

# Realism and Method: The Parables of Jesus

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## Abstract

Papyri from early Roman Egypt that are contemporaneous with first-century Palestine provide ancient *comparanda* of the economic and social practices and realities presupposed by the sayings and parables of Jesus. As such, these papyri, where applicable, provide a window through which the realism of Jesus' parables can be assessed. In this paper, a summary is given of some recent work done on the realism of the parables of Jesus using Graeco-Egyptian papyri. A preliminary reading of the parable of the Wise Steward (Luke 16:1–8a) is also given, paying particular attention to the possible reality underlying this parable. This reading indicates that the use of Graeco-Egyptian papyri can enhance a social-scientific reading of the parables.

## Key Terms

Jesus; parables; method; realism; papyri; Egypt; first century

## 1 Introduction: Methodological Points of Departure

In a realistic reading of the parables, the following quote from Hedrick can serve as a methodological point of departure:

What is at issue . . . is where . . . the reading of a parable begin(s) . . . If one is interested in the evangelist's understanding of the parable, reading begins with the *literary context*, but if one is interested in the parable in the context of Jesus' public career some forty years or so earlier than the gospels, reading begins with the parable and ignores the literary setting . . . Jesus' invention of the parable in the *social context* of first-century life preceded the writing of the Gospels (Hedrick 2004, xiv; emphasis added).

Hedrick's point of view, as expressed in the above quotation, builds on the well-known work of Adolf Jülicher in his *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (1888), in which he questioned the allegorical interpretation of the parables as

presented in the Synoptic Gospels. The authenticity of the Synoptic versions of the parables, Jülicher argued, cannot simply be assumed, since they have been translated, transposed and transformed. The parables existed prior to their incorporation into the Gospels, and the voice of Jesus can only be identified in the voices of the Evangelists through the use of critical and careful analysis (Jülicher 1888, 11).<sup>1</sup>

As a second point of departure, a realistic reading of the parables of Jesus should take cognizance of Dodd's definition of the parables as being "drawn from nature or common life, arresting the listener by its vividness or strangeness" (Dodd 1961, 5).

The above, I believe, can be considered a general road map in reading the parables of Jesus as realistic stories. In this reading, the following should be important: First, the parables should be read in their 30 CE social context, and not in their literary contexts (Jülicher). This, of course, first and foremost implies the use of historical criticism (esp. *Redaktionsgeschichte*) to identify, as far as possible, the most likely "original" forms of the parables.<sup>2</sup> Second, as part of determining the social contexts of the parables, which are vividly expressed by their content (Dodd), available documented papyri can be used to identify the possible social realities and practices (cultural scripts) evoked by each parable. This enables the researcher, I believe, to identify what is "normal" (vivid) in the parables, and what is "abnormal" (surprising). Finally, in a conscious effort to try and avoid the

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<sup>1</sup> See also Levine (2014, 6): "[T]he evangelists are our first known interpreters of the parables. By adapting the language and providing a setting they have already foreclosed some meanings; by providing explications they foreclose others."

<sup>2</sup> Herzog (1994, 3–4): "This approach to the parables requires that their canonical form(s) be scrutinized with care. As they stand in their present narrative settings, the parables serve the theological and ethical concerns of the evangelists. However, if the purpose they served in Jesus' ministry was quite different from the purposes of the evangelists, then they have to be analyzed with a concern for making this distinction clear. Consequently . . . [this approach] utilizes the tools growing out of the historical-critical method, including form criticism and redaction criticism. Conversely, this approach devotes little attention to the narrative contexts of the parables and uses literary-criticism approaches more sparingly." See also Crossan (2012, 57, 88): "First, I remove the story . . . from the later literary context . . . and . . . return . . . to its earlier social context . . . [W]e will have to imagine their original *oral* context as distinct from their present *written* condition" (emphasis in the original). This aspect of parable interpretation, of course, is not uncontested. Hultgren (2000, 16), for example, deems this exercise as too hypothetical, and Schottroff (1987, 4) dismisses the postulation of earlier and more "original" versions of the parables to be impossible, stating that "[d]ie suche nach dem authentischen Jesusgleichnis ist im Ansatz verfehlt."

fallacies of ethnocentrism and anachronism, an understanding of the cultural values and social dynamics of the social world of Jesus and his hearers is deemed inadmissible. Given these observations, social-scientific criticism presents itself as the best available hermeneutical approach.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Realism and the Use of Papyri

The parables, we have seen, are defined by Dodd (1961, 10) as realistic narratives concerned with everyday events in first-century Palestine.<sup>4</sup> The parables of Jesus are stories about shepherds attending to flocks of sheep (Luke 15:4–6), day labourers being hired to work in a vineyard (Matt 20:1–15), servants whose debt are released (Matt 18:23–33), peasants being hired to work in vineyards (*Gos. Thom.* 65), and villagers asking neighbours for help in situations of need (Luke 11:5–8). From a realistic perspective, these stories, respectively, are not stories about Jesus looking for lost sinners, God inviting gentiles to become part of the kingdom, God forgiving abundantly, God appointing temple elite to look over Israel, or God providing whenever there is need. As poignantly put by Kloppenborg (2014a, 490), in some cases “a vineyard or a shepherd in a parable of Jesus is just a vineyard or a shepherd.”<sup>5</sup>

When interpreting the parables, one should assume that their first audiences, most probably the peasantry in Galilee, had competence in ancient cultural practices—like those of first-century Palestine and the Mediterranean—and had native (emic) knowledge of the social *realia* referred to in the parables. It is, therefore, “hardly a surprise that the Synoptics do not bother to explain or elaborate on any of these matters” (Kloppenborg 2014a, 2).<sup>6</sup> When interpreting the parables, we thus run the

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the use of this approach in reading the parables, see Van Eck (2016, 11–18).

<sup>4</sup> See also Zimmermann (2007, 25): “Eine Parabel ist ein kurzer narrativer . . . fiktionaler Text, der in der erzählten Welt auf bekannte Realität . . . bezogen ist.”

<sup>5</sup> Herzog (1994, 136) is of the same opinion, stating that the parables “are grounded in the story-teller’s social, political, and cultural milieu.” See also Levine (2014, 16–17) and Scott (1989, 270).

<sup>6</sup> The reason for this “lack” of explanation is that the texts we have of the parables are products of a high-context society. According to Rohrbaugh (2006, 567), the main problem for modern readers of the parables is “that we do not know what we do not know.” Rohrbaugh (2006, 567 n. 8) continues: “The current consensus view of parables is that they are something like open-ended, extended metaphors that force the reader to arrive at conclusions of his/her own. That may or may not be accurate, but of course the missing piece is knowledge of the context. If we knew all about the setting in which these stories

risk of serious anachronism if these practices and *realia* are not taken into consideration (Kloppenborg 2014a, 2).

Recent studies have shown that papyri from early Roman Egypt provide “solid ancient *comparanda* on the practices and social realities which the sayings of Jesus and the parables presuppose” (Kloppenborg 2014a, 2; see also Bazzana 2011, 511–525; 2014, 1–8; Kloppenborg 2014b, 287–306; Van Eck and Kloppenborg 2015, 1–15; Van Eck 2016). The Graeco-Egyptian papyri, and a few papyri preserved from the ‘Arava, are contemporaneous with first-century Palestine and reflect similar non-elite social strata and processes. With “due allowance made for legal and cultural differences between Egypt and Palestine,” these papyri “can provide useful comparative data for understanding the *realia* which the parables presuppose” (Kloppenborg 2014b, 289).<sup>7</sup> These documentary papyri are important because they are nearly contemporaneous with Jesus’ parables, and reflect the actual economic and social practices presupposed by the parables often ignored by more elite writers. Moreover, the practices evidenced in early Roman Egypt cohere with practices that are later mentioned (albeit in a much more lapidary and fragmentary way) in Rabbinic writings from Palestine in the third and following centuries.

Several studies on the parables by Kloppenborg have indicated that papyri from early Roman Egypt provide detailed information on social realities in the parables (see Kloppenborg 2006; 2011, 323–351; 2014a, 491–511, 556–576, 577–599; 2014b, 287–306). In the interpretation of the parables, Kloppenborg argues, the social *realia* invoked by these parables cannot be neglected, “and we ought to get clear on the most basic meanings of the images in question before moving to abstract, symbolic or allegorical meanings” (Kloppenborg 2014a, 490). As put by (Kloppenborg 2014a, 2), we “have to assemble solid ancient *comparanda* on the practices and social realities which the sayings of Jesus and the parables presuppose. For such a

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were first told perhaps we would get the point in the fashion a high context person would expect. But lacking it . . . we arrive at conclusions that often bear no relation to an ancient context whatsoever.”

<sup>7</sup> The many loan-contracts found in Graeco-Egyptian papyri can serve here as an example. P.Mur 114, for instance, illustrates how fixed formulae were broadly used among contractors. Apart from minor variations, the structure and wording of the loan-contract in P.Mur. 114 are similar to the structure and wording of loan-agreements found in Graeco-Egyptian papyri and papyri from Dura Europos (see Marulli 2012, 206). Marulli (2012, 206) explains: “Though most of the loan-contract papyri have been found in Egypt, there are arguments to accept an extrapolation from contemporary loan documents from Egypt and surrounding areas.”

project, documentary papyri are usually our most plentiful, and sometimes only, resource.”

If we want to know whether certain aspects in a parable were perceived by its first hearers as normal or abnormal (surprising), knowledge of the cultural scripts and social *realia* embedded in the parable is indispensable, assisting us to understand what message the parable wanted to convey. Normally, it is in the “abnormal” that the surprise, and the meaning, of a parable is to be found. When analysing the parables from a realistic perspective, the modern reader should therefore always ask whether his/her exegetical conclusions square with ancient patterns of belief and behaviour, and whether certain aspects of a parable either conform with or challenge the actual perceptions, values, worldviews and social scripts of the hearers who first listened to the parable (see Elliott 1993, 11). What seems odd (abnormal) to the modern reader might have been perfectly normal to the first hearers of a parable, and what seems normal to the modern reader might have been taken as odd or surprising to the first hearers of a parable (see Levine 2014, 1). When attempting to distinguish between “normal” and “abnormal” social practices and realities, information provided by documented papyri can thus not be neglected.

### **3 The Use of Graeco-Egyptian Papyri in Realistic Readings of the Parables: A Few Examples**

Since it is not possible within the space of this article to give a comprehensive summary of work done on realistic readings of the parables using Graeco-Egyptian papyri, a few examples will have to suffice.

#### *3.1 The Lost Sheep (Luke 15:4–6)*

Most interpretations of the parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:4–6) identify in the parable a reference to God’s grace and mercy, to God’s love for the marginalised and lost, or to God’s joy when a sinner is found (see Van Eck 2016, 118). In a realistic analysis of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:4–6), Kloppenborg and Callon (2010, 1–43) have indicated that attention given to some characteristics of pastoralism in first-century Palestine, as well as social and economic registers presupposed by the parable, have a direct bearing on the parable’s possible meaning. In using documented papyri, they have indicated that the sheep in the parable most probably did not belong to the shepherd, since it was common practice in pastoralism for owners to employ shepherds (hirelings, strangers) to take care of their sheep.

Graeco-Egyptian papyri also indicate that a hundred sheep was a normal, medium-sized flock put in the care of a single shepherd, that shepherds were transient, spent most of their time unsupervised, and were armed with a sling and a club. Because of this, shepherds were stigmatised figures, often associated with bandits and agitators.<sup>8</sup> Papyrological evidence further indicates that the wages typically paid to shepherds were meager and that the intrinsic value of a sheep, relative to a shepherd's wage, was high. The wage of a shepherd was more or less sixteen *drachmae* per month (P.Lond. III 1171; see Kloppenborg and Callon 2010, 13–14), the price of a male sheep was not less than ten *drachmae* (e.g., SB XX 14525; P.Amst. I 41), and the price of a female was close to double that amount. A shepherd was held accountable for livestock losses (P.Amst. I 41.8), so that the loss of a male sheep was close to one month's wage, and the loss of a female more than the wage of one month (Kloppenborg and Callon 2010, 14–15). These realistic aspects of the parable, I believe, has a direct bearing on the interpretation of the parable. It explains not only the reason why the shepherd took the risk to go and look for one lost sheep—namely economic survival—but also why the shepherd celebrated with friends and neighbours upon his return, after his contract with the owner had expired.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.2 *The Vineyard Labourers (Matt 20:1–15)*

Most readings of this parable see the owner as a symbol for God, and read the parable as an example of God's grace or justice (see Van Eck 2016, 141–142). A realistic reading of the Vineyard Labourers, however, pays close attention to social and economic practices in the agricultural sector of the Roman economy in order to assess the degree of realism of specific details in the parable, and indicates that the parable confronts audience expectations about what is “normal” and “abnormal” in order to produce a surprising outcome (see Choi 2010; Van Eck and Kloppenborg 2015, 1–11; Vearncombe 2010, 199–236).

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, P.Princ. II 24; P.IFAO III 43; P.Oxy. I 74, P.Oxy. II 245, 350, 351, 353, 355, 356; 357–361; P.Oxy. XLVII 3338; P.Oxy. LV 3778, 3779; P.Köln II 86; P.Phil. 8; P.Berl. Möller 7; P.NYU inv. 35; P.Ross. Georg. II 13; P.IFAO I 21, and P.Batav. 8. See Kloppenborg and Callon (2010, 7–12).

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed realistic reading of the parable, building on the work of Kloppenborg and Callon, see Van Eck (2011a, 1–10).

The parable takes for granted several features that were salient to ancient viticulture: (1) the system of land tenure in which most of the productive land was held by large-scale (elite) owners;<sup>10</sup> (2) a shift from smallholdings producing the Mediterranean triad of grain, grapes, and olives for subsistence to large estates orientated to the large-scale production and export of crops;<sup>11</sup> (3) the rising need for sizable, temporary labour inputs with regards to special and seasonal tasks related to viticulture, especially during the vintage period;<sup>12</sup> (4) the association of viticulture with wealth and the wealthy because it required substantial capital and wage inputs;<sup>13</sup> and (5) owner absenteeism as the norm, since the operation of a vineyard was normally left in the hands of slaves<sup>14</sup> or day labourers supervised by a manager.<sup>15</sup>

From the information above, it is clear that the parable is a combination of usual (normal) and unusual (abnormal) features. For its first hearers, the parable began in an entirely recognisable vein: the harvest is approaching and a large (temporary) labour force is needed to bring in the vintage, which must be picked and processed quickly in order to prevent spoilage and theft. What is abnormal, is the presence of the owner during the harvest, as well as the scenario of multiple recruitments by the owner.<sup>16</sup> These aspects of the parable, I believe, should be taken into consideration when the parable is interpreted by a non-native (modern) reader. The identification of these kinds of realistic details in the parables is essential to

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<sup>10</sup> See P.Lond. VII 1948; PSI VI 554; P.Köln III 144; P.Cair. Zen. II 59162; IV 59186; P.Fouad I 43; P.Hamb. I 23; P.Laur. IV 166.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, P.Lond. II 483; VII 1948; BGU IV 1122; XII 2177; P.Mich. 9229; P.Mil. Vogl. II 69; VII 308; P.Cair. Masp. I 67097; P.Col. II 79; P.Flor. II 134; P.Oxy. IV 707; P.Ryl. II 427; PSI VI 554; P.Cair. Zen. II 59162; IV 59816; P.Köln III 144.

<sup>12</sup> See P.Heid. III 326; P.Oxy. XIV 1631, 1692; P.Col. I 59103. II 79; IV 59176, 59548, 59549; P.Zen. Pestm. 64; P.Lond. VII 1957; P.Cair. Zen. IV 59748, 59827; P.Mich. I 200; II 1 27. For evidence of the use of day labourers, see P.Lond. VII 1957; P.Cair. Zen. IV 59748, 59827; P.Mich. I 200; II 1 27. For a detailed list of specialised and seasonal tasks needed in vineyards, and the use and payment of day labourers, see Kloppenborg (2006, 578–580).

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed list of the expenses of a vineyard owner who focused on large-scale, intensive, export-orientated viticulture, as documented in papyri, see Kloppenborg (2006, 560–561, 570).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, P.Col. II 90; P.Mich. I 49.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, P.Cair. III 59317.

<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of these abnormal aspects of the parable, and its implications for understanding the parable from a realistic perspective, see Choi (2010, 116–118). See also Van Eck and Kloppenborg (2015, 1–11).

their interpretation, for it is only by means of a realistic idiom that the hearers (and modern readers) of a parable can attempt to understand the message that that parable wants to convey (Kloppenborg 2006, 287).<sup>17</sup>

### 3.3 *The Unmerciful Servant (Matt 18:23–33)*

Almost all scholars, in their interpretation of the Unmerciful Servant, link the king (Matt 18:23) with Matt 18:35 (“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart”; ESV), and as a result see the king as a metaphor for God (Van Eck 2016, 162–165). This link between Matt 18:23 and 35 is then used “as key to interpret the parable as a description of God’s forgiveness, mercy, compassion or judgment, and/or a moral teaching on the effect these attributes of God should have on the one who has received forgiveness.” (Van Eck 2016, 163). In these readings, the king’s release of the debt of the first servant is seen as abnormal or surprising, and, concomitantly, influences the understanding of the meaning of the parable.

If, however, the parable is read against the background of attested royal ideology on debt release in documented papyri, the king’s release of the debt of the first servant is not surprising. From this vantage point, combined with a social-scientific reading that focuses on patronage and clientism, as well as honour and shame, the focus of the parable is not on God’s forgiveness—or the effect that God’s forgiveness should have on the recipient thereof—but rather on the proposition that debt should be released in terms of general reciprocity in the *basileia* of God, emulating the way in which patrons release debt for the sake of honour.

Bazzana, in a study on the forgiveness of debts in the Lord’s Prayer (Q 11:2b–4), illustrates the important contribution that can be made by documentary papyri to the historical and exegetical study of ancient Christian texts like the parables (Bazzana 2011, 511–525). In his study, Bazzana identifies five documents<sup>18</sup> that, broadly speaking, discuss royal amnesty decrees on the remittance of debts *inter alia* related to leases, dikes,

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<sup>17</sup> According to Hedrick (2004, 43), interpreting “the parables requires knowledge of first-century Palestinian society, economics, politics, religion, and farming practices if they are to be understood in that context. Such knowledge of first-century practices evokes awareness of subtleties in the narrative missed by the heavy-handed searcher for theological ideas . . . Knowledge of the social world acts as a brake to the overeager imaginations of all who mine the parables for theological insights . . . Readers unaware of such almost subliminal social values are easily led astray in their readings.”

<sup>18</sup> I.e., P.Hib. 1.41; P.Köln 7.313; SB 20.14106; P.Oxy. 2.237 8.7–1; W.Chr. 29.

grain tax, money taxes, the payment of public expenses (taxes), and payments from proprietors for vineyards, orchards and baths.

In his analysis of these papyri, Bazzana makes three important observations: First, the enforcement of these Ptolemaic ordinances was usually extended both to debt that was due to the royal treasury, and to debt that was owed by subjects in the kingdom to one another. “Hence, the subjects were forced to assimilate their own behavior to the king’s and, through this act of obedience, to reinscribe the image of the king as the ideal broker of divine providence to the world” (Bazzana 2011, 517). Second, the royal habit of conceding debt remittances was not a practice restricted only to the Ptolemaic kingdom in Egypt; available evidence indicates that the release of debt was also part of an ideology present in the land of Israel (see 1 Macc 13:36–39). Third, a few documentary papyri connect these royal decrees on remittance of debts to the concept of *basileia* (Bazzana 2011, 520–521).<sup>19</sup>

In the parable, the king’s release of the debt of the first servant is reminiscent of the release of debt in especially P.Köln 7.313, SB 20.14106, and *1 Maccabees* 13:39. Since the royal habit of releasing debt was also part of an ideology present in the land of Israel,<sup>20</sup> it is not difficult to see that the first hearers of the Unmerciful Servant would in all likelihood have connected the social *realia* in the parable with their everyday experience. For the first hearers of the parable, the surprise in the narrative would therefore not have been the king’s release of the first servant’s debt, but rather the first servant’s failure to release the debt of his fellow servant, as well as the king’s reaction when he is informed of the actions of the first servant, whose debt was released by the king. From a realistic perspective, the parable most probably suggests that in the *basileia* of God debt should be released in terms of general reciprocity, emulating the way in which patrons (like kings) release debt for the sake of honour (see also Howes 2017, 16).

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<sup>19</sup> See P.Münch. 3/1.45.2; UPZ 1.113.6; P.Tor. Choach. 12.7.14; BGU 8.1764.1, 5.

<sup>20</sup> See also *Midrash Tanḥumah Emor* 8.30 (on Lev 23:39–40), that has a parable in which a king forgives the taxes owed by one of his provinces. Although this text is part of the later Jewish writings, and employs the parable as an example of divine forgiveness, the text gives evidence of knowledge of the royal ideology of releasing debt.

### 3.4 *The Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5–8)*

The majority of interpreters of the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5–8) read the parable as a teaching of Jesus on prayer, and argue that the meaning of the parable hinges on the meaning of the word ἀναίδεια (generally translated as “shamefulness”) in Luke 11:8, referring either to a positive or negative attitude. Linked to this is the question whose attitude of ἀναίδεια is being referred to in the parable; that of the host outside the door, or the neighbour behind the door.

Studies on the term and its derivatives in early Jewish and patristic literature, the Septuagint, Graeco-Roman literature, and early Christian writings, indicate that the term ἀναίδεια is consistently used in a negative and pejorative manner. In available documented papyri, ἀναίδεια and its derivatives occur ten times.<sup>21</sup> An analysis of these occurrences concurs with the consensus that ἀναίδεια always carry a negative meaning, referring to a willing and shameful participation in improper conduct; robbery, assault, swearing, housebreaking, malicious damage to property, illegal levy of contributions, forcing people to do something against their will, the use of violence, accusing people falsely, taking bribes, failure to settle outstanding debt, failure to compensate for damages caused, unlawful collection of taxes, negligence of responsibilities, and oppressive behaviour (see Van Eck and Van Niekerk 2016, 5–9).

What is the implication of this meaning of ἀναίδεια, found in Graeco-Egyptian papyri, for understanding the term in Luke 11:8? Firstly, in Luke 11:8 ἀναίδεια simply cannot have a positive meaning. Secondly, interpretations of the parable that link ἀναίδεια to the attitude or actions of the host should be dismissed. There are two reasons for this conclusive dismissal, namely the syntactical structure of Luke 11:8,<sup>22</sup> and our knowledge of what was considered normal and acceptable behaviour in the villages of ancient Palestine. In first-century village life, it was normal to ask for help from other villagers to feed (honour) an unexpected guest.<sup>23</sup> The host, therefore, asking a neighbour for bread in the middle of the night to feed a guest was normal behaviour; there is simply no ἀναίδεια involved in

<sup>21</sup> See P.Cair.Isid. 75; P.Lond. II 342; P.Oxy. 41.2996; P.Ryl. II 141; SB 6.9105, 9387, 9421, 6.9458; P.Sakaon 48.

<sup>22</sup> In Luke 11:8, the αὐτοῦ in v. 8b is clearly linked to the ἀναίδεια of the giver: λέγω ὑμῖν, εἰ καὶ οὐ δώσει αὐτῷ ἀναστὰς διὰ τὸ εἶναι φίλον αὐτοῦ, διὰ γε τὴν ἀναίδειαν αὐτοῦ ἐγερθεὶς δώσει αὐτῷ ὅσων χρήζει.

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed analysis of this aspect of the parable, see Van Eck (2011b, 1–14).

the request. This, I believe, should play a role in the interpretation of the parable when read from a realistic perspective.

### 3.5 *The Tenants (Mark 12:1–12 and par.; Gos. Thom. 65)*

In the most extensive reading of the parable of the Tenants currently available, Kloppenborg (2006), using documentary papyri that date from 258 BCE to the fourth century CE, indicates that the parable presupposes several features that are salient to ancient viticulture, as well as a realistic picture of economic, social and legal aspects of the Mediterranean during the early Roman period. These aspects include large-scale landholding, tenancy,<sup>24</sup> absenteeism, conflict, and the sending of a son.<sup>25</sup> When these realistic aspects of the parable are taken into consideration, the parable is not an allegorical story of Jesus' confrontation with Israel's leaders—as many interpreters of the parable assume—but a realistic story that challenges “normal” aspects of life in Jewish Palestine, namely “the middling rich and their pursuit of wealth, the prevalence of absenteeism, and ubiquitous resorts to status displays” (Kloppenborg 2006, 349). Read from this perspective, the surprising turn in the parable is the decision of the owner not to exercise his “right” to use force (violence) to defend his ownership of the vineyard. In doing so, the parable depicts the owner, surprisingly, as the honourable person in the parable.

## 4 **The Wise Steward (Luke 16:1–8a): A Realistic and Social-Scientific Reading**

The history of its interpretation indicates that the parable, broadly speaking, has been interpreted in one of two ways: shrewdness in the use of money,<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, P.Col. II 79; P.Ryl. IV 583; P.Köln III 144; BGU IV 1119, 1122; P.Lond. II 163; P.Harr. I 137; P.Oxy. IV 729; XIV 1631, 1692; XLVII 3354; P.Flor. III 369; P.Ross. Georg. II 19.

<sup>25</sup> In cases where tenants ignored the landlord's deputies, the normal strategy was to send agents of increasing status. See, for example, P.Cair. Zen. I 59015, 59018; P.Oxy. III 645 (Kloppenborg 2006, 323–326).

<sup>26</sup> Ireland (1989, 318), for example, regards the parable to be “a fundamental evaluation of possessions . . . which will lead the wise disciple to use his possessions in the service of the needy.” So Goodrich (2012, 566): the parable teaches the strict ethical demands relevant to the kingdom of God, namely faithfulness not only with unrighteous money, but also with that which belongs to another. According to Scott (1989, 266), the parable breaks the bond between power and justice and equates justice and vulnerability. Snodgrass (2008, 416) sees the point of the parable in the wise use of money in view of

or prudence in a time of crisis<sup>27</sup> (see Blomberg 2012, 327). In these readings, the narrative (literary) context of the parable plays a definite role in coming to grips with its meaning. A realistic and social-scientific reading, on the other hand, reads the parable in terms of its socio-economic context, paying attention especially to the socio-economic registers and dominant cultural scripts of 27–30 CE Palestine.

When this is the focus of interpretation, the following aspects of the parable are deemed as important. Who is the rich man (ἄνθρωπός τις ἦν πλούσιος; Luke 16:1) and the steward (οἰκονόμος; Luke 16:1) in the parable, and what are their respective social standings in the world in which the parable was told? Who are the debtors of the rich man (οἱ χρεοφειλέται τοῦ κυρίου; Luke 16:5, 7)? What is owed—taxes or loans that are in arrears? If it is loans, what kinds of loans are being referred to? What can the quantities owed (Luke 16:5, 7) tell us about the rich man and the debtors? Only when the reader of the parable has some clarity on these aspects of the parable, will it be possible to interpret the meaning of the actions of the steward (Luke 16:5–7), the implications of these actions for both himself and the rich man, as well as the reason why the steward is praised by the rich man for being wise (φρονίμως; Luke 16:8).

An estimation of the value of the quantities of baths (βάτοι; Luke 16:6) and cors (κόροι; Luke 16:7) owed by the debtors in Luke 16:5 and 7 is crucial to the interpretation of the parable from a realistic perspective.<sup>28</sup> An estimation of the value of these quantities can assist in identifying more precisely the social location of the debtors and the rich man, as well as the kind of debt being referred to. The most comprehensive estimation of the

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the eschatological crisis, and Schottroff (2006, 160) interprets the parable as a *halakah* on the subject of money from the perspective of the Lukan communities. Fitzmyer (1997, 178), likewise, sees the parable as a good example of how the Christian should act prudently in respect to wealth.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Hultgren (2000, 153), Jeremias (1972, 181–182), Perrin (1967, 109–115), Derrett (1974, 76), and Boucher (1981, 109). According to Hultgren, the parable places its hearers under judgment and provide a challenge to the children of the light to take their situation before God and act like the children of this age. For Jeremias, the parable depicts the challenge of the hour, and calls for resolute action, like that of the steward. According to Perrin, the parable calls for immediate decision, and for Derrett the point of the parable is to act with single-mindedness in such a way that it sets an example for others to emulate. Boucher describes the theme of the parable as “foresight and decisive action in view of the impending crisis of the final judgement.”

<sup>28</sup> The bat or bath is a liquid measure, and the cor or kor a dry measure (see, e.g., Marulli 2012, 208 n. 37).

value of the hundred baths of oil (ἑκατὸν βάτους ἐλαίου; Luke 16:6) and the hundred cors of wheat (ἑκατὸν κόρους σίτου; Luke 16:7) owed by the two debtors has most probably been done by Oakman (2008, 28–30) and Jeremias (1972, 181). In Oakman's estimation, 1 cor equals 40 litres of dry measure or 11 bushels of wheat. The debt of 100 cors in the parable thus equals 4 000 litres of dry measure<sup>29</sup> or 1 100 bushels of wheat,<sup>30</sup> and would feed approximately 150 people for one year.<sup>31</sup> In addition to this, Jeremias estimates that 1 cor equals the yield of 1 acre, and that the currency value of 1 cor, based on *m. Baba Metsi'a* 5:1, is 25 denarii. The debt of 100 cors thus represents the yield of 100 acres,<sup>32</sup> with a currency value of 2 500 denarii.<sup>33</sup> Regarding the debt of 100 baths, Oakman (2008, 29) estimates that 1 bath equals 40 litres of liquid measure, thus totalling a debt of 4 000 litres of olive oil.<sup>34</sup> This debt, Jeremias (1972, 181) estimates, correspond to the

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<sup>29</sup> For estimations of the quantity of 100 cors by other interpreters of the parable, see Hultgren (2000, 151; 3 930 litres), Jeremias (1972, 181; 3 640 litres) and McLaughlin (2004, 79; 3 930 litres). Pastor (1997, 233), on the basis of P.Mich. 12.634 40, argues that 1 artaba equalled 12 cors, which means that a debt of 100 cors would have equalled 4 650 litres. Working with the same ratio between artaba and cor, Duncan-Jones (1976, 43), on the basis of P.Lond. V 1718, argues that 40 artabas equalled 624 cors, which means that 100 cors would have equalled 6 240 litres. Schottroff's (2006, 159) estimation of 364 400 litres is probably too high.

<sup>30</sup> For more or less the same estimations, see Hultgren (2000, 151; 1 100 bushels), Kloppenborg (1989, 482; 1 115 bushels), Manson (1951, 292; 1 083 bushels) and Snodgrass (2008, 406; 1 100 bushels).

<sup>31</sup> Oakman (2008, 29 n. 70) calculates this figure as follows: Drawing on the work of Hamel, as well as that of Clark and Haswell (see Oakman 2008, 29, n. 70), it is estimated that 200 kilograms of grain is needed per person per year at subsistence level. Given that the average density of wheat today is more or less 27 kilograms per bushel, Oakman calculates the annual subsistence of persons based on the debt of 100 cors as follows: cor multiplied by bushels, multiplied by average density of wheat today, divided by kilogram of grain for one person per year at subsistence level. Thus,  $100 \times 11 \times 27/200 = 150$  people.

<sup>32</sup> So Oakman (2008, 29) and Kloppenborg (1989, 482).

<sup>33</sup> This is also the estimation of Manson (1951, 292) and Oakman (2008, 29). According to Breech (1983, 108), the debt equalled seven-and-a-half years' worth of wages for one person.

<sup>34</sup> See also Jeremias (1972, 181; 3 650 litres), McLaughlin (2004, 79; 4 000 litres), Hultgren (2000, 151; 3 930 litres), Manson (1951, 292; 3 630–4 091 litres), Snodgrass (2008, 406; 3 630–4 091 litres) and Kloppenborg (1989, 482; 3 500 litres). Schottroff's (2006, 159) estimation of 36 500, again, is almost certainly too high.

yield of 146 olive trees,<sup>35</sup> and with 1 bath of olive oil equalling the currency value of 10 denarii, the outstanding debt is 1 000 denarii.<sup>36</sup>

From these estimations, it is clear that the debts referred to in Luke 16:5 and 7 are quite substantial. Regarding the nature of these debts, the possibility that they might refer to outstanding taxes can immediately be dismissed, since tax was paid in money, and there is no indication in the parable that the rich man (master) is a royal figure (Oakman 2008, 29). All other debts were paid in kind, like in the parable. Moreover, the sizes of the debts are simply too large to refer to the debts of individual smallholders or poor sharecroppers (Kloppenborg 1989, 486; see also Marulli 2012, 208; Schottroff 2006, 159).<sup>37</sup> But what then was the nature of the debts described in the parable most likely to be?

Several scholars have argued that, because of the commercial quantities referred to in the parable, the debtors would most probably have been either tenants or wholesalers (merchants) (see Kloppenborg 1989, 482; Marulli 2012, 208–210; Smith 1937, 108; Crossan 2012, 134; Herzog 1994, 247–251; Hultgren 2000, 148–149; Schottroff 2006, 159; Snodgrass 2008, 406). Schottroff (2006, 159) argues for the latter possibility. For her, the nature of the bills depicted in the parable and the quantities of oil and wheat that are owed fit much better within the realm of (wholesale) merchandising than it does in the realm of tenants and leases. Herzog (1994, 249–250), in following Jeremias and Fitzmyer, also opts for the debtors being merchants. The setting of the parable, he argues, is either the master's estate or a nearby market town, where estate managers normally contracted merchants for the selling, transporting or exporting of *inter alia* oil and wheat. Stewards could administer contracts with tenants, plus gather and store harvests, but could not transport gathered crops or exchange them for money. For this, merchants were needed.

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<sup>35</sup> So Oakman (2008, 29). Manson (1951, 292) and Snodgrass (2008, 406) estimate that a debt of 100 baths correspond to the yield of 150 olive trees.

<sup>36</sup> This is also the estimation of Oakman (2008, 29) and Manson (1951, 292). According to Breech (1983, 108), a debt of 100 baths of olive oil equalled three-and-a-half years' worth of wages for one person.

<sup>37</sup> Another argument put forward for the debtors not being peasant smallholders is that the parable describes the debtors as being literate (see respectively Luke 16:6b and 7b: “δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα καὶ . . . γράψον πεντήκοντα” and “δέξαι σου τὰ γράμματα καὶ γράψον ὀγδοήκοντα”). Debtors who were literate enough to change their own accounts could therefore not have been peasants, who were typically not literate (see, e.g., Manson 1951, 37–38; Smith 1937, 108). This argument assumes that no peasants were literate; an assumption that would be difficult to prove.

Kloppenborg (1989, 482), Marulli (2012, 208–210), Hultgren (2000, 149) and Snodgrass (2008, 406) argue for the possibility of both. For Hultgren, the debtors could have been persons who purchased goods from the estate, or tenant farmers who agreed to pay a fixed amount in kind for the yearly rent. In the end, he claims that “one need not know precisely.” Snodgrass also entertains both options, but regards the possibility that the debtors could have been wholesalers to be “less likely.” Kloppenborg also argues for both possibilities, and concludes that the parable “simply does not allow the audience to determine which is the case.” Marulli, finally, also argues for both scenarios. It seems, however, that he opts for the possibility that the debtors are tenants, based on the extent of the debts. According to him, the extent of the debts described in the parable very likely refers to a scenario in which “the rich man of the parable was a patron who helped clients to acquire slaves, seasonal workers, seeds, land and tools in order to be able to produce.”

This reading of the parable<sup>38</sup> takes its lead from Marulli’s point of view due to the following considerations: First, it seems that the steward, after being summoned by his master, had to act really quickly to salvage his situation. That explains his request to the first debtor to quickly (ταχέως; Luke 16:6) change his bill. It is realistic to assume that most merchants—who were transient because of their involvement in long-distance trade, and were therefore absent for long periods of time—were not readily available on short notice. Second, the steward hoped, as a result of his actions, that he would be received in the homes of his master’s debtors. This supports the scenario of debtors, most probably tenants, who were living on a more permanent basis in close proximity to the master’s estate. Third, in first-century Palestine merchants were seen as practising a despised trade. They assisted in the movement of goods accumulated through forced extraction, cash crops, and commercial farming, thus playing a major role in the

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<sup>38</sup> In the reading that follows, the integrity of the parable is delimited to Luke 16:1–8a. Luke 16:8a provides the conclusion of the story, and serves as the “narrative swerve” of the parable (Kloppenborg 1989, 477). Luke 16:9 is a Lukan addition that echoes the steward’s plan to be received in the households of the debtors, and the dichotomy between the earthly and eternal dwellings relegate all the actions in the parable (see Kloppenborg 1989, 475). This is also the point of view of Scott (1989, 258): “[O]n the basis of internal stylistic evidence . . . the parable originally concluded with the master praising an unjust steward.” Even Snodgrass (2008, 411–412), who is normally conservative in admitting redactional changes to the parable by the Synoptics, admits that Luke 16:9 is possibly Luke’s explanation of the parable. For other scholars who argue that the parable ends at Luke 16:8a, see Hultgren (2000, 148 n.8), Scott (1989, 256 n. 4) and Herzog (1994, 234).

deterioration of the peasantry's daily lives that focused on subsistence, and not on commercial trade. Profits made by merchants were perceived as a form of usury and unnatural, and their trade was perceived as socially destructive and a threat to the community; they owned large parts of land, and were part of the apparatus of the ancient political economy of the first-century Roman Empire (see Van Eck 2016, 220–221). If one assumes that the first hearers of the parable were Galilean peasants, a steward cancelling the debts of merchants would not have been perceived as positive *per se*. If, however, the debtors were previous smallholders who had lost their land because of high rents and taxes, and therefore had to become tenants—at times, of land that they had previously owned—the actions of the steward would have been perceived as positive; another reason why hospitality would most probably have been shown by them towards the steward. When Jesus told the parable, the intention was most probably for the first hearers to identify with the actions of the steward. If the debtors were merchants, it would have nullified this intention of the parable. Fourth, the great number of Graeco-Egyptian papyri attesting to the practice of tenancy seems to favour the likelihood that the debtors were tenants.<sup>39</sup> It follows from this that the debt described in the parable would most probably have been outstanding business loans (private debt) resulting from an agreement to rent land for, in the case of the parable, the cultivation of olive oil and wheat at a fixed rate of return (see Marulli 2012, 209; Oakman 2008, 29).<sup>40</sup>

To summarise, quoting Oakman (2008, 29), “the parable envisions a man who owns whole villages. These tenant villages, through representatives, pay a yearly produce rent on their agricultural land.”<sup>41</sup> This scenario fits the description of the master at Luke 16:1 in the parable as ἄνθρωπος τις ἦν πλούσιος, meaning “a man who is part of the elite class.” Being part of this class, he was most probably a patron to many clients. Also, since the first-century Mediterranean society was highly stratified, with

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, P.Mich. XII 634; P.Col. II 79; P.Ryl. IV 583; P.Köln III 144; BGU IV 1119, 1122; P.Lond. II 163; P.Harr. I 137; P.Oxy. IV 729; XIV 1631, 1692; XLVII 3354; P.Flor. III 369; P.Ross. Georg. II 19.

<sup>40</sup> In this regard, see Kloppenborg (1989, 482): “[T]he sums in question are relatively high and militate against both loans for seed grain for smallholders and rent from small rental tracts. One hundred cors of wheat (1 115 bushels) . . . would represent a half-share for almost 200 acres . . . One hundred baths of oil (about 3 500 litres) probably represents a very large oil grove, all the more so if it is assumed that the tenant retains half of the total yield.”

<sup>41</sup> Based on *m. Baba Metsi'a* 5:1, Oakman (2008, 29 n. 73) estimates that rents were normally 10 cors a year (see also Applebaum 1976, 659).

honour and shame being one of the “social glues” of this pyramidal structure (Marulli 2012, 201), he was most probably also a client of patrons who, in turn, were part of the ruling and governing classes with even more power and prestige (see Lenski 1966, 215–216, 228).

Finally, the οἰκονόμος in the parable most probably belongs to the retainer class (Herzog 1994, 241–243; Marulli 2012, 201; Schottroff 2006, 158; Wright 2015, 124). The retainer class averaged around five percent of the first-century Mediterranean population, ranging from scribes, agents and bureaucrats to soldiers and generals, all in service of the elite (Lenski 1966, 243). In the parable, the οἰκονόμος was most probably an estate manager, the agent of his elite master, “a position of considerable authority and trust” (Herzog 1994, 243). As can be seen from papyrus BGU 1.300 (dated 3 January 148 CE), agents had the authority to arrange new leases on behalf of their employers, provide receipts in their employer’s names, and conduct any other business connected with their stewardship in the name of their employers. A steward thus “was able to represent his master, act on his behalf, enter into contracts, and in general, enjoy the legal capacity assigned to his master” (Herzog 1994, 243). That the steward in the parable had this kind of authority, is clear from Luke 16:5–7.

With this then being the important socio-economic registers and dominant cultural scripts operating in the parable, how can the actions of the steward to salvage his predicament be understood, especially in terms of his master’s praise in Luke 16:8a? The most prominent interpretations of the steward’s actions and the master’s praise are those of Derrett (1974, 48–77) and Fitzmyer (1997, 161–184). In both of these readings, the steward is exonerated of any wrongdoing. In Derrett’s reading, the steward made usurious loans that were not sanctioned by his master. When he was found out, he rebated the illegal interest component of the debt. In essence, his master lost nothing, and since he corrected his wrongdoing, was praised by the master. In Fitzmyer’s reading, the steward extended usurious loans to make some personal profit. When he was found out, he lowered the debts by dismissing the profit he would have made. The steward thus corrected his earlier wrongdoing and was therefore praised by the master for being φρονίμως. Kloppenborg (1989, 482–486) has critiqued these two readings extensively: Luke 16:5 and 6 clearly show that the debt was owed to the master; contemporary loan documents from Egypt never make provision for the remuneration of an agent; the amounts of reductions do not match contemporary interest rates; and the parable gives no indication that loans are involved.

In an alternative reading, Kloppenborg (1989, 487–493) argues that the focus of the parable is not on the steward's character, but on the master's honour. Firstly, the guilt of the steward should not be taken for granted. The steward was only reported, by others, as squandering his master's goods (Luke 16:1). This, Kloppenborg argues, engages the social codes of honour and shame, especially the master's honour. He has a steward he cannot control, thus shaming him and making him look like a fool amongst his peers. His steward's alleged dishonesty has entered the public forum, and as a result his social standing is being challenged. To regain his honour, the master only has one real option, namely to dismiss his steward. In an effort to salvage his situation, the steward, in an act that constitutes blatant fraud, reduces the debt of his master's debtors. By doing this, he becomes a patron and the debtors of his master become his clients. Patron-client relationships always implied reciprocity, and therefore his expectation was reasonable that he would be welcomed in the households of his new clients. But then the "swerve" (surprise) in the parable: The master, ignoring his own endangered honour, praises the steward for his act.

By this he shifts attention from his own damaged honour to the apparent success of his now-disembedded steward. He honours with praise a social inferior and one who has threatened his reputation as master of his house. (Kloppenborg 1989, 492)

As such, Kloppenborg concludes, the parable not only fractures the social codes of honour and shame and the expectations of the hearers of the parable, inducing them to doubt the absoluteness of the pivotal value of honour, but also challenges the cultural codes "which undergird various sorts of social exchange but by their very nature erect a wall against other persons" (Kloppenborg 1989, 493).

My reading of the parable agrees in broad with that of Kloppenborg. It is, however, my contention that the steward's activity could have been motivated by a different reason; one that also explains the subsequent praise by the master. As we have seen, Bazzana (2011, 511–525), in a study on the forgiveness of debts in the Lord's Prayer (Q 11:2b–4), identifies five Ptolemaic amnesty decrees in which the debt, or in certain cases some debt, of subjects are cancelled. The motivation behind such debt remission was a continual love and quest for honour (*φιλοτιμία*), as well as a wish to turn subjects into clients, who then had to reciprocate by publically recognising through word of mouth the generosity received. These decrees propagated Hellenistic royal ideology, and set an example of how rulers should act;

showing “mercy” to enhance one’s honour and turn subjects into clients. Moreover, in these decrees, debts and debtors were connected to the lexical sphere of words with the stem ὀφείλ-, as in the case of the parable of the Wise Steward (see χρεωφειλέτης and ὀφείλω in Luke 16:5, as well as ὀφείλω in Luke 16:7). Also important, as we have seen, is the fact that the royal habit of conceding debt remittances was not restricted to the Ptolemaic kingdom in Egypt, but was also part of an ideology present in other areas of the eastern Mediterranean, including the land of Israel (see 1 Macc 13:39; 15:1–9).

In the parable, as we have seen, the steward was in all likelihood falsely accused of squandering his master’s possessions. This public accusation endangered his social position and honour-rating, as well as that of his master. With the steward, in his own words, not being strong enough to dig and not wanting to become a beggar (Luke 16:3), what were his options? In an effort to protect his honour and social position, as well as that of his master, he decided to follow the known example that had been set by some of those who formed part of the ruling class. Like rulers sometimes did, he released some of the debt owed to his master, although he knew that he was acting in a fraudulent manner, and as a result of his actions would in all probability be labelled as ἀδικίας (“unjust” or “wrong-doer”). Yet, he believed that the end justified the means; because of his decision to release some of the debts of his master’s debtors, his own and his master’s social standing and honour rating were protected, and additional clients were also gained (Luke 16:4). The latter, of course, would come in handy in the case of a dismissal.

How does the master react? He has no other option, despite his steward’s fraudulent actions, to praise him. This is why he calls him ἀδικίας and φρονίμως at the same time. He acted wisely; by reducing the debt of his debtors, the steward preserved his master’s reputation by upholding him as a man worthy of honour. Surely, because of the wise actions of his steward, the master’s generosity would soon be praised publically and widely, and as a result, his honour rating would increase rather than decrease.<sup>42</sup>

*Contra* Kloppenborg, the parable therefore does not fracture or challenge social codes or the absoluteness of the pivotal value of honour, but rather advocates that honour lies in the release of debt, as is the case in the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (see Van Eck 2016, 176–182). In the

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<sup>42</sup> For a similar interpretation of the implications of the actions of the steward, see Marulli (2012, 201).

parable, the steward (and the master) initially functions as a symbol of the exploitation of the peasantry and the oppressive agrarian social order. His generosity, however, not only mitigates the oppressive circumstances of the peasantry, but also enables the creation of a new relationship with them. For this, he should be honoured. Honour, in the kingdom of God, Jesus suggests, lies in the release of debt (see Oakman 2008, 35–36).

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