Interpreting the parables of the Galilean Jesus: A social-scientific approach

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a methodology for interpreting the parables of Jesus. The methodology put forward has as starting point two convictions. Firstly, the difference between the context of Jesus' parables as told by Jesus the Galilean in 30 CE and the literary context of the parables in the gospels has to be taken seriously. Secondly, an effort has to be made to at least try to avoid the fallacies of ethnocentrism and anachronism when interpreting the parables. In an effort to achieve this goal it is argued that social-scientific criticism presents itself as the obvious line of approach. Operating from these two convictions, the method being proposed is explained by using 12 statements (or theses) which are discussed as concisely and comprehensively as possible. It is *inter alia* argued that the central theme of Jesus' parables was the non-apocalyptic kingdom of God, that the parables are atypical stories (comparisons), and that the parables depict Jesus as a social prophet.

INTRODUCTION

Modern (critical) parable interpretation and the name Adolf Jülicher are synonymous.[1] In his *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, Jülicher (1910) laid to rest once and for all the allegorical interpretation of the parables that had reigned supreme for the first 18 centuries of parable interpretation. Jülicher suggested, on the model of Aristotle, that the two basic units in parabolic speech are the simile (*Vergleichung*) and the metaphor. Jülicher understood the difference between the simile and the metaphor as absolute: The simile is a literal or direct form of speech (*eigentliche Rede*), while the metaphor is a non-literal or indirect form of speech (*uneigentliche Rede*). The metaphor says one thing but means something else; it needs to be interpreted and remains incomprehensible. The simile needs no interpretation; it is clear and self-explanatory. According to Jülicher, the parables of Jesus fall into the latter category – they are similes (not metaphors or allegories [a succession of metaphors]); they need no interpretation; and, in their purpose to teach, their meaning or intention is clear (Jülicher 1910:52–58).

Jülicher identified three categories of parables: the similitude (*Gleichnis*), the fable (*Parabel*) and the example story (*Beispielerzahlung*). The similitude is an expanded simile consisting of two parts: an object from real life (*Sache*) and a picture (*Bild*), with only one (moral) point of comparison (*tertium comparationis*) between the object and the picture. As such, the intention of the similitude is to prove (Jülicher 1910:58–80). The fable is also a similitude, but refers to an imaginative story in the past with the intention of putting forward a general truth (Jülicher 1910:92–111). The example story is in itself an illustration of the truth it means to demonstrate (e.g. the Samaritan), with the intention of providing guidelines for correct behaviour (Jülicher 1910:112–115).

Jülicher also pointed out that the authenticity of the parables, as presented in the Synoptics, cannot simply be assumed. Jesus most probably did not utter the parables as we have them in Mark, Matthew and Luke. The parables in the Synoptics have been translated, transposed and transformed. This, Jülicher argued, is clear from the fact that the reports of the same parable by two or three evangelists never fully agree. They vary in terms of viewpoint, arrangement, occasion and interpretation. One can therefore speak of a Lukan accent for a specific parable, in contrast to its Matthean version. The parables therefore 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 1910:11).

Jülicher's definition of the parables as similes that make only one point, his classification of the parables into different categories and his opinion that the evangelists retold the parables of Jesus in a way that serve their own interests have had a huge impact on the critical interpretation of the parables since the beginning of the 19th century. Almost all subsequent interpreters have, in general, rejected the allegorical interpretation of the parables[2] and are in agreement with Jülicher that the parables make a single point.[3] Jülicher's understanding of the language of the parables as simile has led to the view that the parables are open-ended language events (extended metaphors),[4] and much

1. Jülicher's contribution to the interpretation of the parables is of such importance that many scholars refer to the history of parable interpretation as the period 'before and after' Jülicher (see e.g. Jones 1964:4).

2. There are, however, some scholars that argue that an allegorical interpretation of the parables is still a viable option (see Blomberg 2004; Hultgren 2000; Snodgrass 2008). The basis for their argument is ample literary evidence of the allegorisation of the various figures featured in Jesus' parables. This allegorisation, however, clearly creates literary tensions in the gospels (see e.g. Mk 12:1–11). Moreover, we also have non-allegorised versions of some of the allegorised parables in the gospels (e.g. Mk 12:1–11 and GThom 65). These two observations raise serious questions 'as to whether allegory was the "ground state" of the parable or a secondary stage of interpretation' (Kloppenborg 2009:1).

3. Jülicher interpreted the single point of the parable in moral terms. Although subsequent interpreters agreed with Jülicher that the parables only make one point, they replaced Jülicher's general moral point with a specific point related to the historical circumstances of the ministry of Jesus. Dodd (1961:34–35) and Jeremias (1972:21), for example, define the one point of the parables in terms of Jesus' proclamation of the imminent arrival of God's reign (see McGaughy 2007:8), and Cadoux (1930) relates the specific point of the parables to Jesus' relationship to the Jews.

4. The understanding of the parables as extended metaphors can be traced back via the work of especially Dodd (1961:5), Funk (2006:29–51; 2007:89–93) and Wilder (1976:134–151). Dodd's definition of a parable is well known: 'At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile, drawn from nature or common life, arresting the listener by its vividness or strangeness – and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought' (Dodd 1961:5). Wilder (1971; 1974), combining the exegetical approaches of New Testament scholarship with literary criticism, defines the parables as narrative metaphors; that is, stories through which the world

attention has been given to the classification of the parables.[5] Finally, and maybe most importantly, Jülicher's demonstration of the 'often ill and awkward fit of the parable to its gospel context' (to use the apt description of Scott 2001b:5), has steered modern parable scholarship into two opposing directions: those who interpret the parables in the Synoptics as if they are the very words of Jesus (the obvious differences notwithstanding); and those who argue that the authenticity of the parables in the Synoptics cannot simply be assumed.[6] These scholars argue that Jesus did not utter the parables as we read them; are aware of the peril of 'gospelizing Jesus' (Van Eck 2008:1764); and focus on the authenticity of the parables as we have them in the Synoptics (and other non-canonical or sayings gospels like Q and Thomas).

Interpreting the parables of Jesus entails a few simple, yet far reaching, choices. Are we interested in the parables of Jesus, the Galilean peasant, or the Synoptic versions thereof? In this regard one is again reminded of Jülicher's taunting observation. How do we go about finding the 'original' parables (voice) of Jesus? On what grounds can one make a decision that a specific parable (or a part thereof) is authentic or not? Is it possible to make such a decision? Is it important to take into account that Jesus told his parables in a world totally different from ours? If the world of Jesus and his hearers was that of an advanced agrarian society, what are the implications for the interpretation of Jesus' parables? Do we have to take the values and culture of the first-century Mediterranean world into consideration when trying to interpret the parables of Jesus? Methodologically speaking, what exegetical approach can help the interpreter to take serious cognisance of the social world of the parables? Is it important to at least try not to read the parables of Jesus from an ethnocentric or anachronistic point of view? How important are the internal structures of the parables in the process of interpretation? Can one identify a central idea or symbol in Jesus' parables that can guide the interpretation of his parables? How important is the classification of the parables (e.g. as metaphor, similitude or example story) when one takes Jesus' first hearers of the parables into consideration? Is a definition of the parable essential to its understanding? What, most probably, was Jesus' aim in telling parables? Are Jesus' parables theocentric (i.e. telling us something about the character of God)? In other words, are the parables of Jesus about religion or theology? Can the parables help us to understand something of who the historical Jesus was? Do Jesus' parables make ethical points? More specifically, can we identify certain values in the parables of Jesus that can be applied morally in a postmodern society? And finally, what picture of Jesus the Galilean can be drawn from the parables he told?

In setting out an approach to interpreting the parables of Jesus, these questions will have to be addressed. Choices must be made. One should, also, be clear on the method that is used. This is done in this article. The method of interpretation put forward has as starting point two convictions: First, Jülicher's distinction between the context of Jesus and the gospels has to be taken seriously. The interest here, therefore, is the parables of Jesus the Galilean. Secondly, an effort has to be made to at least try to avoid the fallacy of ethnocentrism (and anachronism). In an effort to achieve this goal an understanding of the cultural values and social dynamics of the social world of Jesus and his hearers is deemed an absolute necessity. To help us, as modern readers, to gain some understanding of the social world of Jesus, social-scientific criticism presents itself as the obvious line of approach.

Operating from these two convictions, the method being proposed will be explained by using 12 statements (or theses) that relate to the questions put forward above. Each statement is discussed as concisely and comprehensively as possible, without trying to force the statement made. Scholars that made enormous contributions in understanding the parables are treated as respected conversational partners. Where opinions differ, it will be clearly stated. The reader, however, must always keep in mind the two convictions stated above: If we want to interpret the parables of Jesus, this is what we want to interpret – not, for example, the Synoptic versions of the parables told by Jesus the Galilean. And, to do this, the pivotal values of the first-century social world of the Jesus that walked the roads of Galilee have to be taken into consideration.

THESES

Thesis 1

The authenticity of the parables, as we have them in the Synoptics, cannot simply be assumed

As stated above, it was Jülicher that first suggested that the authenticity of the parables in the Synoptics cannot simply be assumed. Jülicher not only argued convincingly that the allegories found in the gospels are not the original interpretations of the parables, but also showed that the parables fit poorly into their gospel contexts. The first scholar that took up these suggestions was the German scholar Joachim Jeremias (1972). Using the insights of the form critics (Dibelius and Bultmann) that studied the development of the oral tradition of Jesus' sayings, Jeremias developed laws of transmission for the parables in order to reconstruct the original words of Jesus. For Jeremias the interpretation of the parables was determined by their life situation (*Sitz im Leben*) – their original context. Jeremias also saw the parables in the Gospel of Thomas as independent witnesses to the parables of Jesus – the first parable scholar to do so. Jeremias's work was followed up by that of Amos Wilder (1976). Wilder attributed the allegorisations of the parables to the hands of the evangelists; and saw the kingdom parables in

(footnote 4 continues...)
of God's kingdom might come to life in the imagination of the listener. Funk, building on the work of Jülicher, Dodd, Jeremias and Wilder, understands the parables as extended metaphors that disclose new meaning or a new reality. As metaphors, the parables frustrate the inherited expectations of their listeners and invite them to re-envision the actual world in unaccustomed ways (see Beutner 2007d:2). Or, in the words of Funk himself: 'A parable is a short, short story that confronts the hearer with a dilemma and then invites the hearer to make a choice' (Funk 2007:89).

5. Jülicher's classification of the parables as similitudes, fables or example stories gave rise to an array of classifications of the parables. To name but a few: According to Dibelius, there are four types of parables (parables that have as content that which is commonplace, typical, extraordinary or imaginary); Bultmann (1963) uses the categories of *Bildworte*, metaphors, *Gleichnisse*, parables that do not picture a typical recurrent event and *Beispielerzählungen* to classify the parables; Trench uses the categories of similitude (parable), fable, mythus, proverb and allegory (see also Lockyer 1963:14–17); and Bruce classifies the parables as didactic, evangelic or prophetic. Bugge uses the categories of argumentative, illustrative, paradoxical and didactic; Smith classifies the parables as similitudes, parables, example-stories, arguments and allegories; Manson divides the parables into two groups (ethical parables and parables that exhibit some aspect of God's rule); and Hunter groups the parables under the topics of the coming of the kingdom, the grace of God, the men of the kingdom and the crisis of the kingdom. Jones uses the categories of contextual, didactic and existential; and Linnemann, in following the classification of Jülicher, uses the categories of similitude, parable proper, illustration and allegory (see Kilgallen 2008:11–12, 14; Kissinger 1979:69–193). The trend to classify the parables into different categories is also present in some of the most recent publications on the interpretation of the parables: Kistemaker (1980:9–11) categorises the parables as either true parables, story parables or illustrations; Stein (1981:18–21) identifies proverbs, metaphors, similitudes, example stories and allegories in the parables of Jesus (see also Stiller 2005:10–11 and Osborne 1991:236, who add figurative sayings to Stein's list of categories); Boice (1983:10) categorises the parables as parables of the kingdom, salvation, wisdom and folly, Christian life and judgement; and Hultgren (2000:3, 6) identifies two types of parables, namely narrative parables and similitude. Blomberg's (2004:15–17) categories make room for one-point, two-point and triadic parables; Hedrick (2004:6–8) uses the categories of simile, similitude, metaphor, symbol and allegory; and Zimmermann (2007:25–28) typifies the parables as *narrativ, fiktional, realistisch, metaphorisch, appellativ* or *kontexbezogen*. Snodgrass (2008:9–16), finally, suggests the following classification of the parables: aphoristic sayings, similitudes (double indirect extended analogy that lacks plot development), interrogative parables (parables that are presented entirely as questions), double indirect narrative parables (metaphoric analogies with plots), juridical parables (parables that elicit a self-condemnation from the hearer through the aid of an image), single indirect parables (example stories) and 'how much more' parables (parables that say that God's actions far exceed or are not like the person's depicted in the parable).

6. Scholars that take as point of departure Jülicher's conviction that the authenticity of the parables in the Synoptics cannot simply be assumed, and therefore focus their attention on the 'original' parables of Jesus (the parables as uttered by Jesus, the Galilean Jewish peasant) are *inter alia* the following: Cadoux (1930); Crossan (1973); Beutner (2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2007d); Bultmann (1963); the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar (Funk, Hoover & The Jesus Seminar 1993); Funk (1996; 2006; 2007); Herzog (1994; 2005); Jeremias (1972); Kloppenborg (2006); McGaughy (2007); Miller (2007); Oakman (2008); Perrin (1967); Scott (1989; 2001a; 2007); Van Eck (2007; 2008; 2009); and Wilder (1974).

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Matthew 13 and Mark 4 as the bedrock of the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Perrin (1967) is another of the few parable scholars who took Jülicher's question on the authenticity of the Synoptic parables seriously. By developing the now well-known criteria of dissimilarity, multiple attestation and coherence, Perrin focused on reconstructing the earliest forms (primary stratum) of the parables. The conclusion he came to was that only a few parables in the Synoptics approximate their original forms, and only because the point of the parable, as originally intended by the historical Jesus, served the interests of the early church. The bulk of the parables, however, has been modified in the tradition, transformed into allegories, supplied with conclusions, or interpreted and reinterpreted to serve the need of an early church that was constantly changing.

Not many interpreters of the parables have followed in the footsteps of Jülicher, Wilder and Perrin. This impasse is the result of at least three points of view among the majority of scholars that focus, or have focused, on the interpretation of the parables. The first view is that we have in the Synoptics the parables as Jesus told them; notwithstanding the obvious differences that can be indicated in the case where two or more of the Synoptics have different versions of the same parable,[7] the fact that the contextual fit of at least some of Jesus' parables in the Synoptics predetermine their 'meaning',[8] or the fact that some of Jesus' parables have been given a different contextual fit (and therefore different meaning), in the Synoptics.[9] Scholars that fall into this category are *inter alia* Blomberg (2004), Boice (1983), Kistemaker (1980), Snodgrass (2008) and Stiller (2005).[10] A second view argues that, although the parables in the Synoptics most probably are not the original parables as Jesus told them, they do agree with the teaching of Jesus in general. Therefore, although we sometimes have more than one version of a specific parable in two or all three Synoptics, the different versions of the same parable do not distort that which Jesus wanted to teach when he told the parable (see e.g. Schottroff 2006, Stein 1981). The third view, because of the evolutionary character of the gospel, dismisses the possibility of constructing the parables as Jesus told them as either hypothetical (e.g. Hultgren 2000:16) or impossible (e.g. Zimmermann 2007:3–5[11]). These scholars argue that what we do have are the versions of Jesus' parables in the Synoptics, and to interpret these is less hypothetical and more surefooted than working with hypothetical alternatives.

North American parable scholars, however, have taken a different route. Taking Jülicher's cue on the different contexts of the parables seriously, they have opted for an approach to the parables of Jesus that is aptly described by Hedrick as follows:

> *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. Those who begin with the literary setting proceed on the assumption that the* literary *context of the parable in the gospels (usually around and after 70 CE) accurately reflects the* social *context in the public career of Jesus (around 30 CE).... Jesus' invention of the parable in the social context of first-century life preceded the writing of the Gospels.*
>
> (Hedrick 2004:xvi)

For these scholars (especially Funk 1996; 2006; 2007; Herzog 1994; 2005; and Scott 1989; 2001b; 2007), the issue is the parables of the historical Jesus in his social context approximately 30 CE, as constructed by the tools of historical criticism.[12] Herzog gives the following description of this line of approach:

> *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.*
>
> (Herzog 1994:3–4)

The most thorough application of this approach to the parables has been done by the Jesus Seminar. In using a specific set of criteria[13] the Fellows of the Seminar concluded that 22 authentic parables of Jesus have been recorded in the gospel traditions (see Funk 2006:165–166). Many parable scholars have complained that this enterprise is too hypothetical, and they are correct. The fact of the matter is that all interpretation is hypothetical. Using the parables as we have received them in the Synoptics is also to work with hypothetical texts, since 'the very Greek New Testament we work with is a hypothetical construct, since we do not possess the original manuscripts. It is a scholarly construction' (Scott 2001b:1–2).

The methodology that will be followed in identifying the authentic parables of Jesus in the Synoptics will take the methodology of the Jesus Seminar as cue. First of all, only parables that pass the criteria of early, multiple and independent attestation will be considered authentic. Mark, Q and the parables in Thomas will be used as independent sources. Secondly, the contexts of the parables in the Synoptics will be considered as secondary (e.g. Lk 11:5–8[14]). Special attention will be given to introductions to the parables added by the evangelists to fit the narrative contexts of their respective gospels, as well as to interpretative conclusions added by the evangelists.[15] A third criterion will be to look for strains of the ideologies of the respective evangelists that might have been deposited into the parables.

7. See, for example, the parable of the mustard seed (Mt 13:31–32/Mk 4:30–32/Lk 13:18–19) or the parable of the wedding banquet or the feast (Mt 22:1–14/Lk 14:15–24).

8. See, for example, the parable of the Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37) or the parable of the friend at midnight (Lk 11:5–8).

9. See, for example, the parable of the talents or minas (Mt 25:14–30/Lk 19:11–27).

10. Snodgrass (2008:31) formulates this point of view by saying that 'the parables are indeed the surest place where we have access to Jesus' teaching', and Blomberg (2004:23) defends this position as follows: '[T]he parables are authentic in the forms and contexts in which they appear in the canonical Gospels. One does not have to pit original meaning against the evangelist's use of the parables in some new setting'.

11. See Zimmermann (2007:4): '*Die suche nach dem authentischen Jesusgleichnis ist im Ansatz verfehlt*'.

12. To these names can be added scholars like Beutner (2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2007d), Borg (2006), the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar (Funk *et al.* 1993), Kloppenborg (2006), McGaughy (2007), Miller (2007), Oakman (2008), and, in a South African context, Van Eck (2007; 2008; 2009). Although these scholars do not focus their scholarly work solely on the parables, they do share the approach of Funk, Scott and Herzog in interpreting the parables of Jesus.

13. The set of criteria used by the Seminar includes the following: The parables of Jesus are metaphors taken from everyday life that surprise and tease the reader with its possible application. The genuine parables of Jesus therefore have no conclusions, and always exhibit characteristic plot structures that have the marks of oral composition. Parables recorded in two or more independent and early written sources (Mark, Q, Thomas, M and L) are more likely to preserve oral tradition and most probably can be attributed to the historical Jesus (the criteria of early, independent and multiple attestation). Only parables that can be traced to the oral period (30–50 CE) therefore most probably go back to Jesus. The narrative contexts in which the evangelist placed the parables, interpretive conclusions added by the evangelists to the parables, as well as the grouping of parables in clusters are considered to be secondary. Evidence of the social location of the early Christian community and common wisdom on the lips of Jesus also fall into this category (see Funk, Scott & Butts 1988:16–19; Funk *et al.* 1993:16–33).

14. In its narrative context the parable of the friend at midnight (Lk 11:5–8) is used by Luke as an example of boldness in prayer. If you keep on praying, knocking and asking (like the friend outside the door), God will answer your prayers (the door will be opened). As such, the parable gives expression to the vertical relationship between God and man. If the parable is taken out of this secondary context provided by Luke, the possibility is opened up to read the parable as focusing on horizontal relationships between man and man, what honourable actions are, as well as the principle of generalised reciprocity between two peasants, *vis-à-vis* the principles of balanced or negative reciprocity (for a description of these terms, see Malina 1986a:98–106).

15. A classic example is the parable of the Samaritan (Lk 10:30–35). In its Lukan context the Samaritan has been provided with an introduction (Lk 10:29) and conclusion (Lk 10:36–37) that are linked by means of the parable. When the parable is stripped of its Lukan introduction and conclusion, the question is whether it is still all about identifying one's neighbour.

For this an ideological-critical reading of the parables, where necessary, will be applied.[16] Finally, the criterion of coherence will play a major role in the decision-making process. By applying the criteria of early, multiple and independent attestation certain values that Jesus stood for can be identified. When some of these values are identified in a specific parable, even if the parable does not pass the criteria of early, multiple and independent attestation, the possibility exists that at least the gist of that specific parable does go back to Jesus. Although this is a general rule, each and every parable will have to be judged on its own merit.

The idea of the above set of criteria is not to construct the 'original' parables of Jesus. This is simply not possible. It is, however, possible to make an informed judgement on whether a specific parable represents what Funk (2006:171–176) calls the 'voice print' of Jesus.[17] Put differently: The above set of criteria will be used to identify that which was typical of the Galilean's message. Starting with the content of those sayings and parables of Jesus that pass the criteria of early, multiple and independent attestation, a picture of Jesus' message will be built as we read his parables. In the end, we hope, it will be possible to paint a coherent picture of Jesus.

Thesis 2

Jesus told his parables in first-century Palestine, an advanced agrarian society under the control of the Roman Empire

First-century Palestine, the world in which Jesus told his parables, was an advanced agrarian society[18] under the control of the Roman Empire. Advanced agrarian societies had two main characteristics: they were aristocratic in nature, and the main 'economic' activity was the working of the land (agriculture). Society was divided into the *haves* (rulers) and the *have-nots* (the ruled). The ruling class (élite) comprised of only 2% of the population and lived in the cities while the rest of the population, the peasants (the ruled or non-élite), lived in rural areas. No middleclass existed.Although comprising only 2% of the population, the élite controlled most of the wealth (up to 65%) by controlling and exploiting the land and sea, its produce and its cultivators (the peasantry and fishermen) whose labour created the produce. The élite had contempt for manual labour (see Cicero, *Duties* 1.150; Sirach 38:25–34), and therefore exploited cheap labour with slaves and tenant farmers. Local, regional and imperial élites imposed tributes, taxes, and rents, extracting wealth from non-élites by taxing the production, distribution and consumption of goods. The élite themselves were known for their conspicuous consumption and displayed their wealth in housing, clothing, jewellery, food and ownership of land and slaves. In short: The élite lived at the expense of the non-élite.

16. The parable of the tenants or leased vineyard in Mark 12:1–12 (and par) serves here as a good example. Kloppenborg (2006) has indicated that Mark 12:1–2, when compared to Thomas 65 (which is most probably closer to the tradition of the historical Jesus), has turned the tenants into a story 'of salvation history in allegorical dress' (Kloppenborg 2006:111). Using this insight of Kloppenborg, Van Eck (2008) – in an ideological-critical reading of the tenants – has indicated that, because of Mark's allegorical interpretation of the tenants, Jesus is pictured as condoning violence. In Thomas 65, however, the direct opposite point of view can be attributed to Jesus. Mark therefore employed the tenants in his gospel to serve his ideology. This example iterates the necessity for ideological-critical readings of the parables (see also Oakman 2008:246).

17. The concept of 'voice print' is used by Funk to describe the way in which Jesus told his parables (his strategy), as well as for the content of his vision. In terms of Jesus' strategy, He offered his hearers a different way of looking at everyday life. With his parables Jesus regularly frustrated the expectations of his hearers by offering them a different way of looking at life, 'a fleeting glimpse of what lies behind the boundaries of the everyday' (Funk 2006:172). Jesus talked about God's domain in everyday, mundane terms, made use of typifications, did not cite scripture, made no personal confessions, did not have ordinary reality in mind, reversed the anticipations of his hearers, made free use of parody, and never answered questions directly (see Funk 2006:172–175). The content of his vision was the kingdom of God, or God's domain, that region or sphere where God's dominion was immediate and absolute (Funk 2007:89).

18. For a short summary of the salient attributes of an advanced agrarian society, see Hanson and Oakman (1998:14). The difference between a (simple) agrarian and an advanced agrarian society is that the latter is more advanced in certain aspects of technology and production, for example the use of iron tools.

The élite did not rule because of democratic elections, but rather through the use and abuse of power and hereditary control of land. The rulers treated controlled (conquered) land as their personal estate to confiscate, distribute, redistribute and disperse as they deemed fit. All matters of importance were in the hands of the élite, and no legitimate channel for political participation by the peasantry existed. The élite ruled through coercion, using the Roman army, and any kind of rebellion was met with immediate and ruthless military retaliation. The legal system also exercised bias towards the élite by employing punishment appropriated not to the crime, but to the social status of the accused.

Patron-client relationships were part and parcel of advanced agrarian societies. The élite stood in patron-client relationships with other élites by dispensing patronage in the form of land and political positions, expecting personal loyalty and support of his political program in return. They also entered into patron-client relationships with the poor and the peasantry to enhance honour and status, display wealth and power, build dependency, and secure loyalty, dependence and submission from the non-élite. From the side of the peasantry these patron-client relationships enabled them to secure something more than just subsistence living.

Since rulers in advanced agrarian societies usually came into power through the use of force, they used different kinds of legitimisation to justify their rule and declare their divine right to rule. This was done, first and foremost, by claiming the favour of the gods. Rome's imperial theology claimed that Rome was chosen by the gods, especially Jupiter, to rule an 'empire without end' (see Seneca, *Duties* 2.26–27; Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.278–279). This imperial theology was bolstered and legitimised by especially the imperial cult (temples, images, rituals and personnel that honoured the emperor). To legitimise their power even further, the élite controlled various forms of communication (political propaganda, e.g. the designs on coins), rhetoric (speeches at civic occasions), various forms of writings (e.g. history, philosophy), and the building of monuments. Development – in the form of the building of cities, roads and aqueducts – was another form of legitimisation, since it gave the impression of prosperity (although these projects were built with forced labour). The élite also favoured traditional forms of rule (indirect rule) and allowed the use of local temples or cults/religions. All this persuaded the non-élite to be compliant.

The building of cities that displayed Rome's élite power, wealth and status ensured maximum control over the surrounding territories, and served as the basic unit for the collection of tribute and taxes – therefore codifying, conserving and construing 'normal' society, producing an image of peace and an ordered state (*pax Romana*) and disseminating the ideology and values of the ruling class.

As such, the élite shaped the social experience of the empire's inhabitants, determined their quality of life, exercised power, controlled wealth and enjoyed high status. Social control was built on fear, and the relationship between the ruling élite and the ruled non-élite was one of power and exploitation.[19]

Thesis 3

Because of the élite's exploitation of the non-élite, the peasantry in first-century Palestine lived at the edge of destitution

Palestine in the first century was part of the Roman Empire. Rome claimed sovereignty over land and sea – its yield, the

19. The above description of the salient features of advanced agrarian societies makes use of the insights of the following scholars: on economy see Polanyi (1944), Carney (1975), Finley (1973), Oakman (1986; 2008); on social stratification see Lenski (1966); on patron-client relationships see Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984), Saller (1982) and Elliott (1987); on the exploitative relationship between élite and non-élite see Fiensy (1991; 2007), Freyne (1992), Hanson and Oakman (1998), Rohrbaugh (1998), Stegemann and Stegemann (1999), Herzog (2005) and Carter (2006; 2008); on conflict and peasant resistance see Lintott (1968), Horsley (1993; 2003), Scott (1985) and Malina (2001).

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), and non-payment of these taxes was seen as rebellion against Rome.

Rome ruled Palestine through native collaborators from the élite 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. Antipas was appointed as client king (tetrarch) of Galilee in 4 BCE by Augustus when he was only 17 years old. Antipas continued the kind of governance of his father, Herod the Great, who lived a lavish and consumptious life and undertook several building projects (notably the building of Tiberias and the rebuilding of Sepphoris). The wealth that was required to support this type of lifestyle, and his many building projects, came from the peasantry by means of a second level of tribute and taxes: Antipas and the Herodian élite first of all claimed the so-called surplus of the harvest; to this was added tribute and taxes. This left the peasantry in Galilee in a situation where their level of subsistence functioned in a very narrow margin. The only way to survive was to borrow from the élite, and the élite were always willing to invest in these loans (with interest rates of up to 48%)[20] – they knew that their debtors would not be able to repay their debts which in turn gave them the opportunity to foreclose and add that peasant's land onto their own estates (Goodman 1987). Peasants therefore lost their land, and in a downward spiral became tenants, day labourers and beggars.

The situation of the peasantry in Judaea was the same. In 6 CE Augustus deposed Archelaus, declared Judaea and Samaria a Roman province (administered by Syria), and appointed the priestly aristocracy (centred in the temple in Jerusalem) – under the control of a prefect (Pilate in the time of Jesus) – to maintain order and collect the Roman tribute. The temple élite in Judaea were no different than those in Galilee. To keep their base of power (the temple system) intact, they added to the Roman tribute tithes, offerings and contributions during the festivals. Even the peasants of Galilee were subject to this demand, although they lived outside the jurisdiction of Judaea. Peasants that could not pay were labelled unclean. Although the land (ideologically speaking) belonged to peasant smallholders who inherited their ancestral plots, the priestly élite also added peasants' land to their estates by investing in loans.

This, then, was the situation of the peasantry in Palestine in the time of Jesus. Taxation was exploitative – an act of domination that subordinated the peasants against their will.[21] Rome assessed its tribute and then left Antipas and the temple élite free to exploit the land to whatever degree they saw fit. Food and debt were a constant problem. Rising indebtedness led to the loss of land (which had been the base of the peasant's subsistence) as well as the loss of the peasant's place in the traditional social structure. By using unconventional means, the élite in Galilee and Judaea became the controlling force of most private land. Small peasant farmers were increasingly replaced by large estates owned by the powerful and exploiting élite. In Galilee, especially, agriculture was commercialised, which in turn led to a monetisation of the economy. All this left the peasantry 'on the edge of destitution, and often over the edge' (Borg 2006:227).[22]

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

21. For a detailed breakdown of these three levels of taxation, see Hanson and Oakman (1998:114).

22. Chancey (2008:1–2) gives the following summary of a social-contextual reading of economic pressures on the peasantry in first-century Palestine that is worth noting: 'These economic pressures are, in turn, often associated with the actions of Herod Antipas, particularly his rebuilding of Sepphoris and his foundation of Tiberias…. Antipas's creation of new cities placed new strains on the peasant majority of Galilee. The cities required a reorientation of the distribution of agricultural products; whereas farmers had once focused on growing crops for their own subsistence, they now had to produce surplus crops to feed the cities. Taxes and rents imposed by the parasitic cities and their élites combined to facilitate this transfer of foodstuffs. But taxes served not only to feed the cities; tax increases would have been necessary just to build them. The cities served as focal points for the collection of taxes not only for Antipas but also for Rome. To pay their taxes, peasants had to sell off their surplus for coins, and Antipas minted bronze coinage for just this purpose, to facilitate payment of taxes. These intertwining policies of taxation and monetization pushed family farmers beyond what they were able to produce, causing them to seek loans from city-based lenders and to sell their lands to city-dwelling estate owners. Some farmers became tenants on what had been their own lands, others were forced to become day laborers, others became artisans and craftsmen, others resorted to begging, and still others turned to social banditry. It is within this context of a debilitating economic crisis that we must place the historical Jesus, with his call for a different type of kingdom'.

Thesis 4

To avoid an ethnocentristic reading of the parables of Jesus the interpreter must take cognisance of the dominant cultural values and norms of the first-century Mediterranean world

The parables of Jesus describe the interaction between Jesus and his first-century hearers, who lived 19 centuries ago in the eastern part of the Mediterranean basin. The social and cultural context of the parables of Jesus (the world of the New Testament) is therefore different from ours, 'a world that, were we to be transported into it, would puzzle us and send us into a profound culture shock' (Fiensy 2007:1). We should therefore be cautious when we read the New Testament.[23] If we really want to understand the parables of Jesus we simply will have to take the social and cultural values (the culture of the first-century Mediterranean) of Jesus and his hearers seriously. Above all, the texts we have of the parables are products of a high context society.[24] Without knowledge of the historical and cultural world of Jesus, the interpreter will not be able to make evident what would have been assumed by Jesus and his hearers.[25]

But is there really such a big difference? The following examples speak for themselves: The most dominant value in the world of Jesus was honour and shame (in our society it is most probably money), and any contact between two males was seen as a challenge of one's honour that most of the times ended up in the social game of challenge-riposte (we are not agonistic in nature, or are we?); the first-century personality was dyadic or group-orientated (we are individuals); all goods were perceived as limited and their accumulation was perceived as immoral (for us the accumulation of wealth is a status symbol); patron-client relationships were the order of the day (between equals it meant reciprocity and between non-equals that clients got access to goods and services that otherwise would not have been accessible (in our society access to goods is based on financial ability); kinship (family) was the most important social institution, family life was patriarchal, and women and children had no social status (think of our bill of children's rights); people, places and times were divided into pure or impure based on the divisions made by God at creation (we do not believe that a person with leprosy is a sinner, or having sexual relations makes one impure – at least for a while, or that certain foods can make you unclean); meals were seen as the redrawing of existing boundaries, likes only ate

23. See in this regard the very important contribution of Rohrbaugh (2006:559–576), in which he highlights the following obstacles in cross-cultural communication: Language, identity maintenance, high and low context communication (field-independent and field-dependent), individualism and collectivism, unwarranted assumptions of human similarity, and cognitive style.

24. '[T]he New Testament…consists of documents written in what anthropologists call a "high context" society where the communicators presume a broadly shared acquaintance with and knowledge of the social context of matters referred to in conversation or writing. Accordingly, it is presumed in such societies that contemporary readers will be able to "fill in the gaps" and "read between the lines"' (Elliott 1993:11; see also Hall 1994:79). The main problem for modern readers of the Bible therefore is 'that we do not know what we do not know. The spare descriptions of context in the Bible often leaves us without the essential ingredient for understanding the message' (Rohrbaugh 2006:567).

25. 'A substantial bar to making the parables applicable today is the great distance between them and us. Jesus was a first-century, Jewish, Galilean peasant and his concerns, speech, and idioms belong to that culture. We belong to a very different world. The transition is difficult' (Scott 2001b:141). See also Kilgallen (2008:14): '[T]here is a need to understand the portables of Jesus as they fit the life of his hearers; that is, one must understand well the social, political, religious world of Palestine in 30 AD'.

with likes, and different kinds of foods were served depending on someone's honour and status (we make sure that everybody gets enough of everything); first-century persons believed in the evil eye (we have never believed in this); people called other people names to discredit and ostracise them socially (this we try to do, but it does not necessarily work); first century cities had areas where only the élite lived, the non-élite lived at the edges of the cities, and those who were socially unclean had to sleep outside the city (we also have this, except for the fact that our bank balance, and not honour or status, determines where we live); and sickness was seen as the result of misfortune (we understand sickness as a biological deficiency).

From these few examples it becomes very clear that we enter a totally different world when we read the parables of Jesus.[26] To simply dismiss this distance and to look at them through the lens of our culture (as if 'our' culture and 'their' culture is simply the same thing) is to misrepresent and misunderstand the parables – it can only lead to anachronism and ethnocentrism.[27] A study of the New Testament's background or the culture of the New Testament is, therefore

> *not the icing on the cake of New Testament studies; it is the flour from which the cake is made. This enterprise is not a hobby one pursues in addition to the serious stuff of exegesis; it is the way the serious stuff is done.*
>
> (Fiensy 2007:2)

Thesis 5

Social-scientific criticism facilitates a culture-sensitive reading of the parables of Jesus

From the above it is clear that the understanding of the parables necessitates a cross-cultural approach. To understand the parables in their first-century Mediterranean context the reader must have clarity on the social system presupposed in Jesus' parables. For this we need reading scenarios (Malina 1981:14–17), and social-scientific criticism offers just that. Social-scientific criticism, in short, is a way of

> *... envisioning, investigating, and understanding the interrelation of texts and social contexts, ideas and communal behavior, social realities and their religious symbolization, belief systems and cultural systems and ideologies as a whole, and the relation of such cultural systems to the natural and social environment, economic organization, social structures, and political power.*
>
> (Elliott 1993:13)

Social-scientific criticism approaches texts from the premise that the historical contexts of texts have further social dimensions than only 'that what was going on when and where'. From a social-scientific point of view, the contexts of texts also refer to social behaviour involving two or more persons, social groups, social institutions, social systems and patterns and codes of sociality. Texts, also, are likewise shaped in their language, content and perspectives by the social systems in which they were produced. Texts also serve as a vehicle for social interaction. The contexts of texts are social contexts, contexts shaped by societal conditions, structures and processes. In their content, structure, strategies and meaning texts presuppose and communicate information about the social systems of which they are a product. Social-scientific criticism therefore moves beyond the mere collection of independent social and historical data to the study of the interrelationship of ideas and communal behaviour, belief systems and cultural systems and ideologies as a whole, and the relationship of such cultural systems to the natural and social environment, economic organisation, social structures and political power. It also takes as premise the dynamic that all ideas, concepts and knowledge are socially determined (see Elliott 1993:9–16).

In order to (re)construct the social and cultural context of the New Testament texts (e.g. the parables of Jesus), social-science criticism draws on modern anthropological studies of Mediterranean and Near Eastern (advanced) agrarian communities. On the premise of cultural continuity, social-scientific criticism uses these studies to construct models that can in turn be used as cultural scripts for gaining insight in texts such as the parables of Jesus. Social-scientific criticism employs models as interpretative tools to facilitate understanding. A model is a conceptual vehicle for articulating, applying, testing and possibly reconstructing theories used in the analysis and interpretation of specific social data. In short, models are tools for transforming theories into research operations. Models are always perceptual in nature, heuristic in function and have to be constructed. In short, models are theories in operation. Some of the theories applied in social-scientific criticism pertain to aspects such as honour and shame, patronage and clientism, dyadic personality, ceremonies and rituals, labelling and deviance, sickness and healing, purity and pollution, kinship and the social stratification of society (see Elliott 1993:37–59).

A social-scientific analysis of the parables therefore has two foci: Firstly, social sciences are used to construct theories and models for collecting and analysing data that illuminate salient features of, for example, the ancient Mediterranean and early Christian society and culture. Secondly, it aims to elucidate the structure, content strategy and intended rhetorical effect of the text within its social context. The text is analysed as a vehicle of communication whose genre, structure and content, theme and aim are shaped by the cultural and social dynamics of the social system and the specific historical setting in which it is produced and to which it constitutes a specific response. In this regard, the parables of Jesus are a very good example.

Thesis 6

The central theme of Jesus' parables was the non-apocalyptic kingdom of God

There is consensus in parable scholarship that the kingdom of God was at the centre of Jesus' message.[28] What Jesus meant by the kingdom of God, however, is not a point of consensus. Based on the paradigm created by Weiss and Schweitzer (and Dodd) at the turn of the 19th century, most parable scholars in the 20th century held the position that Jesus, when he used this term, proclaimed an apocalyptic eschatology (imminent eschatology).[29] Jesus therefore had the expectation that the kingdom would come in the near future by means of a cataclysmic or dramatic intervention by God, a position recently defended by Allison (1998).[30] Many scholars, however, no longer

26. This, according to Rohrbaugh (2006:560, 563), is however only half of the problem. 'Cultural awareness of the "other" is only half of the equation when it comes to cross-cultural communication. Cultural self-awareness is equally essential if we are to understand why … all other peoples [moderns] so persistently project themselves onto the language and thinking of others. Unless we know what is peculiarly … about the way we think and speak and how it differs from the cognitive habits and communicative styles of other cultures, we are not likely to understand why we cannot accurately hear what they … write even when cultural knowledge of the "other" is readily available to us. In spite of our fondness for our own culture and its way of thinking/doing, the fact is that it is peculiar. It is not shared by the vast majority of those around the world and was never envisioned by those who wrote the Bible' (Rohrbaugh 2006:563).

27. An anachronistic and/or ethnocentristic reading of the parables entails a reading that reads 'into the text information from some present social context rather than comprehending the text in accord with its own contemporary social and cultural scripts' (Elliott 1993:11).

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

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

30. Allison (1998) bases his understanding of Jesus as an apocalyptic eschatological prophet on five arguments: 1) Many early followers of Jesus thought the eschatological climax to be near (Ac 3:19–21; Rm 13:11; 1 Cor 16:22; Heb 10:37; Ja 5:8; 1 Pt 4:17; Rv 22:20), and Jesus' vision of the future was continuous with his most prominent predecessor (the Baptist) and his most prominent successor

support the apocalyptic hypothesis of Weiss and Schweitzer. The undermining of this hypothesis started with the work of Käsemann, who argued that Jesus did not share with John the Baptist a future-oriented, apocalyptic expectation. Jesus, rather, associated the kingdom of God with his person and preaching. A next beacon on this road was the work of Kloppenborg (1987) on Q. Using literary analysis, Kloppenborg identified in Q a layer of wisdom sayings of Jesus (which he called Q[1]) that have an absence of apocalypticism. Koester (1990) and Patterson (Kloppenborg, Meyer, Patterson & Steinhauser 1990) came to the same conclusion in their work on the Gospel of Thomas by indicating that also in Thomas an early stage in its development can be identified that has no apocalyptic references. Finally, the interpretation of the parables also added to the demise of the apocalyptic hypothesis. Many parable scholars, in following Jülicher, have indicated that the apocalyptic understanding of the parables was bound up with their secondary allegorisation. All this has led to the idea that Jesus, when he spoke of the kingdom, did not speak of a future, apocalyptic event, 'but of the immediate reign of God that is now present in the potential of the human imagination to see the world differently and to act accordingly' (Patterson (cited in Borg *et al.* 2001:71).[31] This is also the point of view of Moxnes (2003:91–107): Jesus' parables are not to be read for a view of the future or the end of time. The parables should rather be interpreted as an imagined 'kingdom' (reality) where different social relations and power structures operate. In this regard we should remember that Mediterranean people were rather markedly present-orientated, with the past in the second and the future in the third place (Malina 1989:1–31; see for example Mt 6:34).[32]

Miller (2001a:1) is correct when he states that the question as to whether Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet 'may well be the single most important one about him because it goes directly to the essential nature of his message and mission'. If the kingdom of God is apocalyptic, the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, for example, are growth stories. If not, these parables are 'wickedly clever satires of imperial values and religious respectability' (Miller 2001b:113). The latter interpretation clearly relates to a non-apocalyptic kingdom here and now, a transformed world, a kingdom 'that challenged the kingdoms of this world' (Borg 2006:186), a kingdom that challenged the exploitative social and economic relations in Jesus' society (Moxnes 1988). It is from this perspective that the parables of Jesus the Galilean should be interpreted.

Thesis 7

Since the social location of Jesus was that of the peasantry, the interpreter of the parables should always ask the question: what message did the parables carry in their rural context, and how were the parables heard by their rural audience?

Except for the parable of the pearl (Mt 13:44–45; see Miller 2007:65), all Jesus' parables are native to Palestine and have a rural context. The stories he told were about a farmer sowing his field (with all the hazards any small farmer faced; Mk 4:3–8; Mt 13:3–8; GThom 9:1–5 1; Lk 8:5–8), planting a mustard seed (GThom 20:2–4; Mk 4:30–32; Lk 13:18–19; Mt 13:31–32) or reaping a harvest (Mk 4:26–29); a woman that is looking for a lost coin (Lk 15:8–9) and a shepherd for his lost sheep (Lk 15:4–6; Mt 18:12–13; GThom 107:1–3); a man finding a treasure in a field (Mt 13:44; GThom 109:1–3) and a merchant a costly pearl (Mt 13:45–46; GThom 76:1–2); a women that works leaven into flour (Lk 13:20–21; Mt 13:33; GThom 96:1–2) or loses her flour on the way home (GThom 97:1–3); and a slave storing money by burying it in the ground or wrapping it in a cloth (Mt 25:14–28; Lk 19:13–24). These are all mundane stories of day-to-day peasant life, with a surprise for somebody here or there. They are stories that contain meaning for people close to the soil, and indicate that the village was the predominant context for the ministry of Jesus. It therefore seems natural to assume that Jesus shared many of the same values and expectations as those of his peasant audiences (Oakman 2008:118–119; see also Malina 1981:73; Fiensy 2007:45). The interpretation of Jesus' parables should therefore start with what is known typically about peasant values and expectations (Oakman 2008:172–173).[33]

Jesus, however, also told parables that give evidence to those elements that were common of advanced agrarian (aristocratic) societies such as debt (Mt 18:23–34; Lk 16:1–8a); patrons (Lk 16:19–26); élite using their status to coerce tenants (Thomas 65:1–7; Lk 20:9–15; Mt 21:33–39; Mk 12:1–8); the existence of large estates and tenants working on large estates most probably because they lost their land through excessive taxes or debt (Thomas 65:1–7; Lk 20:9–15; Mt 21:33–39; Mk 12:1–8; Thomas 63:1–5; Lk 12:16–20); élite that amass wealth, which was seen as theft in a limited good society (Lk 19:11–27); élite putting money out on loan at most probably very high rates (Mt 25:14–28; Lk 19:13–24); élite playing the social game of challenge and riposte to gain honour and status (Thomas 64:1–11; Luke 14:16–23; Mt 22:2–13); day labourers waiting to be hired (Mt 20:1–15); and the poor not being looked after (Lk 16:19–26). These stories are not mundane. They not only assume knowledge of the Palestinian countryside under the early Roman Empire (Oakman 2008:172–173), but also show the ugly face of the exploitation of the peasantry by the élite so common to advanced agrarian (aristocratic) societies. They are stories about the kingdom of Caesar. By telling these parables, Jesus most probably acknowledged the needs and frustrations of the peasants in his first-century rural context (Oakman 2008:118–119). The way he did it was to tell stories of the kingdom of God (see Thesis 8), stories that addressed the social world of the peasants and expendables in villages and their surroundings (Bessler-Northcutt 2004:55). In the words of Oakman (2008:117), '[o]ne must assume a rural context for Jesus parables. The question always should be: How would a rural audience have heard it? The more it looks like the views of urban culture and literati, the less likely it will be the view of Jesus'.[34]

A final remark on 'context': By context is not meant the specific context in which the parables were told, that is, 'the living contexts in which Jesus spoke and people listened' (Miller 2007:75). These original (situational) contexts are lost to us. Moreover, since Jesus most probably retold some of his parables, the parables had more than one original context. What is meant by context is what Miller (2007:75–76) calls the 'emergent context' of the parables.

(Footnote 30 continues...)
(Paul); 2) the resurrection language used in the New Testament is apocalyptic language; 3) the language used in the New Testament to describe the death of Jesus is eschatological language; 4) apocalyptic eschatology was widespread in the first century CE; and 5) several New Testament texts compare Jesus to eschatological figures such as John the Baptist, Theudas and Judas the Galilean. It is, however, clear that Allison locates the apocalyptic expectation of early Christianity in the pre-Easter message of Jesus, while many historical Jesus scholars locate the apocalyptic expectation of early Christianity in the post-Easter community.

31. See also Cupitt (2001), Borg (2006) and Funk (2007) in which the kingdom is defined in the same manner: 'Jesus' Kingdom had been ethical and this-worldly. It was about committing oneself ethically to life and to one's neighbour here and now, in this world, and in the present' (Cupitt 2001:55); 'The kingdom was for the earth, political and religious and involved a transformed world' (Borg 2006:186); and '[t]he kingdom of God was a kingdom of this world. Jesus always talked about God's reign in everyday, mundane terms – dinner parties, travelers being mugged, truant sons, laborers in a vineyard, the hungry and tearful' (Funk 2007:89–93).

32. See also Kloppenborg (2009:5): 'For peasants, the future is tomorrow or the next harvest, not some distant parousía'.

33. 'Jesus was a rural artisan working often within typical peasant contexts. His parables reflect these contexts. This means that while Jesus could and did move beyond the village during his life, his fundamental world of values and his fundamental interests and loyalties were shaped within and oriented to the village. The interpretation of Jesus' parables must start with what is known typically about peasant values and expectations. Indeed, many of the parables themselves urge this starting point, assuming as they do knowledge of the Palestinian countryside under the early Roman Empire' (Oakman 2008:172–173).

34. See also the following important remark by Elliott (1993:11): 'The acid test to be applied to all the conclusions of literary and historical critics of the Bible is to ask the questions, "Did people really think and act that way and, if so, why? Do these exegetical conclusions square with ancient patterns of belief and behavior? Are the statements of the texts as suggested by exegetes in fact coherent with the actual perceptions, values, worldviews, and social scripts of the communities in which these texts originated?"'.

Emergent context refers to, for example, observations Jesus made that led to the creation of a parable (e.g. a patron mistreating a client or a member of the élite practising negative reciprocity), or even a direct response to some event or confrontation. The cue taken here is that the exploitative situation of the peasantry in first-century Palestine, as result of the ideologies of the kingdom of the *pax Romana* and the kingdom of the temple, served as emergent context for many of the parable of Jesus. In short: '[T]he basic meaning of the parables must always be assessed *vis-à-vis* their original audience and socio-political context' (Oakman 2008:25).

Thesis 8

Jesus' parables are atypical stories (comparisons). This renders the classification of the parables obsolete

Since Jülicher's classification of the parables as similitudes, fables or example stories, the interpretation of the parables based on their classification seems to be a *sine qua non* for most parable scholars. How the parables should be classified, however, is another matter altogether among parable scholars.[35] This is the case even where scholars steer away from classifying the parables and use a broad category like metaphor to describe the parables (see Liebenberg 2000:48–166). The classification of the parables is a modern construct, and is to be considered obsolete. How would a rural audience have heard Jesus' parables? As similitudes, example stories, double indirect extended analogies, double indirect narratives, or single indirect parables? Most probably as none of the above. But then, how did they hear them?

One can start answering this question by looking at the content of Jesus' parables. First of all, Jesus' parables were drawn from the common life experiences of his listeners (Dodd 1961:5). They were stories for common people (Scott 2001b:1), in most cases made up and fictional (Borg 2006:151). There was, however, nothing common or 'normal' in Jesus' stories: a man plants a weed-like mustard seed in his garden (therefore making it impure) that becomes a bush in which all the birds in the sky nest (and not in the mighty cedars of Lebanon); a Samaritan becomes the hero when somebody is in dire straits; a patron does not exploit day labourers by paying them all the same wage, even for the fact that they all did not work the full day; a father does not chastise his prodigal son but welcomes him back; a patron cancels the huge debt of one of his slaves; a king invites the 'wrong' people to a wedding; an owner does not take up his 'right' to kill his tenants because of their violent actions; corruption (leaven) is used as a description for God; and a shepherd leaves 99 of his sheep unprotected to go and look for one that is lost.

Stories can work in one of two ways – they can either support the world as defined and perceived by the dominant culture, or they can subvert that world (Scott 2007:13–14). Jesus' parables obviously fall in the latter category. His parables cut against the social and religious grain of his day, they go against the expected and acceptable, they are in direct opposition to the way 'we do things here'. His parables are not 'business as usual', but rather surprising and shocking; questioned the status quo, characteristically called for a reversal of roles and frustrated common expectations (Beutner 2007d:2; Hoover 2001:92, 94; Laughlin 2000:91; Scott 2007:15–16, 118). His parables tell the story of a different world, of the way things ought to be, of 'life as ruled by God's generosity and goodness' (Hoover 2001:92). They re-envision the actual world in wholly unaccustomed ways (Scott 2007:15–16), and offer its hearers an alternative world to the world created by aristocratic society (Rome), privilege and power, tradition and custom, religious authorities, temple ritual and sacred texts (Borg 2006:167; Hoover 2001:98). Jesus' parables, however, also question his hearers' 'own cultural assumptions that belittled them, their own participation therein, and their own enforcement of those oppressive mores against their neighbours' (Bessler-Northcutt 2004:56).

35.See again note 4.

This world Jesus called the 'kingdom of God'. And because it was called a kingdom, it challenged all other kingdoms, especially the kingdom of Rome (the *pax Romana*)[36] and the kingdom of the temple (Beutner 2007c:17; Scott 2001a:131). In a certain sense, therefore, the parables can be described as 'comparisons' – they compare one world with another, that is, one kingdom with another kingdom; the kingdom of the *pax Romana* and the kingdom of the temple with the kingdom of God (see Carter 2008:190; Kilgallen 2008:11; McGaughy 2007:7; Scott 2001b:17). As such they were atypical stories; stories that did not describe that which was typical, but that which was possible.

Thesis 9

The parables depict Jesus the Galilean as a social prophet

All societies might be viewed as consisting of at least four social institutions: kinship, politics, economics and religion (Parsons 1960). While modern societies generally attend to these four institutions as separate spheres of life, first-century Mediterranean people treated politics and kinship as the only exclusive arenas of life (Malina 2001:15–16). In the political sphere, therefore, there was political religion and political economy, but no separate religion and economy. And in the kinship sphere, there was domestic (kinship) religion and domestic (kinship) economy, but no separate religion and economy (Malina 1986b:92–101; 1994:1–26). The aristocratic kingdom of Rome dealt with the non-élite through social institutions characterised by power and resource inequities (political economy). Jesus' parables, conversely, 'were underwritten by culturally informed values that envisioned alternate institutions' (Oakman 2008:253).[37] For Jesus, this institution was the kingdom.

When Jesus therefore 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 where God's presence and not Rome's presence was fully established, a community where 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 élite that practised generalised reciprocity (taking no account of exchanges or debt) (Oakman 2008:105), it was a political statement. And when Jesus told stories that transgressed the purity rules of the temple, making impure leaven and mustard seed positive symbols of God's presence, it was also a political statement. As a matter of fact, any talk about values that envisioned an alternative for the power and privilege of Rome and the temple was political. Jesus' parables, therefore, were political. They were stories of social critique on the first-century oppressive political, religious and social context. To use the words of Schottroff (2006:103), they did not describe 'a specific historical event, but a political structure'.

Jesus' parables, however, did not only grind against the temple élite (the kingdom is impure) and the Roman Empire (do not divide and conquer) (Scott 2007:113–114; see again Thesis 8); criticism was also levelled at peasant interests (Oakman 2008:180). Peasant villagers also had to overcome some of their own prejudices and interests (e.g. the unforgiving slave [Mt

36.See also Borg (2006:47): 'Jesus' parables were provocative, disturbing and subversive. His parables flowed from, *inter alia*, his observations of the conditions of peasant life. As an alternative he proclaimed the kingdom of God, a kingdom that was a radical critique of the domination system of his day, it embodied a social vision of how the world would look if God was king, and not Caesar'.

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

18:23–34]; the older brother in the prodigal son [Lk 15:11–32]; and the victim in the Samaritan [Lk 10:30–35]). Herzog (1994:3) is therefore correct when he describes Jesus' parables as 'a form of social analysis'. Or, in the words of Oakman (2008:296): 'The kingdom represents social challenge and transformation. Jesus' historical activity was essentially about politics and the restructuring of society, and not about religion or theology'.[38] The parables, in short, therefore picture Jesus as a social prophet. A social prophet that spoke of a society wherein the élite did not exploit the non-élite and a society wherein the peasantry 'accept each other, [where they] no longer see themselves in agonistic conflict with each other, [where they are] no longer defending their given and limited positions but even reaching out to Samaritan enemies' (Scott 2001b:134). This society posed a real threat to Rome's rule and put it in conflict with the religious authorities. And the words that described this society, Jesus' parables, were dangerous, so dangerous that they got him killed (Laughlin 2000:96; Scott 2001b:10). If a parable therefore shows a non-political or theological interest, it means it has been transmitted and transformed (Oakman 2008:159). If a parable, however, spoke about an alternative world than that created by aristocratic society and religious authority, it most probably belongs to the tradition that goes back to Jesus.

Thesis 10

The parables of Jesus are not stories about God (theocentric), but stories about God's kingdom

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

To read the parables from this perspective is to depict a Jesus that 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: '[T]he parables were not earthly stories with heavenly meanings, but earthly stories with heavy meanings' (Herzog 1994:3). They are stories about 'the gory details of how oppression served the interests of the ruling class' (Herzog 1994:3), exploring how human beings could respond to an exploitative and oppressed society created by the power and privilege of the élite (including the temple authorities).

From this perspective, the father in the parable of the prodigal son is a father that subverts the patriarchal system of his day, a story of how fathers – that are part of the kingdom – should treat their prodigal sons, it is a story that pictures a total new understanding of what family entails; the owner in the parable of the leased vineyard is not God, but a patron that 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 that depicts a non-violent kingdom (see Van Eck 2007:909–936; 2008); and in the parable of the unforgiving servant the king is not God the 'heavy', but a king that exercises authority in a way befitting the kingdom of God (Beutner 2007a:36).[40] The characters in the parables do not point to God. The parables point to the kingdom of God. Put differently: '[T]here is something about the parable as a whole that is like the kingdom of God' (McGaughy 2007:11).

Thesis 11

The parables of Jesus the Galilean do make ethical points

Jesus had no ethical system. He did not design a theory of proper behaviour, nor did he develop criteria for a moral way of life (Scott 2001a:119; Stegemann 2002:45–60). The parables of Jesus, however, do make ethical (theological) points. Almost all parable scholars will agree with this statement. The question, however, is: what ethical points? Those that can be deducted from the parables in terms of their literary context in the Synoptics? Or those that can be inferred from the parables in their social context of more or less 30 CE? This is an important question. The parable of the friend at midnight (Lk 11:5–8) can again here serve as an example. Does this parable exhort believers to keep on praying, knocking and asking until God answers? Or is it a critique on balanced or negative reciprocity (the accumulation of debt)? And does, or does not, the parable say something on honourable behaviour between neighbours? The latter questions only come into play if the parable is interpreted in its social context of first-century Palestine in 30 CE (see again Hedrick 2004:xvi).

Clearly this is the approach to be taken if the modern reader is interested in the potential of the parables as a criterion for personal and social ethics (Hoover 2004:21). In his parables Jesus re-imagined a different world (Scott 2001b); he spoke of a different reality (McGaughy 2007:13). Jesus' parables unmasked 'the pretence of the bogus civility of an oppressive world' and revealed 'the fault lines shivering beneath the surface of its moral posing' (Beutner 2007a:35). The kingdom, for Jesus, was this-worldly, it was about the here and now, about his world, about his present (Cupitt 2001:55). His ethics were ad hoc and an integral part of the symbolic moral system of his culture (Stegemann 2002:51). Any ethical behaviour, values or norms deducted from the parables for application can therefore only be the values or norms that arose from that situation. From the example given above it is clear that when this approach is not taken, we no longer have the values of Jesus himself in focus, but the values of Jesus as distorted by the theological or ideological interests of the evangelists.[41]

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

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

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

41. According to Snodgrass (2008:32), an ethics based on the 'original' parables of Jesus 'never have sufficient breadth to become the basis of ethical thinking or the authority to instruct the church or those seeking to understand Jesus'. The reason for this, he argues, is that any constructed original parable of Jesus is a rewriting thereof. Snodgrass surely misses the point here. It is the parables in the gospels that rather should be seen as rewritings. To use his own words: the parables were placed in 'narrative contexts for theological and rhetorical effect', and the words of

Thesis 12
Indeterminacy exists in the reading of the parables

The meaning of the parables is polyvalent, as can be seen from the allegorisation of the parables in the Synoptics, the different interpretations of the same parable provided by the different gospel writers as well as the difference in interpretations in parables scholarship. Several reasons for the polyvalency of the parables can be given. These reasons include at least the inherent structure of the parables, their narrative contexts in die gospels (that are fictional), as well as the problem of constructing the original contexts of the parables.

When it comes to the polyvalency of the parables, parable scholars are divided more or less into three groups. For some, the rule of thumb is that anything goes. The parables, they argue, are polyvalent to such an extent that it is impossible to delimit all the possible meanings of one parable to just one possibility. Jesus' parables were essentially open-ended, which means that not even Jesus thought of his parables as having only one specific meaning (as attested to by the allegorical interpretation of the parables in the Synoptics). A second group of scholars argue that the meanings of the parables are to be found in their narrative contexts. Although fictional, this is all we have. And since the gospel writers were closer to Jesus than we are, the gospel writers should be trusted and their interpretations accepted as the original intention of Jesus. These scholars are also particularly negative towards any attempt to construct a historical and social context for the parables (e.g. the context of first-century Palestine peasantry). This context, they argue, will never be rich enough to curb the polyvalency of the parables of Jesus (see e.g. Liebenberg 2000:59, 69).

A third group of parable scholars, however, are of the opinion that a construction of the historical, social, political and economical circumstances of first-century Palestine do provide a rich enough background to curb at least some of the polyvalency of the parables. Such a construction, combined with a social-scientific approach to the parables, seems to be a more responsible approach to the parables, since it takes into consideration both the specific historical context and social world (cultural norms) in which the parables originated (see Oakman 2008:180[42]; Rohrbaugh 2006:567). This construction, of course, must go hand in hand with a 'de-contextualisation' of the parables from their narrative contexts in the gospels, as well as a consistent 'de-apocalytisation'.[43]

Of course, no interpretation of a parable of Jesus 'can ever be established with absolute certainty, due to the ambiguous nature of the parables and to the recontextualization nature of the tradition' (Oakman 2008:180). The above approach, however, at least limits the polyvalency of the parables to a certain extent.

CONCLUSION

In the approach spelled out above the focus is on the parables of the historical Jesus in his social context approximately 30 CE, as constructed by the tools of historical criticism. The social context in which Jesus told his parables – first-century Palestine – was that of an advanced agrarian (aristocratic) society. In first-century Palestine all power and privilege belonged to two 'kingdoms': the kingdom of Rome and the kingdom of the temple. These two 'kingdoms' exploited the peasantry to such an extent that they lived at the edge of destitution.

Jesus' parables should be understood against this social (and political) background. In his parables Jesus offers his hearers a different world than that created by the privilege and power of Rome and the religious authorities. This world Jesus calls the kingdom of God; a kingdom that challenges all other kingdoms. As such, his parables can be typified as comparisons; atypical stories that envisioned a non-apocalyptical kingdom that re-envisioned the actual world in wholly unaccustomed ways.

The content and rural context of the parables place Jesus among the peasantry. His parables are political and consist of social critique, and thus picture Jesus as a social prophet. As stories of a social prophet, Jesus' parables are not stories about God, but stories about God's kingdom. His parables, put differently, are the kingdom. As such, the parables do make ethical points, and can be used as a criterion for personal and social ethics in a postmodern world.

If this is what the parables of Jesus are all about, how should we go about interpreting Jesus' parables? Clearly we enter a totally different social and cultural world when reading the parables of Jesus. To dismiss this distance can only lead to anachronism and ethnocentrism. What is needed is an approach that facilitates a culture-sensitive reading of the parables. For this we need reading scenarios to help us understand the social system presupposed in Jesus' parables. Social-scientific criticism offers just that.

Retrojecting the parables into the setting of first-century Roman Palestine and employing social-scientific perspectives seems to be the responsible hermeneutical approach when interpreting the parables of Jesus. Such an approach at least limits the polyvalency of the parables to a certain extent.

(Footnote 41 continues...)
the parables have been nuanced 'to assist the reader in understanding the intent of Jesus, or to emphasise the significance of his teaching' (Snodgrass 2008:31–32).

42. 'Retrojecting the understanding of the parables into the setting of first-century Roman Palestine, and employing social-scientific perspectives seems to be a responsible hermeneutical cue' (Oakman 2008:180).

43. In Thesis 6 it was argued that the apocalyptic understanding of the parables went hand in hand with their secondary allegorisation (see Patterson, in Borg *et al.* 2001:75).This simply means that the apocalyptic interpretation in and of itself was also late.

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