



# Mazamisa's Dialectica-Reconciliae and Mosala's Materialistic Reading of the Text: An Experimental Exploration of Luke 12:13-21

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This article explores the interpretive dimensions of Luke 12:13-21 within the landscape of the first-century world and how it relates to the democratic South African context. The question that drives this reading is two-fold: (1) How would this parable be understood by the early Jesus movement in the first-century Mediterranean context? In the light of socio-economic, religious, and political context of the day? What did they hear from what Jesus said through this parable? (2) similarly, what are we hearing from this same parable in today's society, in the light of our own socio-economic, religious and political landscape? I suggest analysing this parable through Mazamisa's dialectica reconciliae and Mosala's historical-materialistic lenses, which might reveal profound insights into the nation's post-1994 journey of reconstruction and development of South Africa and the liberation of the black child, in a government led by another black child. The passage's warnings against materialism and its call to be 'rich towards God' resonate with South Africa's pursuit of social justice and equitable wealth distribution. It mirrors concerns over land reform and responsible inheritance, aligning with the principles of Ubuntu that emphasize collective well-being. The text's emphasis on spiritual values contributes to discussions on fostering a cohesive national identity amid religious diversity. It underscores the importance of transparent governance and accountability, addressing wealth disparities, and confronting poverty. This exploration offers a compelling synthesis, suggesting how Luke 12:13-21 can guide South Africa in forging a just, inclusive, and spiritually grounded democratic society.

**Contribution:** This study explores the interpretive dimensions of Luke 12:13-21 within the context of the first-century world and its relevance to South Africa, offering profound insights into post-1994 reconstruction and development, social justice, equitable wealth distribution, collective well-being, national identity, wealth disparities, and poverty, ultimately guiding South Africa towards a just, inclusive, and spiritually grounded democratic society.

**Keywords:** Mazamisa's Dialectica Reconciliae; Mosala's; materialistic reading; Luke 12:13-21; materialistic possessions; rich towards God.

## Introduction

Why should this study focus on Luke in this special occasion of commemoration of the works of our two indigenous giants of the Christian faith? There are mainly two reasons for this: firstly, recently in a radio interview,<sup>1</sup> Prof Tinyiko Maluleka, when asked to comment about these two biblical scholars, remarked that at the pick of Black Theology of liberation, both these individuals came to the scene with the Bible. One carrying the Old Testament and the other the New Testament. I thought that was an interesting observation. More importantly: (1) Prof Mazamisa was a Lukan scholar! (2) Prof Mosala's remarks and observation on Luke – he said Luke is irredeemable because he speaks from the centre, he is part of the elite even though he is esteemed to be speaking for the poor. Secondly, Prof Mosala in his momentous work on biblical hermeneutics has a large section where he focuses on Luke's nativity stories (Mosala 1989:154–160). This seems to show that Mosala is affectionate towards Luke even though he is a renowned Old Testament scholar. Both of them worked at the University of Cape Town until they retired.

1. Available at iLizwi FM Podcast-date of the interview was 06August 2023-Radio presenter and hosts was Rev/Dr Faleni & Rev. Otto Makalima.

**Note:** Special collection: Historical Thought and Source Interpretation.

The dialectica-reconciliae and materialistic reading of Luke 12:13–21 involves interpreting this passage from both a dialectical perspective, which examines opposing concepts and seeks their synthesis, and a materialistic perspective, which focuses on socio-economic and material conditions. In this passage, Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool who, after experiencing an abundant harvest, decides to store up his excess wealth and live a life of ease, believing he has secured his future. However, God condemns him, saying, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' (Lk 12:20 ESV). The issue that concerns this article is that: How Luke 12:13–31 (parable of rich fool), speaks to the systems of power (both religious and political) then and now? As mentioned already I want to attend to this question from the perspective of dialectica-reconciliae and materialistic reading of this particular text. In so doing, this essay wishes to investigate how this kind of reading may contribute to a deeper understanding of socio-economic issues and ethical considerations in the South African religious and political landscape, specifically regarding wealth distribution, social responsibility and the promotion of equitable practices.

## An overview of the two approaches

According to Mazamisa (1987:156–157), the concept of a dialectica-reconciliae represents a fusion of exegesis and hermeneutics, distinguished by the continual progression of the hermeneutical circle or the culmination of the spiral movement. This dynamic movement entails an incessant oscillation between the comprehension of the whole and its constituent parts and, conversely, from the parts back to the whole. If executed consistently, this approach serves to avert one-sidedness and emancipate us from the fixation upon a singular perspective.

It is crucial to emphasise that a dichotomy between exegesis and hermeneutics, in isolation from one another, yields a disorienting and estranging one-sidedness. In contrast, a synthesis of these two methodologies facilitates a holistic understanding of the subject matter. Notably, while materialistic literary theory primarily centres on the production of literature, it is inherently reader oriented, owing to the integral role of reception within Marx's dialectic of production consumption. As Jauss (1984:153), cited by Mazamisa, astutely posits, this approach's social constitutive function aligns harmoniously with the productivity of the reader. Consequently, this approach delves into inquiries regarding the identity of both the original and contemporary readers, including their societal context, class affiliations and underlying interests.

Furthermore, it is pertinent to consider the insights offered by Mosala in this context, as they may provide valuable contributions to the discourse. Mosala (1989) ardently cries out that:

we need an approach to the biblical texts that recognizes that they are the products of definite historical and social material conditions. This approach should also recognize that these texts are productions or signifying practices, that reconstitute in

every specific way the realities of the material conditions of which they are products. He further argues that such an awareness would negate the possibility that the use of sociological methods would become no more than a new scholarly fashion, while the concern with social systems and realities that the new methods bring is welcome, their failure to affect a theoretical break with the underlying idealist framework prevents the creation of new knowledge through the use of the methods. (p. 7)

Mosala's resolute contention underscores the indispensability of both a foundational engagement in current socio-political struggles and the recognition that such involvement, while crucial, is not in itself adequate for the formulation and progression of a black biblical hermeneutics of liberation. In his articulate exposition, Mosala emphatically posits that the struggle itself serves as the hermeneutical linchpin within his interpretive framework. Upon a meticulous examination of these two tenets, it becomes increasingly evident that they do not stand in opposition to one another but, rather, coalesce to enhance the overall efficacy of his approach. The imperative of actively participating in contemporary struggles is the initial building block, a requisite foundation upon which the subsequent hermeneutical process rests. In other words, without a profound engagement in the tangible challenges and injustices faced by black communities, any attempt at developing a black biblical hermeneutics of liberation would lack authenticity and relevance.

However, Mosala's assertion that the struggle itself constitutes the hermeneutical key underscores the dynamic interplay between lived experiences and scriptural interpretation. This perspective affirms that the act of grappling with and reflecting upon the struggles faced by black individuals and communities yields invaluable insights into the biblical texts. Through this lens, the struggles serve as a transformative and illuminating force that informs the interpretation of sacred scriptures, thereby imbuing them with a liberatory potential. In summation, far from being contradictory, Mosala's two assertions harmoniously converge to form a comprehensive and robust foundation for a black biblical hermeneutics of liberation. The engagement in contemporary struggles provides the essential experiential grounding, while the recognition of the struggle as the hermeneutical key underscores the symbiotic relationship between lived experiences and scriptural interpretation, reinforcing the essential role of the struggle in this transformative process.

Mazamisa dialectica-reconciliae when clearly understood incorporates Mosala's materialistic method or *visa versa* somehow. In the insightful words of Mosala (1989:5), it is imperative to underscore that proponent of historical-materialist methods and the manifestations of these approaches exhibit a notable degree of variation. This diversity is discernible not only in the theoretical orientations and methodological nuances of those who employ such methods but also in the broader socio-cultural contexts within which these approaches are situated. Mosala astutely observes that these variations are influenced by historical

factors, cultural perspectives, racial dynamics and gender considerations.

By incorporating cultural, racial and gender dimensions into the purview of our inquiry, we acknowledge the profound impact of these intersecting axes of identity on the lived experiences of individuals and communities. Moreover, we recognise that these identities are not merely peripheral or secondary concerns but are inherently intertwined with the overarching material conditions and power structures that historical-materialist methods seek to elucidate. Mosala's admonition serves as a vital reminder of the rich tapestry of perspectives and contextual factors that shape the application of historical-materialist methods. As scholars engaged in the study at hand, it is our scholarly duty to embrace this complexity and encompass cultural, racial and gender dimensions within our analytical framework, thereby fostering a more comprehensive and robust understanding of the material relationships that underpin our investigation.

## ***Dialectica-Reconcilia* – Exegetical analysis**

### **Social-historical context**

Mazamisa (1987:123) posits that, when considered in simple terms, the exegete must contextualise the text of the New Testament within the backdrop of Jewish religious and cultural traditions, as the New Testament draws its foundational elements from the rich tapestry of the Tenach. More recently, scholars such as Carter (2006), Horsley (2008), Rowdon (1982), Uwaegbute (2022), Wright, Murphy and Fitzmyer (2002) have reached a consensus that the world depicted in the New Testament is intricately intertwined with the societal norms and values of Greco-Roman civilisations.

This becomes necessary as it is pivotal to understand the social and historical background of Luke 12:13–21. We need to consider the context of the time in which the events described in the Gospel of Luke took place. This context includes the economic, social and religious factors that influenced the teachings of Jesus in this passage. During the temporal context of Jesus, the territories of Judea and Galilee were subject to what is commonly referred to as the Roman occupation, exemplifying a geopolitical reality characterised by Roman dominance and influence. The Romans imposed heavy taxes on the Jewish population, which often led to disputes and economic hardships for many people. This context of Roman taxation and oppression likely contributed to the concerns about wealth and possessions that are addressed in the passage (Häkkinen 2016:1–2).

On the other hand, Jewish society in the 1st century CE was characterised by a diverse range of social and economic classes. There were wealthy landowners and merchants, as well as many who lived in poverty. Disputes over inheritances and property were not uncommon, as is evident from the situation presented in the passage whereby someone asks Jesus to intervene in a family inheritance

dispute (Rosenfeld & Haim Perlmutter 2011). The request to divide the inheritance reflects the cultural norm of family solidarity and the importance of inheritance within Jewish society. It was expected that a family's wealth and property would be passed down from one generation to the next (Clines 2001:657). The religious context of 1st-century Judaism is also important. Jesus' teachings were rooted in Jewish faith and tradition, but he often challenged the religious leaders of his day. In this passage, he emphasises the importance of being 'rich toward God', suggesting a spiritual and ethical dimension to wealth and possessions.

### **Genre**

This passage is part of a larger section in the Gospel of Luke where Jesus is teaching his disciples and the crowds that have gathered around him. It's a narrative discourse where Jesus responds to a request from someone in the crowd, transitioning into a parable to convey a deeper spiritual lesson. Parables are a common genre in the Gospels, and they are short stories or analogies that use everyday situations to convey profound spiritual truths (Van Eck 2009:310–321).

### **Grammatical and structural issues**

Someone in the crowd said to him – The Greek word used for 'someone' is 'τις' [*tis*], which implies an unidentified person from the crowd. 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me'. The word for 'teacher' is 'διδάσκαλε' [*didaskale*], addressing Jesus with respect. The request pertains to a legal matter, highlighting a common concern in society. The structure of this parable follows a typical pattern found in many of Jesus' teachings, with an initial situation, a moral lesson and often an unexpected twist or divine judgment. For example, in the Rich man's prosperity (Lk 12:16), Jesus introduces a rich man who experiences a bountiful harvest, emphasising the man's wealth and abundance. In the Rich man's dilemma (Lk 12:17), the rich man faces a dilemma because he does not have enough storage space for his crops. He begins to think about what to do. The Rich man's plan (Lk 12:18): the rich man decides to solve his problem by tearing down his old barns and building larger ones. He plans to hoard all his crops and possessions, assuming this will secure his future. The Rich man's self-assurance (Lk 12:19): the rich man reassures himself, addressing his own soul. He believes he has secured his future for many years and plans to enjoy a life of ease and indulgence. God's response (Lk 12:20) at this point: God intervenes and calls the rich man a fool. God informs him that his life will be taken from him that very night, and he will not enjoy the fruits of his labour. The conclusion (Lk 12:21): Jesus concludes the parable by emphasising the moral lesson. He warns that those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God are ultimately not wise.

A man interrupts Jesus' teaching (12:1–12) to try to persuade him to settle a dispute with his brother over the division of their father's inheritance. Inheritance-related disputes were

common, and it would not have been unusual for one with a complaint to bring his case to a religious leader as the Mosaic law embraced the civil and criminal as well as ritual and moral law (Garland 2011:967–968). Furthermore, Bock (2011) notes that in this pericope Jesus:

[W]arns a man who asks him for help with his inheritance that those who rest in riches will not be able to take them with them when God calls them. The parable of the rich fool shows how selfish and self-satisfied one can become if one seeks riches; this displeases God. Jesus calls on disciples to trust in the Father's care, for people are more important than the birds and the grass that God cares for. (p. 73)

As Jesus responds to this intrusion to his disciples, the crowds are able to listen in (12:1). The parable tweaks classical wisdom that is found, for example:

One becomes rich through diligence and self-denial, and the reward allotted to him is this: when he says, "I have found rest, and now I shall feast on my goods!" he does not know how long it will be until he leaves them to others and dies. (Sir 11:18 – 19)

Jesus classifies such a one as a fool. Seneca philosophised:

How stupid to plan out the years that lie ahead when you are not even a master of tomorrow. What madness to start out with long-term hopes, thinking, 'I'll buy and sell and build, I'll lend money and take back more, and I'll gain positions of honour. And when I'm too old and tired, I'll retire'. Believe me when I tell you everything is unsure, even for the most fortunate (Ep 101.4).

Seneca did not apply this wisdom to his own life, nor did he consider that there would be a judgement before God, but his statement reveals that Jesus' parable would have resonated across cultures.

From a dialectical viewpoint, this passage presents a tension between material accumulation and spiritual values. The rich man's desire to hoard wealth and possessions contrasts with the admonition to be rich towards God. The dialectical approach seeks to reconcile these opposing ideas by highlighting the dangers of excessive materialism and the need to prioritise spiritual well-being over material gain. In other words, the passage warns against the pursuit of material wealth without considering spiritual matters. To reconcile these perspectives, this article considers the paradox between material accumulation and spiritual fulfilment, applying a Hegelian dialectic synthesis framework. Ultimately, the passage encourages a synthesis where individuals acknowledge the importance of responsible stewardship of resources while recognising the limitations of worldly possessions in providing lasting fulfilment.

## Materialistic perspective

As Mosala (1989:4–7) has argued that his hermeneutical tool is a struggle for the liberation of the black child. Hence, from his materialistic perspective, one should try and attempt to investigate power imbalances and forms of oppression in this pericope. In light of this fact it is then

perhaps adequate to consider this passage in terms of navigating the socio-economic and class dynamics. In his seminal work, Ringe (1995) posits that the parable under scrutiny is situated within a societal milieu characterised by a pronounced stratification based on social position and wealth. Within this intricate socio-cultural backdrop, individuals' standing in society was unequivocally determined by the interplay of these two salient factors: social position and wealth. This assertion underscores the profound significance of these two pivotal elements in shaping and defining the roles and identities of individuals within the given societal framework. In Pittman's (2010) observation, he states that Luke is the sole recorder of this particular encounter and parable, both of which collectively depict the pursuit of material possessions as a fundamentally self-centred and potentially isolating endeavour. The initial conflict between the two brothers over inheritance reflects a common issue in societies where wealth and property distribution can lead to disputes and inequities (Adams 2014:128–129). The rich man's decision to build larger barns and accumulate more wealth represents a typical behaviour among those in privileged positions who seek to consolidate their economic advantage. This interpretation emphasises the structural factors that contribute to wealth inequality and highlights the consequences of prioritising individual accumulation over collective well-being.

## Synthesis of the two approaches

A synthesis of the dialectica-reconciliae and materialistic readings of this passage underscores the need for a balanced approach to material possessions. It encourages individuals to engage in responsible resource management while being mindful of the broader social and spiritual implications. The passage invites reflection on how one's actions influence both personal fulfilment and the well-being of the community. By reconciling the tension between materialism and spiritual values, this synthesis promotes a holistic perspective that acknowledges the interconnectedness of individual and societal needs.

Following Bock (2011:321, 329), the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:13–21 underscores the central theme of the futility of wealth accumulation. In this narrative, a farmer experiences a bountiful harvest, initially greeted by a sense of good fortune. At this juncture, there is no manifestation of greed; rather, the farmer perceives his newfound prosperity as a stroke of luck. However, as affluence bestows itself upon him, he begins to formulate selfish and imprudent plans. Notably, a critical element of this parable lies in the farmer's perspective, where a subtle issue becomes apparent. Throughout the verses, a conspicuous stylistic feature is the persistent presence of the pronoun 'μου' (mou), signifying 'my' in Greek, intertwined with numerous first-person singular verbs. The possessions originating from the land, as well as other components of the narrative, are recurrently characterised with this possessive pronoun: 'my fruit', 'my barn', 'my goods' and, ultimately, 'my soul'.

Bock's interpretation underscores the farmer's increasing sense of ownership and self-centredness as he contemplates his newfound wealth. The repeated use of 'μου' reinforces the notion that the farmer's focus shifts from gratitude or generosity to possessiveness. His preoccupation with the material aspects of his prosperity reveals a profound attachment to his possessions and a failure to recognise the transitory nature of earthly wealth. In this context, the parable serves as a cautionary tale, emphasising the perilous consequences of prioritising personal accumulation over spiritual and communal well-being. The farmer's 'my'-centred perspective symbolises the inherent dangers of greed and materialism, and it aligns with the broader themes in the Gospel of Luke that critique the pursuit of earthly riches in favour of being 'rich toward God' (Lk 12:21). Thus, according to Bock's analysis, the parable of the rich fool serves as a poignant illustration of the underlying message that the fixation on wealth and possessions ultimately leads to spiritual bankruptcy. The language in the parable of the rich fool points to a self-centred focus that often accompanies the accumulation of wealth. As the farmer amasses his possessions, he becomes increasingly attached to them, using 'my' to describe everything. When God demands his soul, he is rich in worldly terms but spiritually poor, lacking a connection with God. The parable illustrates the dangers of wealth attachment, showing how it can lead to self-centredness and a false belief in self-sufficiency, leaving one spiritually empty in the end. So, as always, one can see that Jesus' teachings often challenged the prevailing social and economic norms of his time.

## Mazamisa' and Mosala's reading of Luke 12:13–21 and implications for democratic South Africa

When examining Luke 12:13–21 through *dialectica-reconciliae* and materialistic lenses in the context of South African democracy, several additional layers of interpretation and relevance can be identified. South Africa's history of apartheid, struggle for democracy and ongoing challenges related to socio-economic disparities provide a rich backdrop for understanding this passage and realise its relevance. Blomberg (1999) suggested that the parable of the rich fool explores the intricate connections among material possessions, one's relationship with God and the concept of justice. Bailey (2008:302) provides an insightful interpretation of this parable, where Jesus imparts the lesson that true fulfilment in life cannot be found in the endless pursuit of material abundance. Bailey goes on to emphasise that human desires, regardless of how much wealth is accumulated, are driven by an unrelenting fear that compels individuals to amass more, as the inner sense of insecurity remains unquenched. In essence, Bailey underscores that the parable primarily aims to caution Christians against the relentless pursuit of material wealth.

If Bailey is right, then this passage's emphasis can possibly resonate with South Africa's post-1994 agenda of social

justice and equitable wealth distribution. The parable warns against the accumulation of wealth for personal gain, aligning with the ideals of economic transformation and addressing historical injustices in the country. The dispute over inheritance in the passage parallels South Africa's complex issues related to land reform. The redistribution of land to address historical imbalances and empower marginalised communities is a key concern in the country. The passage's caution against greed and accumulation could be interpreted as a call for responsible land ownership and management.

Kim (1993:254–255) conducted a study on the parable of the rich fool within the framework of stewardship as presented in the Gospel of Luke. Kim asserts that the argument supporting this interpretation can be found in the text, where words associated with hoarding are employed in three different forms: συναζω (vv. 17, 18), κείμενα (v. 19) and θησαυρίζων (v. 21). The fact that these hoarding-related words are used four times within this narrative may suggest the parable's significant relevance to the overarching theme of stewardship and equal sharing of possessions. Ramose (2002:81) asserts that African law finds its foundation in the concept of ubuntu. So, if South Africans cry for justice and equality, then the philosophy of Ubuntu comes to play in this regard, which emphasises the interconnectedness of all individuals and the importance of collective well-being. Especially, when we consider this passage's critique of individualism and selfishness aligns well with Ubuntu principles. It encourages individuals to consider the broader impact of their actions on their communities and society as a whole.

South Africa's diverse population encompasses a range of spiritual and religious beliefs. The passage's emphasis on spiritual values and the transient nature of material possessions can contribute to discussions on fostering a cohesive national identity that transcends religious and cultural differences. In the passage, Jesus refuses to arbitrate the inheritance dispute, highlighting the separation between spiritual leadership and worldly matters. This can be relevant in the context of South African democracy, emphasising the importance of transparent and accountable governance that serves the common good. The stark contrast between the rich man's abundance and his eventual loss of everything underscores the impermanence of material wealth. This can serve as a reflection on South Africa's persistent wealth disparities and challenges related to poverty, urging a commitment to addressing socio-economic inequalities.

## Conclusion

The utilisation of the dual lenses advocated and applied by the late Prof. Mazamisa and Prof. Mosala in their academic and life trajectory represents an experimental endeavour with the potential to yield valuable insights and perspectives. Attempting to synthesise the dual perspectives inherent in the interpretation of Luke 12:13–21 has yielded valuable insights

for navigating the inherent tension within the text. This passage focuses more on balancing the tension of excessive riches at the expense of richness towards God. The examination, conducted through both methodologies employed in this study, illuminates the subject under investigation, offering a comprehensive and nuanced understanding. I think one can conclude that it tried to provide a profound lens through which to view and propose a way forward in South African democracy. It calls for responsible stewardship of resources, the pursuit of social justice, the enhancement of collective well-being and the harmonious integration of spiritual values. As South Africa continues its democratic journey, these principles serve as guiding lights, helping the nation navigate the complexities of governance and society while remaining true to its foundational values.

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M.H. is the sole author of this article.

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