ... wives and children ... are treated as the property of the male head of the household.

(Horsley 1993:232; see also Van Aarde 2000:226)

This elevated status of the husband was based on the conviction that life was contained in the seed of the male and that 'the female provided nothing beyond a place for the seed's growth until birth' (Malina-Jacobs 1993:1). Subsequently, women needed men to be 'whole' and inherently possessed the possibility to shame their husbands:

Unlike the male whose gender made him whole and complete, the female was raised with a sense of shame which made her as dependent on the male for her own 'completeness' as she was dependent on him for children, support and honor. The woman whose modesty and strictly controlled behavior in public manifested this sense of shame brought honor on the males to whom she was attached.

(Malina-Jacobs 1993:1)<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, the presence of the kingdom in the activity of a peasant woman, who was not even allowed into the temple ('holy space') and who served as a symbol of impurity, was a shocking image. This kingdom was in the 'wrong place' and included the 'wrong people'. Clearly, God's active location shifted from 'purity' to 'impurity', a 'scandalous relocation of the divine presence' (Bessler-Northcutt 2004:59).

24. According to Jeremias (1972:147), κατασκηνόουν, used in Mark 4:32, Matthew 13:32 and Luke 13:19, is a technical term for the incorporation of the Gentiles into the people of God (see *Joseph and Aseneth* 15.7; see also Manson 1979:133).

25. In urban areas bread was normally bought at a bakery. We have, for example, large remains of bakeries in Ostia, Antica and Pompeii. In the parable, however, we have a scene in which a woman, in a rural village, is preparing to bake bread (see Scott 2001:25).

26. The patriarchal relationship between men and women was understood as analogous to God's creation: 'God is to man as man is to woman; man is to nature what man is to woman; the master is to slave as man is to woman, the emperor is to his people as man is to woman, the teacher is to his pupil as man is to woman' (Malina-Jacobs 1993:2).

Moreover, leaven, like a mustard seed, is surely not a correct symbol of the kingdom of God. According to the 'kingdom of the temple', with its 'politics of holiness', unleavened was the symbol for purity and the divine, as can be deduced, for example, from Exodus:

*For seven days [during Passover] no yeast<sup>27</sup> [leaven] is to be found in your houses. And whoever eats anything with yeast in it must be cut off from the community of Israel, whether he is an alien or native-born. Eat nothing made with yeast. Wherever you live, you must eat unleavened bread.<sup>28</sup>*

(Ex 12:19–20)

Unleavened was seen as the proper symbol for the divine, while leavened was a symbol for moral evil and the unclean (Scott 2007:99; see also Boucher 1981:75). In the ancient world, according to Scott (2001), the process of leavening stood as a metaphor for moral corruption.

*Just as a decomposing corpse swells up, so does a leavened loaf. A modern example is the swollen corpse of road kill. That corpse swells up for the same reason that bread swells up – fermentation.*

(Scott 2001:25)

Leaven is a product of fermentation (rotten bread) and is associated with a corpse, thus with impurity.<sup>29</sup> As such, the juxtaposition of the kingdom and leaven was blasphemous: The divine is identified with that which is unclean and unacceptable: the impure (Scott 2007:100). Moreover, the leavening process only stops when everything is leavened, until everything is corrupted. Scott (2007) summarises Jesus' shocking one-liner as follows:

*This one sentence parable redefines the divine. The divine is identified with the unclean, the impure. The involvement of the divine with the unclean does not result in the unclean becoming divine. The parable does not end with 'until it was all unleavened.' Rather the divine becomes unclean – or to restate this insight even more provocatively, God becomes unclean.*

(Scott 2007:100)

The parable of the leaven must have been shocking to those, like the temple elite, who understood God in terms of his holiness (that is, 'unleavened'). For the 'leavened', however, the parable was good news. In the kingdom there was a place for women and the socially 'impure' (i.e. the so-called 'sinners', such as the lame, the blind, cripples and lepers). God's kingdom indeed was inclusive. God's holiness was not that as understood and defined by the temple. His holiness was compassion. God was like leavened, not unleavened, bread, which means that the boundaries of the sacred, as established by the understanding of God in terms of his holiness, were eliminated (see Scott 2001:34).

Inclusivity is also one of the topics in the parable of the great supper (Lk 14:16–24; Mt 22:2–14; GThom 64). Before we turn to the aspect of the parable that is of interest here, two remarks need to be made for the sake of clarity. In the first-century Mediterranean world a man was known by the company he kept. Read this statement literally. This was especially the case where meals were concerned. Like only ate with like. Elliott (1991:103) describes this relation between food codes and social codes in the time of Jesus as follows:

*In any society or sub-group thereof, there is generally a correlation of the rules and boundaries concerning what one eats, 'with whom' one eats, when one eats, how one eats, where one eats, to 'what community, group, or kinship network one belongs', and what constitutes the 'group's traditions, values, norms, and worldview'.*

(Elliott 1991:103, my emphasis)

Those with whom one ate was therefore an indication of the group to which one belonged (e.g. the elite, the Pharisees). It was also, very importantly, an indication of one's status and honour (the pivotal social value in the world of Jesus). People, for example members of the elite, therefore regularly invited people with the same or higher status to a meal in order to enhance their own status and honour. The parable of the great supper is an example of such an effort to enhance status and to gain honour. It is also, however, a good example of Jesus' attitude towards this ever-present desire for the enhancement of status and honour (and an exclusive and stratified society as product thereof). Let us consider the Lukan version of the parable (Lk 14:16–24).

A man (most probably a member of the elite, since he can prepare a δέϊπνον μέγα ['great' supper]) invited guests (probably also members of the elite, since they can buy fields and have as many as five pair of oxen<sup>30</sup>) to supper. On the day the supper was to take place the guests were invited again.<sup>31</sup> They, however, make excuses to avoid attending the supper. When one takes their poor excuses<sup>32</sup> into consideration, it is clear that the invited guests, between the first and second invitation, have come to realise that their attendance will do nothing to enhance their status and honour; it may even be to their detriment.<sup>33</sup> This information most probably came their way by means of the 'gossip channel'<sup>34</sup> that was part and parcel of non-literate societies like that of Jesus (see Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:366–368).

Clearly the host was shamed, but he reacted in a totally unacceptable way. He first sent his servant to the πλατείας (wide street within a city; see Louw & Nida 1989:19, 1.103) and ῥύμας (city thoroughfares; Louw & Nida 1989:19, 1.104) to

30. In general, a farmer in first-century Palestine would have been in possession of as much land as one or two oxen could plough (more or less 10–20 hectares; Jeremias 1972:177). Wanting to buy five yokes of oxen thus gives an indication of the person's material abilities; he was most probably an estate holder and part of the elite. Jeremias (1972:177) estimates that a farmer who has just bought five pairs of oxen will own at least 45 hectares. The farmer is therefore a very wealthy man.

31. The double invite was a special courtesy that was part of the way that the upper circles (elite) in the first-century Mediterranean world did things. The first invite was sent out prior to the banquet and the second one was brought by servants on the actual day of the event.

32. Issuing an invite was an art because the host had to know which people, those on the same level and those above his social location, would be likely to accept the invite. If they did not accept the invite he would face rejection and shaming (Herzog 2005:205). The host in the parable most probably invited people who were slightly above him in the social scheme of things. If the invited guests accepted the invite they were obligated to extend a future invite in return; that would mean an enhancement of his honour and status (Herzog 2005:205). In this manner he could court wealthier members of the elite as patrons. The invited guests, however, most probably decided that by attending the supper there was nothing to gain; rather, loss of honour and status was possible. They therefore declined the invitation.

33. The procedure for how a piece of land was purchased in the ancient Middle East was very time consuming and extensive. There was not a great deal of available cropland in the Middle East and for this reason the buyer would study and inspect the land for months (or even years). The quality of the soil was of the utmost importance, drainage was vital and it was very important to find out whether it faced winter sun. The terraces needed to be inspected and it had to be verified whether there were any fruit trees on the property. This shows how poor the excuse of the first guest was, having first bought a field and then only wanting to inspect it (Bailey 2008:314). If we consider the above it goes to show just how weak the guest's excuse is and it is a clearly a public insult because no one would buy a field before inspecting it. The same goes for the second excuse. A pair of oxen has to tire at the same speed and must have the ability to pull together. Nobody would therefore buy a pair of oxen before they had been tested, as two oxen that cannot work together are useless and definitely not an asset (Jeremias 1972:177). The third excuse is just as offensive, since the man invited does not even ask to be excused.

34. Among non-literate people (only 2–4 per cent could read or write in agrarian societies), communication was basically by word of mouth. Where reputation (honor and status) is concerned, gossip informed the community about (and validated) ongoing gains and losses, thereby providing a guide to proper social interaction' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:367).

27. The translation of ζύμη as 'yeast' in the New International Version (see also e.g. the NEB and NRSV) is anachronistic. Yeast is a leavening agent, but 'not all leaven is yeast in the modern sense, that is, a leavening agent that can be purchased in refrigerated cubes or as a dried substance in a package' (Hultgren 2000:406). In antiquity, leaven consisted simply of fermenting dough and therefore should not be equated with yeast. See also Scott (1989:324): '[l]eaven is made by taking a piece of bread and storing it in a damp, dark place until mould forms. The bread rots and decays, unlike modern yeast, which is domesticated.'

28. From Exodus 12:19–20 it is clear that in the Old Testament, unleavened bread is seen as a symbol of that which is holy and pure. Leavened, on the other hand, is seen as unholy and impure. In the New Testament we have several examples of leaven as something negative (see Mt 16:6; Mk 8:15; Lk 12:1; 1 Cor 5:6–8; Gl 5:9).

29. See also Scott (1989:324): '[t]hat leaven in the ancient world was a symbol for moral corruption has long been recognized ... panary fermentation represented a process of corruption and putrefaction in the mass of dough.'

fetch the ostracised and unclean/impure (such as the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, i.e. those excluded from the temple). Because there was still room left, he then again sent his servant, this time to the δόους (road between two centres; see Louw & Nida 1989:18, 1.99) and the φραγμούς (path or area along a fence [where desperately poor people might stay]; see Louw & Nida 1989:19, 1.105). The latter most probably was the place outside the city where the impure had to stay during the night because of their social impurities.

This was Jesus' kingdom. Everyone was accommodated, especially the 'impure' ones who were not welcome in the 'kingdom of the temple'. Moreover, the honourable man was the one who was willing to receive these 'outcasts' at his table, like Jesus did (see e.g. Mk 2:16).

## Jesus and social injustice

Several of Jesus' parables addressed the many social injustices experienced especially by the peasantry in first-century Palestine. One of these parables is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–26). The backdrop for the parable is the advanced agrarian (aristocratic) society of first-century Palestine in which the ruling class controlled most of the wealth by controlling the land, its produce and the peasants whose labour created the produce (Carter 2006:3; Hanson & Oakman 1998:69; Horsley 1993:11, 2003:34). Because of the heavy tax burden, most peasants struggled to live above the level of subsistence, accruing heavy debts ('investments' from the elite) that they could not repay (Goodman 1982:426). The result of this rising indebtedness was the forming of ever larger estates, tenancy and a landless class (Kloppenborg 2006:284–309). The peasantry was constantly threatened with downward mobility and a loss of subsistence, being displaced from smallholder to tenant, then from tenant to dependent day labourer and eventually ending up as part of the expendables of society (e.g. beggars like Lazarus).

In the parable the elite are represented by the rich man who shows his status by flaunting his wealth through the clothes he wears. To enhance his honour and status, he feasted every day, most probably with other members of the elite who stood in patron-client relationships with him. Being part of the elite, he also competed for clients among the poor and the peasantry. These patron-client relationships put him in a position to control more and more land, produce and labour.

At his gate one of the products of his exploitation, Lazarus (who represents the exploited peasantry), spent his days.<sup>35</sup> Lazarus had become one of the expendables of the society that the rich man and the other members of the elite created. Lazarus was no longer of any use to the rich man. Since it is said that he was put there every day (Fitzmyer 1985:1131), it means that he could not really beg or take part in the daily *salutation* of the patron. Therefore he was no occasion for almsgiving or the enhancement of honour. Nothing could be gained by making Lazarus a client, even in terms of negative reciprocity, and to show *hospitium* to him (e.g. looking after his sores) would have made Lazarus the rich man's equal. This, of course, would have meant a loss of honour for the rich man. To him, Lazarus was expendable in every sense of the word, but he was also a result of the social and economic injustices of the elite in first-century Palestine. Lazarus had no honour left: he was economically poor (Hollenbach 1987:58), poor in the sense that he could not maintain his status as a peasant-smallholder (Malina 1987:355), he had no family.

35. The reason why Lazarus ended up at the gate of the rich man can only be speculated over. Maybe he was the second or third son of a peasant farmer who only had enough land for the eldest son to inherit; maybe he had to leave the family plot and seek work elsewhere because there were too many mouths to feed in a household living below, or just at, the level of subsistence; or maybe his father had lost his land because of rising indebtedness and eventual foreclosure on his mortgage by one of the exploiting urban elite (Herzog 1994:119). He may even have been a smallholder of inherited land who, because of *inter alia* the excessive tax burden imposed by the ruling elite, lost his land. Whatever the case may have been, the road that led to the gate of the rich man was a one-way street: first tenant, then day labourer, eventually drifting to the city where work was scarce, meaning he did not find work and had to become a beggar. The parable describes the final stretch of the road he travelled: he has become malnourished and covered with sores and is not even able to beg anymore.

ties left and, above all, he was considered socially and ritually impure. His name says it all: only God can help.

In the parable, the name Lazarus (only God can help) is not accidental. It typifies the way in which Jesus sided with the poor, the expendables and the socially impure during his day.<sup>36</sup> This, however, was not the way in which the rich man acted, even though nothing prevented him from doing otherwise. The gate was there; it even belonged to him. But he did not pass through it, simply because he could gain nothing by doing so. He could only lose some honour.

When the rich man dies, he is confronted with the kind of patronage towards and solidarity with the poor and destitute that Jesus advocated. Abraham, the example *par excellence* of hospitality in the Old Testament, clearly embodies Jesus' attitude towards the poor. Lazarus is sitting at the table (bosom) of Abraham. *Hospitium* has been extended to him. And then the surprise in Jesus' parable! Abraham is not willing to help the rich man. This is indeed a paradox: Abraham not being hospitable? This simply cannot happen where Abraham is involved. But it does happen: Abraham does not show hospitality. And then the last and biggest shock: the gate between the rich man and Abraham cannot be opened. It cannot be passed through. It has been closed forever.

This is the gist of the parable. When patrons (e.g. the rich), who have in abundance, do not pass through the gate to the poor, a society is created in which a chasm, so great that it cannot be crossed, is brought into existence – one that divides the rich (elite) and poor (peasantry). The worlds of the urban elite and the peasantry drift so far apart that the gap between them eventually cannot be closed. Pass through the gate while you can. Just as unthinkable as it is for Abraham not to do what he can, it is unthinkable for those who can help. Abraham, being a prime example of hospitality, had no reason to turn his back on the rich man. The same holds for the rich man: nothing prevented him from helping Lazarus. It was not impossible to help Lazarus. The protection of the rich man's status and honour, however, made it impossible. And when this happens, nobody can become part of the kingdom, neither Lazarus nor the rich man. This is the result of patrons not being patrons. Real patrons are children of Abraham and they look after the poor (Lk 19:8–9).

In the Thomasine version of the parable of the tenants in the vineyard (GThom 65),<sup>37</sup> Jesus addresses another social injustice:

36. In a situation where Jesus knew very well that the exploiting rich were only becoming richer and the poor poorer, Jesus' concern for the poor is not surprising. He congratulated the poor (Q 6:20 [Lk 6:20/Mt 5:3]/GThom 54) and the hungry (Q 6:21 [Lk 6:21/Mt 5:6]; GThom 69:2), damned the rich and those who were well fed at the cost of the poor (Lk 6:24–25) and exhorted the rich to sell their possessions and give to the poor (see Mt 13:44; GThom 109:1–3; Mt 13:45–46; GThom 76:1–2). He also criticised patronage and client relationships, based on the principle of negative reciprocity, by modelling all personal relations on those of close kin, that is, generalised reciprocity (see Oakman 2008:103–107).

37. The parable of the tenants in the vineyard in the Gospel of Thomas 65 is translated by Funk, Hoover and the Jesus Seminar (1993:510) as follows: "An [usurer] owned a vineyard and rented it to some farmers, so that they could work it and he could collect its crop from them. <sup>2</sup>He sent his slave so the farmers would give him the vineyard's crop. <sup>3</sup>They grabbed him, beat him, and almost killed him, and the slave returned and told his master. "His master said, "Perhaps he didn't know them." <sup>4</sup>He sent another slave, and the farmers beat that one as well. <sup>5</sup>Then the master sent his son and said, "Perhaps they'll show my son some respect." Because the farmers knew that he was the heir to the vineyard, they grabbed him and killed him." When one compares Mark's version of the parable of the Tenants in the vineyard with the version in the Gospel of Thomas 65, three major differences can be indicated. First, there is an intimate connection between the parable and Mark's plot (Kloppenborg 2006:219–220). Mark's framing of the parable in Mark 12:1a, 6a, 7c and 12 integrates the parable into his plot, highlighting the hostility of Jesus' opponents that started in Mark 3:6 and is ever present in the narrative (see e.g. Mk 7:1–5; 8:11–13; 12:13–17; 12:18–27; 12:35–37). Of special importance is Mark 12:6a (ὄγκιστος), a Markan addition to the original parable that integrates the parable into Mark's Christology (see e.g. Mk 1:1, 1:9–11; 8:31–32; 9:7; 9:31; 10:33–34; 15:39). The second distinguishing feature of the parable is Mark's close relationship with texts of the Tanak (Is 5:2, 5; Gn 37:20, 24). The third distinguishing feature of Mark's version of the parable is the allusion to the Deuteronomistic pattern of God's repeated sending of the prophets to Israel and their repeated and violent rejection (Mk 12:5b), the only trace of the Deuteronomistic schema in Mark. The parable of the Tenants in the vineyard in Mark is thus not only closely linked to Mark's plot and theology but also contains features that are typical neither of Mark's other parables nor of parables in general (Kloppenborg 2006:223–241).



the systemic violence that was also part of first-century Palestine. Jesus was born and carried out his public ministry in an advanced agrarian Palestine that was in a situation of colonial occupation, described by Malina (2001:19–22) as a 'ruralized society' or, in the words of Horsley (1993:3–19), an 'imperial situation' maintained by a 'politics of violence' that subjected, pacified and exploited the occupied land and its people (see also Carter 2006:1–3). This pacification and domination, without exception, furthered the interests of the imperial (and the Jerusalem) elite (Herzog 2005:3; Horsley 1993:5). Domination by the ruling elite was not only material in content (the appropriation of produce and labour), but also influenced personal well-being and feelings. It deprived the ruled of their dignity and was degrading and humiliating. As Carter (2006:11) says, '[i]t exacts not only agricultural production but an enormous personal toll of anger, resentment, and learned inferiority.'

Horsley (1993:21) calls this total domination a 'politics of violence' or, more precisely, 'institutional' or 'structural' violence: the illegitimate or unauthorised use of power against the will or desire of others. Also, as the illegitimate use of power, violence can be physical, psychological or spiritual, applied directly or indirectly, in an overt or covert manner. Following these distinctions, Horsley argues that first-century Palestine was in a situation of institutional or structural violence: people were dominated and pacified with extensive and widespread violence applied largely in indirect ways (e.g. indirect rule and taxation), both covertly and overtly. In short: Roman rule was institutional or structural violence (Horsley 1993:21).

Violence perpetrated by the Roman aristocracy consisted of taking land by force, adhering to a legal system that was biased towards the elite, clamping down on any resistance with excessive force (direct and overt), controlling both land and sea (its yield and the bodies that worked the land and sea by means of taxation), cheap labour and census (direct and covert), maintaining patron-client relationships to enhance honour and status, displaying wealth and power and building dependency (indirect and overt) and controlling various forms of communication (political propaganda) in the form of coins, buildings and temples (indirect and covert).

This imperial ideology was based on claiming the favour of the gods. Rome proclaimed that it was chosen by the gods (especially Jupiter) to manifest their rule, will and blessings, to show their presence and favour throughout the world and to rule an 'empire without end'. As such, Rome claimed sovereignty over sea and land and all its inhabitants. This ideology, logically, included the 'right' to domination and power and a belief in Rome's superiority.

Jesus' stance on this structural violence can be deduced from the Gospel of Thomas 65.<sup>38</sup> In this parable Jesus, first of all,

38. A reading of Mark 12:1–12 (and its parallels Mt 21:33–44 & Lk 20:9–19) suggests that Jesus condoned, even instigated, physical or direct overtly violent behaviour. In the Markan version of the parable of the tenants in the vineyard Jesus, after describing the violent behaviour of the tenants, asks a rhetorical question about what the owner of the vineyard will do with his violent tenants. His answer is simple: violence will be answered with violence; the owner will kill the tenants and give the vineyard to others. In the Matthean version the question asked by Jesus is not rhetorical and is answered by those present in the temple (see Mt 21:23) in more or less the same way, but with one exception: the tenants will be killed (as in Mk) so that the vineyard can be given to others who will render the owner his 'rightful' part of the crop; this is an answer that is received by Jesus in a positive way. Simply stated, this can be understood as Jesus' condoning not only violence, but also the expropriation of peasant land by the aristocratic elite with the view of accumulating wealth and status. This, however, is not the end of the story, since, in the Lukan version, Jesus goes even further. After Jesus tells the parable and poses the same rhetorical question and answer as in the Markan version, those present vehemently oppose Jesus' answer of fighting fire with fire. Jesus, however, dismisses their reaction by quoting Psalm 118:22 and adding a Midrash-like interpretation with an overt violent implication (see Lk 20:18). In the Markan version of the parable of the tenants in the vineyard (and therefore also Matthew and Luke in terms of the two-source theory) it is most probably not Jesus but Mark's Jesus speaking. Mark most probably reworked an original parable into an allegory of salvation history that features Jesus' death as the climactic moment of God's relationship with Israel. Mark's parable of the tenants in the vineyard is a piece of theology, 'a reading of salvation history in allegorical dress' (Kloppenborg 2006:11). As a result, Jesus' stance on violence cannot be inferred from Mark 12:1–12 and its parallels; an analysis of GThom 65 most probably will bring us closer.

challenges indirect violence, that is, the first-century values of wealth and status. The owner, in using his status and power, does not succeed in getting his vineyard back. All 'self-evident' or 'ordinary/normal' expedencies such as the connection between status and social power, the privileges of ownership and the normalcy of status displays are unsuccessful and ineffective. Put differently, the 'normal' elite values of status, honour and power (as indirect overt violence) are questioned by Jesus (Kloppenborg 2006:352).

In the parable, Jesus also criticises the use of direct physical violence. In the Gospel of Thomas 65, the tenants' resort to physical violence (with its climax in the killing of the owner's son) reaps no gains. Their violence leads to nothing and in the end the owner is the one who has honour not because he tries to protect his honour by means of status and power, but because he does nothing after his son is killed. Lintott (1968:30) has indicated that in the Roman Empire possession normally was a function 'of the ability to take, hold, and exploit land. Possession involved force'. The possession of land by using force was seen by the aristocracy as a right. Moreover, 'possessions which were originally acquired by force will therefore in the end have to be defended by force' (Lintott 1968:30). In the Gospel of Thomas, the owner refrains from using violence to regain his possession. In other words, honour is gained by acting in precisely the opposite way to that which was regarded as 'normal'. Status and honour are not retained or gained by using violence; the honourable person is the one who refrains from using violence.

Let us finally turn to the parable of the talents (Lk 19:11–27; Mt 25:14–30). Ethnocentric, capitalist readings of this parable, in which the first two slaves (who respectively increase the monies entrusted to them ten- and fivefold) are seen as the heroes of the story and the third slave (who hides the money in the ground [Mt 25:25] or ties it in a cloth [Lk 19:20]) is seen as the villain, are abundant. But in a world where all goods were perceived as available only in limited quantities (Foster 1965; Malina 1981:71–93, 1987:354–367) and people (like the elite) who enriched themselves were seen as morally corrupt thieves,<sup>39</sup> this parable, if this is indeed its meaning, would have been heard by a peasant as a 'text of terror' (Rohrbaugh 1998:33).

In a brilliant reading of the parable, Rohrbaugh (1995:32–39) has shown that the meaning of the parable is just the opposite. The third servant, who gained nothing, can only be seen as a villain from an elitist point of view. From the point of view of Jesus (and the peasantry), however, he is the hero. The third slave is the only one in the parable who acted responsibly and in an honourable way: By hiding the monies that were entrusted to him in the ground, he refused to be part of the exploitative practices of the elite who invested in loans at a high interest rate they knew their debtors would not be able to repay, which in turn gave them, for example, the opportunity to foreclose and add their debtors' land onto their own estates (Goodman 1987). If this is indeed the meaning of the parable, it was bad news for the members of the elite (like the man in the parable) who 'prey upon the weak, take additional shares of the limited pie and thereby amass what is not rightfully theirs' (Rohrbaugh 1998:34). In the parable, Jesus was, therefore, putting his finger on a social injustice of which the peasantry was on the receiving end.

## SOCIAL INJUSTICE IN THE OLD

### TESTAMENT: INCLUSIVITY AND CRITIQUE

#### Universalism

#### Prophetic traditions in the Old Testament

Jesus' accommodation of the social outcasts of his day as well as people from a different *ethnos* than that of Judeanism was

39. [I]n the eastern Mediterranean in New Testament times, "rich" or "wealthy" as a rule meant "avaricious, greedy", while "poor" referred to persons scarcely able to maintain their honor or dignity' (Malina 1987:355). Traditional peasant societies (like that of the first-century Mediterranean) perceived all resources in terms of 'limited goods' and therefore saw wealthy persons as 'thieves' who had benefited at the expense of the poor (see also Malina 1981:71–93, 1987:363).

not something new. It is already to be found in the prophetic traditions of the Old Testament. Like Jesus, Second Isaiah lived in the period of the Second Temple with its politics of holiness. And like Jesus, Second Isaiah had an openness towards the Gentile world.<sup>40</sup> According to Blenkinsopp (1988:86; see also Lohfink & Zenger 2000:47–49), Second Isaiah gives evidence of Israel's being already a confessional community, a community that accepts proselytes. In Isaiah 44:3–5, for example, the Abrahamic tradition (Gn 12:1–3) is interpreted in such a way that the blessing of the nations is understood as adherence to the religion of Abraham's descendants. Moreover, membership of this religious community comes about by personal decision, excluding circumcision. Isaiah 45:20–25 carries the same message: Gentiles are invited to turn to Yahweh to accept salvation from him, salvation that implies a confession of faith in Yahweh (Is 45:23; see also Is 45:14; Ex 18:8–12; Jos 2:9–11; 2 Ki 5:15). This universalistic approach of Second Isaiah, according to Blenkinsopp (1988:93), is also present in Trito Isaiah (see also Lohfink & Zenger 2000:47–49, 53–57). In Isaiah 56:1–8 Yahweh gives the assurance of salvation not only to foreigners but even to eunuchs (socially impure). Clearly here incorporation and membership 'are determined not on ethnic or national considerations but on a profession of faith' (Blenkinsopp 1988:95): Israel will, in future, also include Gentiles.

Gelston (1992:377–397) finds, like Blenkinsopp, the same perspective in Second Isaiah. According to Gelston, Isaiah 43:8–13, 44:3–5 and 44:6–8 (and to a lesser extent 43:21) affirm Second Isaiah's universalistic tendencies. These passages speak of the Gentiles who will recognise that Yahweh is the only God and supreme power of the world, 'surely a form of universalism' (Gelston 1992:385). Like Blenkinsopp, Gelston sees Isaiah 44:3–5 as an indication of Second Isaiah's universalistic tendency: 'Individuals who are not Israelites by birth will become adherents of YHWH' (Gelston 1992:386). Isaiah 45:22 carries the same message even more clearly: the Gentiles are also invited to experience the salvation offered by God (Gelston 1992:391), the same salvation Jesus spoke about when he told stories about the kingdom of God.

### Old Testament prophecy and social injustice

Jesus' stance on social injustice was also not something new. Jesus' concern for the poor, for example, is clearly in line with the priestly,<sup>41</sup> Deuteronomic,<sup>42</sup> wisdom<sup>43</sup> and prophetic traditions (see e.g. Is 3:14–15) in the Old Testament to protect the poor from the exploitative practices and systemic violence of the rich (Fiensy 2007:96, 132).

The Old Testament prophets – of whom Amos and Hosea are probably the best examples – vehemently opposed the exploitative practices of the elite at the expense of the common peasants. Amos's and Hosea's prophetic activity took place in the eighth century BC when Jeroboam II reigned in Israel (the north) and Uzziah in Judah (the south) (Mays 1969:4). This period of history has striking similarities to first-century occupied Palestine. Under the leadership of Jeroboam II and Uzziah, Israel and Judah experienced unprecedented economic growth and political stability (Premnath 2008:126). Jeroboam II and Uzziah colonised vast territories to the east, west and south (see 2 Chr 26:6–8). As is almost always the case, this

colonisation resulted in economic gains that almost exclusively favoured the rich (the ruling elite) at the expense of the majority of the populace: the peasantry (Escobar 1995:169–170; Premnath 2008:127). Using the urban centres (of which a growth in this period can be indicated) as political and administrative centres, the elite set up a system of taxation that effectively extracted the surplus from the rural areas. Agricultural activities were commercialised, which in turn made it possible for the elite to import horses and chariots in exchange for local specialty items such as wine and oil. This procurement of military items gave the elite the military power and political control to dominate the peasantry (Premnath 2008:129). To support their lifestyle of leisure and luxury (conspicuous consumption, for example the use of luxury items such as fine linen, expensive ornaments and perfume) the elite sought as many trade relations as possible, which in turn meant extracting the biggest economic surplus possible. To gain maximum economic advantage, more and more lands were converted for the production of commercial crops, leaving the staples that the peasantry needed for survival in short supply (Premnath 2008:130). This meant that in order to survive, the peasantry had to turn to the local markets – where the merchants took advantage of the peasantry – to buy food they once produced themselves. Consequently the peasantry was in debt and in dire straits and when it did not rain they had to borrow money to survive. Failure to repay their loans meant the foreclosure of their lands, which in turn served the aim of the elite to create large estates and commercialise agricultural activity. Turning to the courts was of no avail; controlled by the elite, the courts were biased and were used as an instrument by the elite to subvert justice (Premnath 2008:131).

Amos and Hosea criticised this situation in very sharp terms. Amos called the elite, who hoarded plunder and loot in their palaces (Am 3:10), from their palaces at Ashdod to come and see the oppression in Samaria (Am 3:9). He further warned them that their strongholds and fortresses would be plundered (Am 3:11). Hosea also criticised the exploitative urban centres: Israel had forgotten its Maker and built palaces, and Judah had multiplied fortified cities, cities that would be devoured by Yahweh (Hs 8:14; see also Hs 6:1–3). Hosea condemned the elite's trust in military power (Hs 10:13–14), as well as their treaties with Assyria and Egypt that enabled them to procure military equipment (Hs 12:1; see Premnath 2008:129). Amos had stern words regarding the excessive extraction of surplus. In his opinion, the elite exploited the poor by taking taxes of wheat (Am 5:11), trampled the head of the poor into the dust (Am 2:7) and oppressed the poor and crushed the needy (Am 4:1). In Hosea 7:5 the excessive lifestyle of the elite is criticised (they drink so much wine that they become sick) and in Amos 8:5–6 the corrupt practices of the market merchants are condemned. To this can be added Amos' critique on the interest on loans (Am 2:6), the taking of collateral for loans (Am 2:8), the exacting of payment in kind (Am 2:8) and the subverting of justice (Am 5:7, 10), and Hosea's critique on the sociopolitical and economic policies of the elite (Hs 1:2–9, 7:7; 8:4; see Mays 1969:12–13; Premnath 2008:129–132).

Amos and Hosea condemned the exploitative 'kingdoms' of Jeroboam II and Uzziah.<sup>44</sup> Jesus spoke against the 'kingdoms' of Rome and the temple elite. The exploitative practices of these kingdoms were the same, as was the respective social critiques of the prophets Amos and Hosea and the social prophet Jesus.

### CONCLUSION

In a colonial situation, like the one which existed in the times of Amos and Hosea and Jesus respectively, the elite always have a substantial stake in maintaining the status quo (Horsley 1993:16). Interests have to be protected. Even the 'middle strata' (e.g.

44. In the same century Micah's message was the same as that of Amos and Hosea. He criticised the elite for their ruthless acquisition of peasant land (Mi 2:2) and their failure to serve the cause of justice (Mi 3:1–2) and condemned the cities the elite lived in (Mi 1:5).

40. Scholars such as Rowley (1950:62–63, 1955:64), Halas (1950:162–170), Blank (1958), Davidson (1963), Gelston (1965) and Blenkinsopp (1984, 1986) go as far as to argue that Second Isaiah provided the model for Jesus and early Christianity's openness to the Gentile world *vis-à-vis* the religious particularism of the Second Temple (see Blenkinsopp 1988:99). There are, however, also scholars who argue the direct opposite (e.g. Snaith 1950:191; De Boer 1956:110; Lindars 1986:494; Orinsky 1967:116; Wilson 1986:326 & Barstad 1989:22, in Gelston 1992:378–379).

41. See for example Exodus 22:25 and Leviticus 19:10.

42. See for example Deuteronomy 15:4–11.

43. See for example Proverbs 14:31; 22:9 and 22.



scribes and scholar-teachers like the Pharisees and Sadducees in the time of Jesus) make adjustments to find themselves a role in the colonial system (Horsley 1993:16). There are, however, also those from the 'ordinary' walks of life who take up the role of prophetic spokesperson for God and leader of the people (Horsley 2003:103). Jesus took up this role and, following in the footsteps of those before him (such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea), proclaimed an inclusive God who condemns exploitation and structural violence against the 'small ones' of society. As was the case with Isaiah, Amos and Hosea, Jesus therefore decided to walk 'the dangerous path of justice and righteousness' (to use the term of Berquist 1993:54). Consequently it is understandable that some of his contemporaries saw him as 'one of the prophets of old'.

As such, Jesus was a 'public theologian'. Public theology, according to Van Aarde (2008:1213–1215), is not about professional theologians or pastors (read 'theological elite') doing theology in the public square but is about public theologians (neighbourhood saints, strangers and fellow citizens; see Storrar 2008:7–8) doing theology in public. These public theologians come from almost every walk of life (e.g. film directors, novelists, scientists, philosophers, poets, artists, technicians, salespeople and administrative officials), their theological reflection has many faces (e.g. films, songs, poems, novels, art, architecture, protest marches, clothing, newspaper and magazine articles, personal blogs and graffiti; see Van Aarde 2008:1216) and the contents of their theological reflections are regularly political and social issues.

Jesus was such a 'public theologian'. As an artisan (τέκτων) from Nazareth, he reflected on God. His reflection consisted, *inter alia*, of pictures drawn by words. These pictures, his parables, painted a different and new kingdom with a Ruler who is compassionate and inclusive, a kingdom in which there is no place for exploitation and systemic injustice. As such, his parables were a form of social analysis that represented social challenge and transformation; it was essentially about politics and the restructuring of society.

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