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 1776,1 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 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; Tweltree 1993; Vermes 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; Thiesen 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.2 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 (Mt 6:15, Lk 9:8). In the Emmaus narrative Jesus is referred to as a ‘prophet mighty in word and deed’ (Lk 24:19). 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 aristocracy3 (Judea). 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.

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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 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 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.6


7.Interest rates up to 48 per cent are attested (Bruson’s loan to Salamins; Cicon, 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; Kloppenburg 2008:4).

8.Chanoy (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: [these economic pressures are, in turn, often associated with the actions of Herod]
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 generational reciprocity (taking no account of exchanges or debts) (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 present social order (Rex, Rome and the temple) is 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 structure. 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, therefore, were political. They were stories of social critique on the first-century’s oppressive political, religious and social context. 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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) to identify the actors or characters in the parables with God or even Jesus himself. 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 deems a non-violent kingdom (see Van Eck 2008:909–936; 2008) and in the parable of the unfortifying servant the king is not God ‘heart’ and ‘hearth’, exploring how human beings could respond to an exploitative and oppressed 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 to the gospels 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 oppressed 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.
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,18 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 n. Ketim 1, 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 19:19–20; Scott 2001:37). Consequently planting a mustard seed in a garden19 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.20 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.21 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 has been replaced by something unclean. That the birds of the sky come to nest. The comparison is clear: the mighty cedar has been replaced by something unclean.22

21. According to Luke 13:19 the mustard seed is planted in a garden, in the Gospel of Thomas 20:4 it is 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 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.

22. 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 Deut 22:11–11).

20. Mishnah Kilayim 3.2 is clear on the fact that a mustard seed could not be planted in a garden. Whether every kind of seed may be sown in a garden (see 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.

21. ‘The patriarchal relationship between men and women was understood as a “socially mated” relationship through marriage. It was a “horizontal” relationship, as marriage was not recognized as a covenantal relationship. This view of marriage was based on the idea of a “fundamental anthropological identity” between the two sexes. It is important to note that the patriarchal relationship was not a monogamous relationship, but rather a polygamous one, where a man could have more than one wife (see Malina-Jacobs 1993:1).’

22. ‘The kingdom is like a woman who leavens flour until it is all leavened. How does one come to this conclusion? In 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). 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 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. [In ... 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)’

23. ‘For 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,24 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). 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.

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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)

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).


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 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! [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.

(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 2007:100)

Leaven is a product of fermentation (rotten bread) and is associated with a corpse, thus with impurity. 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 clean. 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:

The translation of γίνομαι 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 yeast 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’ (Hufnagl 2000:406). In antiquity, leaven consisted of simple fermenting dough and therefore should not be equated with yeast. See also Scott (1989:324):

‘Yeaven 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.’

From Exodus 12:15–20 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 un holy and impure. In the New Testament we have several examples of leaven as something negative (see Mt 16:8; Mk 8:15; Lk 12:1; 1 Cor 5:6–8; Mt 5:5–9).

See also Scott (1989:324):

‘That 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.’

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, who eats with whom’. The community, group, or kinship network one belongs’, and what constitutes the ‘group’s traditions, values, norms, and worldviews’. (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 acknowledge 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 δείπνον μίγα [great supper]) invited guests (probably also members of the elite, since they can buy fields and have as many as five pair of oxen) to supper. On the day the supper was to take place the guests were invited again. One wonders about the excuses to avoid attending the supper. When one takes their poor excuses 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. This information most probably came their way by means of the ‘gossip channel’ 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 πατρικός (wide street within a city; see Louw & Nida 1989:19, 1.103) and μυριοκατάκτης: (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 be of 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).
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 (Luke 16:19–31). The basis 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; Holladay 1995:365–368; Kloppenborg 2006:294–309). The peasantry was constantly threatened with dispossession and a lack 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 dispossession and a lack 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. Lazarus had become one of the expendables of 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 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 hospitalitas 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 honour for the rich man. To him, Lazarus was expendable in

The reason why Lazarus ended up at the gate of the rich man can only be as a peasant smallholder (Malina 1987:355), he had no family

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. 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. Hospitalitas 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 have any second thoughts about 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 passed. 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 Thomaseine version of the parable of the tenants in the vineyard (GThom 65),37 Jesus addresses another social injustice:

36In a situation where Jesus knew very well that the exploiting rich were only becoming richer and the poorer, poorer, Jesus’ concern for the poor is not surprising. He congratulated the poor (Lk 6:20; GThom 65:1; GThom 76:6) and praised the rich who were ‘outcasts’ at his table, like the poor, the socially impure, the tax collector, the publican and the lawyers (Lk 15:1–2; 5:30; 14:11; 7:39). Jesus did (see e.g. Mk 2:16).

37The 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. He sent his slave to the vineyard and the farmers beat that one as well. Then the master sent his son and said, “Perhaps they'll show my son some respect.” But the farmers grabbed him, killed him, and beat the son. When one compares Mark’s version of the parable of the Tenants in the vineyard with 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; 12:15–17; 12:25; 12:35–37). Of special importance is Mark 12:6a, 7c and 12 integrating 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; 12:15–17; 12:25; 12:35–37). Of special importance is Mark 12a, (oynymoia), a Markian addition to the original parable that integrates the parable into Mark’s Christology (see e.g. Mc 1:1; 11:1–9; 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 the text of the “Impure” ones who were not welcome in the

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A prophet of old: Jesus the ‘public theologian’

The systemic violence that was also part of first-century Palestine. Jesus was born and carried out his public ministry in an advanced peasant kingdom 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; Horsley 1993:3). 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, ‘it 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 could be physical, psychological, 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 (the fields 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 divine providence and power throughout the world and to rule an empire without end. As such, Rome claimed sovereignty over sea and land and its inhabitants. This ideology, logically, included the ‘right’ to domination and power and a belief in Rome’s supremacy.

Jesus’ stance on this structural violence can be deduced from the Gospel of Thomas 65.39 In this parable Jesus, first of all, 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’ expediencies 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 (Kloppenburg 2006:352).

In the parable, Jesus also criticizes the use of direct physical violence. In the Gospel of Thomas 65, the tenants’ resort to physical violence (with its climaxes in the killing of the landlord’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 (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,39 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 only the 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 become part 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 ethnic than that of Judaism was

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39. In the eastern Mediterranean in New Testament times, “rich” or “wealthy” as a rule meant “avantgarde” or “leading”, while “poor” or “refugee” meant “poor” or “refugee”. This meant that the poor/less fortunate could 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.40 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 (Gen 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 18:9–12; 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.

40.Scholars such as Rowley (1950:62–63, 1955:64), Halas (1950:162–170), Blank south (see 2 Chr 26:6–8). As is almost always the case, this

Gelston (1992:377–397) finds, like Blenkinsopp, the same perspective in Second Isaiah. According to Gelston, Isaiah 43:8–13, 44:3–5 and 46:6–8 (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 1992:286). 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,41 Deuteronomic,42 wisdom43 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 (Fieney 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

...
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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 1992:16). 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 (μισθωτός) 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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