A social-scientific perspective on the parable of the ‘unjust’ steward (Lk 16:1-8a)*

Hans J B Combrink

ABSTRACT
The implications of a sociological reading of the New Testament, focusing on a specific parable, are investigated. The present state of social-scientific interpretation of the New Testament is briefly assessed. A sociological reading of the parable of the Unjust Steward (Lk 16:1-8a) explores the meaning(s) of the parable.

1 INTRODUCTION
Hester (1992:27) shows that modern scholars by and large assume that ‘kingdom’ preaching serves as rhetorical context for the parables, and that parables are ultimately viewed as ‘theologically motivated teachings’.1 While many and different themes may be identified, the assumed framework still dictates not a material, but a divine referent. According to Hester (:56), this has been the reason for a certain thematic monotony in parable scholarship. I suspect that he is right, and would like to take up his challenge2 to investigate the parables from a slightly new and nuanced angle.

Following Hester, I would therefore like to suggest and investigate a different context for parable interpretation. I agree that ‘while religious themes are present, they are but one of many social factors against or within which

* This article is based on my assignment submitted as partial fulfillment of the degree Baccalaureus in Theology at the University of Stellenbosch, 1994.

1 Hester (1992:27-28) describes what he means by ‘theologically motivated’ by saying that ‘from them we are supposed to learn what God is like, and about Jesus’ vision of the coming (eschatological) realm (Jeremias, Taylor, Carlson). Or, we gain insight into our existential situation as humans confronted by the choice of authentic/inauthentic living (Via). Or, the parables are supposed to reflect how the Church viewed its place in salvation history (Jülicher, Bultmann, Dodd). Or, we learn how the Gospel authors used the parables for their narrative needs (Drury), and so on’.

2 Hester (1992:56) shows that through a socio-rhetorical reading of the parable of the Tenants, he ‘found a new teaching at its heart’. He continues, ‘It only remains to be seen whether such an approach can be generalized and used to explore and explain other parables successfully’.

0254-9356/96 $4,00 © NTSSA
the parables interact’ (1992:28). I assume that different audiences would most likely hear different meanings in the same text, corresponding to varying sociological, political, historical, economic and artistic contexts. Through a sociological reading of the parable of the Unjust Steward, and by opening up the interpretative possibilities through this methodological shift, I want to investigate the socio-historical context of the parable. I would like to achieve this by exploring some of the relevant values and customs of the people of the parable and the culture of the first-century Mediterranean world in which they lived. Through the use of sociological and anthropological models, I shall try to construct the ‘world’ of the parable, and by immersing the twentieth-century reader in the original social life-setting of the parable, I want to facilitate a responsible reading of the parable.

Firstly, though, a short overview of the interesting endeavour of the sociological interpretation of the New Testament is given, as this will provide the background from which I shall proceed to the parable of the Unjust Steward.

2 THE SOCIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT: THE PRESENT STATE OF RESEARCH

2.1 The need for sociology

‘Die soziologische Fragestellung gehört seit langem zur historischen Methode. Sie ist kein Neuansatz’ (Theissen 1989:3; see also Scroggs 1987:255; Malherbe 1983:4; Richter 1984:77 and Van Staden 1991:27). Martin (1993:103) agrees with this statement of Theissen, saying that although ‘social-scientific criticism as a subspecialty within biblical studies has a relatively brief history, beginning only about twenty years ago, it owns what may be called a long ‘pre-history’ within historical criticism of the Bible’ [italics mine]. The turn of the nineteenth century ushered in a new era in which the sociological perspective became part and parcel of New Testament research (Theissen 1989:4).5 This was a time when everything gave rise to the expectation that sociology would take an unchallenged place in the study of the New Testament.

Why then a renewed interest in sociology? Why is it difficult to explain the absence of sociological and socio-historical perspectives in New Testament studies for the best part of the twentieth century until 1970 (Theissen 1989:5)?

---

4 Tolbert (1979:30) shows that the parable form in itself has an openness to multiple interpretations.

5 Theissen (1989:4) refers to scholars such as E von Dobschütz, A von Harnack, E Schürer, E Troeltsch, A Deissmann and H Gunkel who studied the social aspects of early Christianity.
Although sociology was introduced to the study of the New Testament as part of the form critical method, it is interesting to note that the sociological perspective never received proper attention (Theissen 1989:5-6) and that the social description of a Sitz im Leben usually lacked concreteness and offered only a most abstract understanding of life (Smith 1975:19). As early as 1975 Smith (1975:19) pointed out that the study of early Christian materials 'has been characterized by an overemphasis on a literary-historical and theological point of view to the detriment of the sociological'. Why has this occurred? Theissen (1989:6-9) tries to explain: When finally form criticism was accepted within New Testament studies, the theological context changed. With the rise of dialectical theology there was an increased focus on the theological content of the biblical text. The question of Sitz im Leben was increasingly spiritualised, and religious interests were given more attention than social aspects. 'Es handelte sich nicht mehr um den Sitz im Leben überhaupt, sondern den Sitz im religiösen Leben' [my italics] (Theissen 1989:6). The great scholar Bultmann, exponent of the form critical method, ushered in a fascinating existential hermeneutic of the New Testament, with its focus on the individual rather than the social dimensions of the text. This situation was worsened and the social dimension of the text was further eliminated through the rise of redaction criticism after the second World War. This discipline gave much prominence to the individual evangelists and their theologies, so that the theological construction of ancient writers was accentuated and no prominence whatsoever was given to the social life of the communities. Then came the advent of structuralism, with its view of texts as networks of relationships which have to be understood by discovering the deeper structures and elements which transcend time and historical situations. Through this 'antihistorical' exegesis, even less attention was given to concrete historical situations.

According to Holmberg (1990:2) the picture drawn by Theissen meant that

New Testament studies around 1970 suffered from a fifty-year deficit on social history and sociological perspectives. There was a balance that needed to be redressed.

---

6 The basic idea of Formgeschichte is that different types of literature or genres (Gattungen) are shaped by specific types of social life-settings (Sitz im Leben) (Holmberg 1990:1). Therefore the form-critical school looked into the socio-historical background of texts as part of its exegetical programme (Van Staden & Van Aarde 1991:55-56).

7 Martin (1993:104) refers to what Wayne Meeks said in an interview on May 22, 1991 regarding this issue, that '...the form critics, who talked about Sitz im Leben, did not use anything that resembles sociological method in order to define what the typical life settings were'.
After decades of dominance for theology and the history of ideas there existed a certain hunger for renewed contact with and more solid knowledge about the concrete social history of the movement whose thinking had been so diligently studied.

Theissen (1989:8) also states that in this situation where the development of exegesis from form criticism to structuralism led to an ever increasing isolation of the historical perspective, there came a renewed interest for the sociological perspective and the human reality in and behind texts. Indeed, 'the pendulum has swung' (Holmberg 1990:2) and since 1970 there has been a flood of investigation concerning the social life-setting of the early Christian communities.

In a recent work on new approaches in biblical criticism, Rhoads (1992:135), clearly voices the need for the sociological interpretation of the New Testament when he says that 'The New Testament is a profoundly social document'. This is because each writing in the New Testament emerged from a specific community and addressed specific people with a unique message for that particular time and place. 'The writings of the New Testament were social acts. Our reading of the New Testament is also a social act'. Because our reading of the text is a cross-cultural experience, the important question emerges, 'How can we understand the New Testament as a collection of writings from the eastern Mediterranean world of the first century rather than impose the meanings we bring to the text from our time and place? The social study of the New Testament addresses this question' (:136).

2.2 The sociological perspective

Considering the work and research done by various exponents on the aim and scope of the social study of the New Testament, it would seem to me that one could hold the distinction between the proto-sociological approach (or social history), and the sociological approach (or the social scientific

---

8 Scroggs (1987:255) states as well, 'Today the pendulum has swung again. Interest in social questions is again substantial in some quarters. Whether this is the result of neoliberalism, or social tensions such as the Vietnam war, student revolutions, and severe economic and political oppression in various parts of the world, or all of these, is not clear as yet.'


10 I agree with Martin (1993:107) that one can make this distinction only 'at the risk of oversimplification', but still I am convinced that for the sake of clarity such a 'break' could be identified.

A comparative synopsis of the nuances of the sociological and socio-historical methods is given by Botha (1990:60-61) and this serves well to give an idea of the accents of both these approaches. One of the exponents of the sociological approach, John Elliot, illustrates this distinction in the following way: the social historian on the one hand travels through the countryside of Palestine by tour bus and records and describes everything separately in a catalogue, while the sociological approach on the other hand can be compared to someone in a helicopter observing the same countryside with a bird’s-eye view—exactly the same survey is done, but with the difference that the person in the air has the advantage that the whole picture and all the elements in their interrelatedness can much clearer be seen. The person with the bird’s-eye view can move beyond description and attempt an explanation and interpretation of the relevant data (Botha 1990:58-60).

Holmberg (1990:6) states that this distinction between the proto-sociological and the sociological approach certainly is useful, ‘because it helps in discerning the scope or ambition of studies in this field, and precludes the easy labelling of any biblical study that touches the social life as “sociological”’. Given this distinction, he nonetheless warns against making too much of it, as it could be misleading in implying that social description is neutral and objective, while the application of sociological models and concepts is more subjective. Clearly today it is realised more and more that the assembling of data and the description of social life by the social historian is not neutral and objective, but presupposes a theoretical framework, dictating the questions asked and the methods used (Holmberg 1990:6). Martin (1993:107) agrees to this and points out that it ‘would be a mistake, however, to paint a picture of two distinct groups of scholars using opposing methods’. Though not always in opposition, they certainly criticise each other. The social scientists with their sociological approach have critique on the lack of methodology of the social historians and their random description of first century social life. The social historians again accuse the sociological ‘school’ of anachronism because they use modern sociological models to describe

---


13 Neyrey (1991:xiii) makes the remark that the social scientific perspective ‘looks to the broader, more encompassing social system and the coherence and interrelation of its component parts’.

14 Malina (1982:237-9) deals with the three criticisms/objections that are generally leveled against the use of social science models in biblical interpretation. They are, in short, the critique of reductionism, of impossibility because of the paucity of data and lastly the objection of their deterministic nature.
and interpret ancient cultures and communities (Botha 1990:59). Although there is valid criticism against both of these approaches, they have an important contribution to make. Both should be given a place in New Testament scholarship, as long as the parameters and paradigms in which both operate, are kept in mind (Botha 1990:62). Albeit the debate between these two groups of scholars is far from over, it focuses our attention on the important question of methodology, to which we now turn.

2.3 The question of methodology

Smith (1975:20) points out that although much work has been done concerning the sociological perspective in New Testament research, ‘studies have been clouded in the majority of cases by unquestioned apologetic presuppositions and naive theories’. Holmberg (1990:2) also states that there have been ‘deep-seated methodological faults’ in New Testament studies, resulting in some areas of human life being left unresearched for a long time. Scroggs (1987:255–256) states that to some the discipline of the theology of the New Testament seemed to operate out of a ‘methodological docetism, as if believers had minds and spirits unconnected with their individual and corporate bodies’. He argues convincingly, stating that ‘interest in the sociology of early Christianity is no attempt to limit reductionistically the reality of Christianity to social dynamic; rather it should be seen as an effort to guard against a reductionism from the other extreme, a limitation of the reality of Christianity to an inner-spiritual, or objective-cognitive system. In short, sociology of early Christianity wants to put body and soul together again.’ Holmberg (1990:3) agrees to this metaphor of Scroggs and sees all sociological investigations in the field of New Testament studies as ‘attempts at understanding Christianity more fully, more as it really was, a flesh-and-blood reality’.

When considering the methodological problem, Scroggs (1987:256) suggests two warnings. Firstly we need to understand how the applied method works and be sure it can be applied to the data at hand, and secondly we have to be aware of the theoretical presuppositions and implications of the method in use. Elliot (1993:36–59) mentions ten presuppositions of the method of social-scientific criticism, and these are certainly worth noting. We furthermore need to be aware of the ‘tentative nature’ of our findings (Tidball 1983:21). This means that we have to realise that ‘sociological models are not to be awarded absolute objectivity as if they were natural laws. They are rather the time- and culture-bound creatures of humans’ (Tidball 1983:257).

In a recent survey, Martin (1993:107) shows that ‘the debate over method becomes complicated by different uses of the term “model”... The disagreement really centers around what particular models are used and how they are
used'. Many different interpretative models could be used in the process of understanding social interaction and human behaviour. It is not my purpose in this article to give a description of all the many different kinds of models that could be, and have been, used to interpret or understand social systems such as the early Christian groups. Rather, I would like to refer to Malina (1981:17; 1982:229, 232, 236–237), an exponent of the sociological approach, as an example of someone who has ‘always been at pains to explicate both theory and model.’ Through his extensive and clear writing, he has done much in making accessible to the interested reader the theories and models used in the realm of the social sciences (Van Staden & Van Aarde 1991:71).

Malina chooses the symbolic model as the basic type of model, because it derives from a social science model that makes explicit what is implicit in the text segment, that makes the interpreter aware of his or her own implicit presuppositions, which can be tested and checked, controlled and validated in a way most other approaches to interpretation cannot (Malina 1982:239). In this context he guides us in the use and application of models by distinguishing the minimal five characteristics of a good social science model for biblical interpretation (Malina 1982:241).

In applying models to open up the world of the first century to the reader (section 3, below), I have chosen models of the symbolic type. I have done this because they are of such a kind that they explicate the implicit roles, symbols, gestures and situations, as well as the interactions between the people in the text. As such they have heuristic value (Elliot 1993:44) in that they may help us in understanding the text in a more capable way. Furthermore they guard against ethnocentrism, by making us aware of our own presuppositions when reading and studying the text.

To recapitulate what has been said thus far, it is clear that various scholars report that sociology as perspective to the interpretation of the New Testament has come to stay. Richter (1984:85) reports that a ‘new consensus is...beginning to emerge that, although difficult, it is possible to interpret the New Testament material from a sociological perspective—providing the limitations of this procedure are recognized’. Martin (1993:116) states that social-scientific criticism, ‘which only recently enjoyed the reputation of a maverick among methods, is now a staid and respectable... member of the

---

15 The symbolic model presupposes that for the most part human interactions are symbolic interactions and that human individual and group behaviour is organised around the symbolic meanings and expectations that are attached to socially valued objects, objects such as ‘the self, others, time, space, and the All (gods, God)’. People are thus always ‘wrapped in social roles, sets of social rights and obligations relative to each other’ (Malina 1982:236).
neighborhood'. Richter (1984:85) remarks that sociological approaches to the New Testament have been a welcome breath of fresh air for biblical scholarship. They have had the capacity to free the imagination from many of its dusty stereotypes. They have been a timely reminder that the New Testament message is related to the everyday life and concerns of real human beings attempting to work out their response to the event of Jesus Christ in the splendour or squalor of their own concrete historical situation [italics mine].

Malina (1982:241-42) states as well that the outcome of this approach to the Bible should be an increased understanding of the behaviour described in the texts—'the behaviour of the persons who people the text as well as the behaviour ascribed to God by analogy with human behaviour'.

Space does not permit us here to venture an in-depth study of the vast number of publications which show the extent of scholarly socio-historical interpretation of the parables and the background of the social dynamics of first century peasant culture. But a few broad observations may demonstrate in what way the social-scientific method has proved to make a worthwhile contribution to parable research. In assessing the work, views and studies of the scholars on the parables, it would seem that the pendulum in parable scholarship has swung from an historical critical approach to the parables of Jesus and interest in understanding what the parables meant in the time of Jesus (Tolbert 1979:25), through to a literary critical approach, where the parables are treated as genuine works of art and as real aesthetic objects which cannot have the immediate connection with Jesus' historical situation which is customarily attributed to them (Via 1967:ix-x). Now the pendulum has swung again. During the last two decades, scholars have become aware of the need for, and the place of, social-scientific analyses in biblical scholarship. The awareness of the sociological context of the parables has brought a necessary correction to, and an enrichment of, the often 'a-historical' approach of the literary critics. By this I would in no way whatsoever want to imply that the work being done by literary critics is not important; on the contrary, I believe it is of fundamental importance. One of the exciting developments among the scholars using the literary critical approach, is that it has become clear that the parables are polyvalent in form, and therefore open to multiple interpretations. It is even stated that the interpretation of parables in different contexts is 'completely appropriate and often illuminating' (Beavis 1990:484). It is therefore appropriate to view the parables as texts against their original socio-historical context, but also to keep in mind the contemporary context and social world of modern readers/hearers of the text.

Both of these approaches are necessary, and should not be undertaken without the other. Malina (1982:229) states that 'biblical interpretation, as the
investigation of linguistic communication from the past, requires at least two
sets of tools: one set of a *linguistic sort* that can deal with texts as texts...and
another set of a *historical sort* that can deal with the past in some cross-
cultural way' [italics mine]. I believe that the latest exponents in the history
of parable scholarship succeed in combining both these approaches, and so
they pave the way for a new era in parable interpretation.

3 THE PARABLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD (LUKE 16:1–8a)

Shortly after the turn of the century, in 1910, Adolf Jülicher (1976(2):495)
comments in his monumental study on the parables of Jesus, saying, 'Als die
crux interpretum unter den parabolischen Abschnitten der Evangelien gilt
seit lange die Parabel vom ungerechten Haushalter. Unzählbar sind die Ver-
suche ihren wahren Sinn zu enträteln, d.h. die herrschende Methode der
Parabelerklärung hat sich an ihr bankerott erklären müssen'. The parable of
the Unjust Steward has been a constant source of puzzlement and confusion,
and since the work of Jülicher 'there is hardly a consensus on any single
aspect of the parable' (Kloppenborg 1989:474). It seems that amongst the dis-
agreement and diversity of opinions (see, e.g., Derrett 1961:198; Marshall
1987:614), commentators are at least agreed on one thing, and that is that this
parable is 'one of the most difficult of all Jesus' parables to interpret' (Ireland
1989:293; cf Liefeld 1984:986; Grundmann 1981:316; Bailey 1983:86; Schip-

I agree with Kloppenborg (1989:474) that it might 'seem presumptuous,
therefore, to dream of solving such an intractable problem.' But not enough
has been done to highlight the social world of ancient Mediterranean society
(474). Therefore I would like to attempt an application of the insights from
sociology and cultural anthropology to the parable in question in order to
help facilitate the understanding thereof.

In dealing with the difficulties presented by this parable, it seems that it
would be necessary to refer in short to the tradition of interpretation of the
parable. I would firstly like to give an indication of the limits of the parable
as I understand it, because this has been a much-debated issue. Secondly, I
would like to address the question of the apparent honesty or dishonesty of
the steward, as there seem to exist two separate traditions in this regard.
Closely related to this issue is the vexing problem of the master's praise. Follow-
ing this I want to offer a social-scientific perspective on the social world
of first century Palestine, by making use of insights from sociology and

---

16 See Fitzmyer (1985:1095); Hunter (1971:99); Moxnes (1988:139) and Evans
cultural anthropology such as the pivotal values of honour and shame, the patronage system, the perception of the limited good society (Malina 1981), and the peasant household economics (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992). Finally I would like to offer an interpretation of the parable of the Unjust Steward by utilising and applying these insights.

In the next section the issue of the ending of the parable is discussed in so far as it is relevant to the narrative structure of the parable as such. The interpretation of the parable is obviously also determined by its position and function in Luke's narrative as a whole. This aspect is not dealt with here due to the scope of this article.

3.1 Difficulties presented by this parable

3.1.1 The limits of the parable

There has been much debate, a 'great deal of disagreement' (Fitzmyer 1985:1095) and certainly 'no unanimity about the parable's conclusion' (Scott 1989:256). Fitzmyer (1985:1096) and Crossan (1973:109) give four possible views in regard to the ending of the parable: verses 1-9, verses 1-7, verses 1-8a and verses 1-8b. Although I do not want to give a lengthy report of the scholarly discussion on the limits of this parable, I realise that I shall have to say something about the broad consensus in opinions, because I believe that the interpretation of this parable to a large extent depends on the choice made in this regard.

Concerning verses 9-13, commentators share the opinion that these sayings are not originally part of the parable, but later additions to it. It seems that scholars are agreed that verses 10-13 represent 'secondary applications' of the parable in question 'or further developments of its theme' (Marshall 1978:616). Ellis (1983:198) states that verses 9-13 form an exhortation which explains and applies the lesson of the parable, and that these sayings appear to be joined by the 'catchwords' Μαμωνωτικας and οδικία. Schneider (1977:331) sees verses 9-13 as a unity of Jesus sayings which interprets the parable in a new way. Leaney (1985:223) agrees that verses 9-13 are 'an assorted collection of sayings brought here to explain points in the parable', but states that it is 'a task for which they are not well fitted' [my italics]. Donahue (1988:163) highlights the fact that the saying in verse 13 which prohibits the serving of two masters can scarcely be the interpretation of the parable (vv 1-8) because that is exactly what the steward does—he serves two masters. It is the view of Bailey (1983:110) that verses 9-13 'has its own integrity' and that 'it should be read and interpreted apart from the parable that precedes it' [my italics]. Kloppenborg (1989:475) believes that the sayings in verses 10-12 actually divert the attention further away from the parable and
its conclusion ‘by exploiting the dichotomy of earthly and spiritual introduced in v. 9’ and by developing the maxim that ‘faithfulness in lesser matters’ is an indication of faithfulness ‘in weightier’ matters. Finally the conclusion in verses 11–12 ‘transforms the parable into a negative example story’ at the expense of ignoring the master’s praise of v 8a. In regarding the opinions mentioned above, it would thus seem that most commentators agree that the sayings from verses 9–13 are comments on the parable, whether or not they are apt in their purpose. From the survey in scholarship opinions, it seems that the majority of interpreters would say that verses 9–13 actually do not fit very well with the parable in the context of Luke. From a socio-rhetorical viewpoint, however, it would be very interesting to attempt an interpretation of verses 9–13 and to try and establish if these verses actually understand the parable in a legitimate way—something not to be pursued in this article.

There are a few scholars who regard the ending of the parable as verse 7 (e.g. Grundmann 1981:315-8; Jülicher 1976(2):503; Crossan 1973:109). Jeremias (1965:31) shares this view that the parable ends in verse 7 and holds verse 8a as the comment of Jesus. He therefore identifies the ὁ κύριος in verse 8a with Jesus (Jeremias 1965:30; cf Ellis 1983:199), because according to him the master of the parable had no reason whatsoever to praise the dishonest steward (Jeremias 1965:30). Although such an identification with Jesus would have been possible to make in the light of Luke 18:6, there is actually ‘no evidence that demands that ὁ κύριος be taken to mean Jesus’ (Marshall 1978:619-20). I believe that these scholars are avoiding the difficulties presented by the parable, because they indirectly avoid the ‘vexing problem of the master’s praise in v. 8a’ (Kloppenborg 1989:476).

Regarding the difficult verse 8, several commentators have maintained that verse 8a is the conclusion (Scott 1989:256; Fitzmyer 1985:1097), and that the ‘domestication’ of the parable has already begun with v. 8b’ (Kloppenborg 1989:475). Schneider (1977:331) states, ‘Der Spruch von den “Kindern des Lichtes” V 8 b ist schon sekundär angehängt’. Marshall (1978:616) also states that verse 8b must be seen as a comment on the parable, and that most likely ‘v. 8a is an original part of the parable’. Via (1967:156) agrees by saying that verse 8b seems to have been added as an explanation of verse 8a before the parable came to Luke, so that the Lukan redaction only started at verse 9. Liefeld (1984:988) comments that verse 8b seems inappropriate as part of the

17 By this Kloppenborg (1989:475–6) means that v 8b ‘limits the prudence commended in v. 8a to the ’children of this age’ while it introduces ‘the children of light’ for whom, presumably, this sort of ’prudence’ is not quite appropriate’. As such the saying in this verse ‘evokes a social division’ between Christians and outsiders which is imaginable only in a post-Easter setting.
story and that it is more likely to end the parable with the master’s praise of the manager in verse 8a.\textsuperscript{18} Porter (1990:129) states that in ‘any case, verses 8b-9, in their Lukan context, cannot be a persuasive explanation of the parable.’

I would like to take up this line and argue that the parable ends in verse 8a. On the one hand, I hold the view that the narrative and literary structure of the story ends abruptly and without a climax when the parable is limited to verse 7. On the other hand I believe that verse 8b is not part of the parable because its inclusion would introduce 

\textit{topoi} like \textit{οἱ νικι} τοῦ \textit{αἰώνοις} τοῦτοι and \textit{οἱ νικι} τοῦ \textit{φωτός} which are not inherently part of the narrative structure of the parable, and thus signal the beginning of the commentary on the parable.

3.1.2 Honest or dishonest steward?

In a recent article, Ireland (1989:294–295) has shown that there are two basic interpretations of the actions of the steward, namely that his actions were ‘Fraudulent and Dishonest’ on the one hand, and ‘Just and Honest’ on the other.

The traditional interpretation is that the steward acted corruptly throughout the story: after ‘having wasted his master’s goods’ (διασχορτήθη) during his stewardship, he finally falsifies the accounts of his master’s debtors ‘by reducing the amounts owed in order to obtain their goodwill’ (Marshall 1978:614). This view raises the difficulty that the steward is praised for his dishonest conduct.

The other interpretation is that the steward’s ‘final set of actions was legal and praiseworthy’ (Marshall 1978:614; see also Ellis 1983:198). Some like Derrett and Fitzmyer\textsuperscript{19} have argued in this direction, but their position involves ‘a complicated set of assumptions about the nature of the financial transactions of the steward’ (Kloppenborg 1989:479–80). They both assume that the steward was making usurious loans, while this is not entirely clear from the parable. Derrett (1961:213 n 8) argues that the debtors could not have been tenants, because the ‘vital point is that under any such agreement the obligee owes nothing at all until the time for payment (for example, the harvest) arrives’. Bailey (1983:92-3) rightly responds that Derrett fails to see that ‘the steward is not collecting the amounts’, which are quite correctly ‘not due until harvest’, although ‘they are indeed owing from the day the

\textsuperscript{18} According to the Jesus Seminar, the parable of the Dishonest Steward ends at v 8a (Funk, Scott & Butts 1988:32).

\textsuperscript{19} For a summary of the position of Derrett and Fitzmyer, see Kloppenborg (1989:480) or Marshall (1978:614-5).
agreement is signed’. The debtors might just as well be tenants who paid a fixed amount of the produce (see also Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:375), as I will later try to argue. Against Fitzmyer (1985:1098) who states that the manager ‘has eliminated his own commission’ could be stated {Kloppenborg 1989:481} that in the parable itself ‘the steward inquires to how much the debtors owe his master’ (πόσον ὁφέιλεις τῷ κυρίῳ μου;).

Furthermore the amounts owing were ‘large enough that they may be the tax debts of an entire village’ (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:375) and therefore would probably not be the ‘commission’ of one manager. Kloppenborg (1989:486) summarises by saying that attempts to ‘exonerate the steward and account for the master’s praise by positing a last-moment compliance with the laws of usury fails both because the narrative would have had to include much clearer indications of this if a first-century audience were to discern that intent’. He also states that the ‘natural implication of the story is that the steward’s actions are injurious to the master’s interests’ (Kloppenborg 1989:486).

I believe that the parable only makes sense when the actions of the steward are viewed as corruptly throughout the story, although it creates some difficulty such as the master’s praise in verse 8a. But I believe that in the light of the cultural background, the problems are not insurmountable, as I shall shortly try to show.

3.1.3 The master’s praise
The ‘master surprisingly offers a word of praise for the steward (v. 8a)’ (Gillman 1991:81, italics mine). As stated above, verse 8a has in the past caused much disagreement on who the ὁ κύριος is (Jülicher 1976:503) and where the parable proper ends. When ὁ κύριος is identified with Jesus, it necessarily implies that the parable has to end at verse 7 (Jeremias 1965:30-31). I believe, however, that we have to deal with the difficulty of the master’s praise in a way other than by ending the parable in verse 7. The fact is that the steward has already referred to his master as ὁ κύριος twice in the parable (vv 3 and 5), and from a structuralist perspective, the narrative is incomplete without the praise of ὁ κύριος in verse 8a (Kloppenborg 1989:477). I would therefore argue that ὁ κύριος in verse 8a is also the master of the parable (cf Blomberg 1991:71).

It is exactly the last line of the parable which creates tension with the rest of the narrative. ‘No one is really prepared for what actually occurs in v. 8a’ (Kloppenborg 1989:477). The whole story puts the master in a negative role.

20 Scott (1989:259) also states that the position of Derrett and Fitzmyer ‘is ultimately unconvincing. In vv 5 and 7, the debt is clearly owed to the master’. 
and the logic of the plot demands punishment, not commendation (Gillman 1991:81). The steward is called ἀδικία, but the master responds in praise (ἐπαινέω) and so ‘frustrates a hearer’s anticipation that he would respond in anger’ (Scott 1989:264). Mann (1991:234) comments that ‘the presence of the obstinate ἀδικία (“unjust”, or “unrighteous”) is daunting, especially when linked with a commendation’. The surprise is that ‘the steward is praised for his action’ (Seccombe 1983:162). Some try to alleviate the difficulty by explicitly stating, that ‘Das “Lob” des Herrn bezieht sich ausdrücklich auf ein kluges Handeln’ (Schneider 1977:333) and that ‘er lobt nicht den Verbrecher, nicht die ἀδικία, sondern das Klughandeln’ (Jülicher 1976:504). In other words, it is not the steward’s dishonesty, but his clever foresight in preparing for the future which is commended (Marshall 1972:614). The standard casuistic solution has been ‘to focus on the “prudence” (or shrewdness) of the steward and argue that the master praises this while overlooking the dishonesty’.21 Similarly, Christians should be equally prudent without being equally dishonest. Apart from being a bit more than the text or the human imagination can bear, this line of interpretation ‘fractures the narrative logic of the parable’ (Donahue 1988:164). Indeed, the text explicitly states, καὶ ἐπήνευεν ὁ κύριος τῶν αἰκατημόν τῆς ἀδικίας ὅτι φρονίμως ἐπτοίησεν. I believe that the master’s praise should be taken very seriously, as this is a key verse for the interpretation of the parable.

3.2 A social-scientific perspective

The need for a social-scientific approach to this parable is confirmed by Bailey (1983:86-7) when he states, ‘Our need for a more precise understanding of the culture that informs the text is perhaps greater in this parable than in any other’ (cf Derrett 1961:198). It is not enough to treat the parable as ‘an aesthetic object which has its meaning and power to grasp and inform the attention through its total configuration’ (Via 1967:161–162, my italics). While I have applied the work of literary critics in an attempt to give my opinion of the limits of the parable, literary criticism alone is not enough to understand the parable properly. In order to ‘understand the parable adequately, it is necessary to reconstruct the world of the listener, and this includes not only “religious” but social and economic aspects’ (Kloppenborg 1989:486–487). Although some work has been done by scholars in regard to the economic aspects of the parable, such attempts have been limited and have not been comprehensive enough to offer a legitimate reading of the

21 See Brawley (1990:194) for the antitheses of dishonesty and prudence; waste and thrifty use of possessions; outside and inside.
parable of the Unjust Steward. Therefore I want to offer a social-scientific reading of the parable, by firstly immersing the reader in the cultural world of first-century Palestine and highlighting some values and customs of their time.

In offering a social-scientific perspective, I am indebted to other scholars. I have decided to use anthropological models as heuristic 'tools' in order to help us to hear the parable of the Unjust Steward in terms of its original cultural context. As it is impossible to be comprehensive in describing the cultural and social aspects of the Mediterranean first century world—this would ask for a separate study in itself—I am limiting myself to a few areas of social life in first-century Palestine, which I shall describe with the use of a few models.

3.2.1 Honour and shame

'Unlike our Western guilt-oriented society, the pivotal focus of the Mediterranean society of the first century was honour-shame' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:309). But what exactly is meant by honour? 'Honor can be understood as the status one claims in the community together with the all-important recognition of that claim by others. It thus serves as an indicator of social standing, enabling persons to interact with their social superiors, equals, and inferiors in certain ways prescribed by society' (:310).

'Honor can be ascribed or acquired. Ascribed honor derives from birth; being born into an honorable family makes one honorable in the eyes of the entire community. Acquired honor, by contrast, is the result of skill in the never-ending game of challenge and response' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:310). Honour, like all other goods in the first-century Mediterranean world, is a limited good (see below). 'There is only so much to go around' (Malina 1981:29) and therefore, if one person wins honour, someone else loses. This means that envy is institutionalised, because if anyone seeks to outdo his neighbours, such a person is subjected 'to hostile gossip and the pressure to share' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:30). Since honour is the pivotal value in the Mediterranean society, almost every interaction with non-family members has undertones of a challenge to one's honour (Malina 1981:30). Any challenge seeks to undermine the honour of another person and asks for a response that answers in equal measure or challenges in return (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:307). These challenges can be positive or negative. To give a gift is a positive challenge and requires reciprocal action. An insult is perceived as a negative challenge that cannot be ignored (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:310). Both positive (gifts and compliments) and negative (insults) challenges must be answered to avoid a serious loss of face (Malina & Rohrbaugh...

Honour is presumed to exist within one's own family—among all those with whom one has blood relations. According to the honour system one can always trust your blood relatives. But all people outside this circle are presumed dishonorable. It is with these that one must play the game, engage in the contest and put one's own honour and one's family honour on the line (Malina 1981:33). Family honour must be defended at all costs, since the honour of one's family determines whom you can marry, with whom you can do business, what functions you can attend, where you can live, and even what religious role you can play. One can 'be shamed' which means that one loses honour. To 'have shame' is something totally different—it is a sensitivity to the opinions of others and is therefore a positive quality, usually ascribed to women. People without shame, without this needed sensitivity to their honour (like prostitutes, tavern owners and actors), would make fools of themselves in public. They did not have respect for the 'boundaries or norms of the honour system and thus threatened social chaos' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:310–311). It is important to note that the honour system operates in public. Honour is only honour insofar as it is recognised by the community, because honour 'is a claim to worth and the social acknowledgment of that worth' (Malina 1981). Therefore publicity and witnesses are crucial for the acquisition and bestowal of honour. 'Literally, public praise can give life and public ridicule can kill' (Malina 1981:36). It is considered highly dishonorable and against the rules of honour to go to court to seek legal justice. The one challenged only aggravates his dishonour by publicising it, and further legal satisfaction does not restore honour (see Malina 1981:39). Honour demands restoration by oneself or one's extended self (Malina 1981:39).

3.2.2 The patronage system

Patron-client systems are socially fixed relations of generalized reciprocity between social unequals in which a lower-status person in need (called a client) has his needs met by having recourse for favors to a higher-status, well-situated person (called a patron). By being granted the favor, the client implicitly promises to pay back the patron whenever and however the patron determines. By granting the favor, the patron in turn implicitly promises to be open for further requests at unspecified later times. Such open-ended relations of generalized reciprocity are typical of the relation of the head of a family and his dependants: wife, children, slaves. By entering a patron-client arrangement, the client relates to the patron as to a superior and more powerful kinsman, while the patron sees to his clients as to his dependents (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:326-7; cf Van Staden 1991:244).

Brokers mediated between patrons above and clients below. Patrons controlled first-order resources such as land, jobs, goods, funds and power, while
brokers controlled second-order resources such as strategic contact with or access to patrons. Brokers thus mediated the goods and services a patron had to offer (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:328).

By the late years of the Roman Republic, the patronage system spread rapidly into the outer parts of the Roman world. By the early years of the Roman Empire, especially in the provinces, a situation prevailed where the newly rich competed for their share in the exploitation of the land (Theissen 1977:43) and for the honour status ascribed to someone having many client dependents. These clients were mostly the urban poor or village peasants who sought favours from those who were in control of the economic and political resources of society. Clients were daily obliged to serve the patron's needs, which could take up much of the day, and to honour him through public praise. The patron had to provide the clients with one meal a day and some odd favours. Humiliation of clients was frequent, and patrons who provided more than this were considered gracious. As the Roman patronage system spread to provinces such as Syria (Palestine), it changed in its formal and hereditary character. The newly rich, seeking to establish their family position in a community, competed to have many client dependents. 'Clients competed for patrons just as patrons competed for clients in an often desperate struggle to gain economic or political advantage' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:327-328). 'A pervasive social network of patron-client relations arose in which connections meant everything. Having few connections was shameful' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:328).

The honourable man would seek out patron-client contracts with those of higher status, especially to be able to get hold of goods and services not normally available in the village or urban neighbourhood. He would thus attempt to 'tap the proper higher class resource in a variety of ways' (Malina 1981:85). Therefore the elite groups had a rightful place too. As long as the elites allowed the lower classes their subsistence, it did not really matter how much they took in taxes, tribute, sacrifice and the like. And as long as 'these elites allowed lower classes to interact with them in patron-client relationships, it did not matter how unequal they might be in prestige and power' (:88). The honourable higher class person was expected to live up to his socially ascribed self-image. This 'entailed the obligation of serving as patron for clients of lower social strata' (:86). While some persons were more powerful than others, the key to success was 'to get to know the power of the person with whom an honourable man can actually or potentially interact and to use those persons for one's own ends, for salvation from a difficult situation' (:87).
3.2.3 The 'limited good' society

The first-century Mediterranean world is a nearly perfect example of a classic peasant society—a set of villages socially bound up with and dependent on the preindustrial cities in a number of ways (Meeks 1986:38). The preindustrial city (typical examples were Jerusalem, Corinth, Ephesus, Athens and Rome as the central city) usually served as administrative, religious and market centre for the predominantly fishing and/or agricultural villages under its symbolic power (Malina 1981:71). The preindustrial city contained about 10 percent of the entire population under its direct and immediate control. About 8 percent of the urbanites were engaged in handicrafts and were clustered in guilds. They worked from their houses and sold directly to their customers. The remaining 2 percent was constituted by the elite or high class who 'consisted of literate individuals who held positions in the administrative and religious institutions of society, along with the wealthy absentee landlords who resided in the city' (Malina 1981:73).

In modern economies we assume that, at least in principle, goods are in unlimited supply. If a shortage exists, we just produce more, and so if someone gets more of something, it does not necessarily mean that someone else is getting less. It just means that the factory worked overtime and produced more (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:324). But in the ancient Mediterranean, people believed that 'society is a closed system' (Moxnes 1988:77) and thus the perception was just the opposite: 'all goods existed in finite, limited supply and all goods were already distributed. This included not only material goods, but honor, friendship, love, power, security, and status as well—literally everything in life' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:324). Since all goods existed in limited amounts, it follows that an individual can improve his position only at the expense of others. Hence any apparent relative improvement in someone's position with respect to any good is viewed as a threat to the entire community (Malina 1981:75-6).

The honourable man is greatly concerned about maintaining stability and harmony, and he is interested in preserving his inherited status (Malina 1981:76). Most people in the Mediterranean worked to maintain their inherited status, not to get rich (:82). Since all goods are limited, the honourable person would certainly avoid and prevent the accumulation of wealth, since that would be a threat to the rest of the community (:83).

Because an honourable man was interested only in what was rightly his, every form of acquisition was understood as a form of stealing. 'To be labelled “rich” was therefore a social and moral statement as much as an economic one. It meant having the power or capacity to take from someone weaker what was rightfully his. Being rich was therefore in general synonymous with being greedy. By the same token, to be “poor” was to be
unable to defend what was yours. It meant falling below the status at which one was born. It was to be defenseless, without recourse’ (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:324). In other words, the terms ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ are not only economic terms. They also ‘describe a social condition relative to one’s neighbors: the poor are the weak, and the rich are the strong’ (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:325). By and large, only the dishonourable rich, the dishonourable non-elite and those beyond the scope of public opinion (such as city elites, governors and regional kings) ‘could accumulate wealth with impunity. They did this in a number of ways, notably by trading, tax collecting and money lending’ (Malina 1981:83).

3.2.4 Peasant household economics

The moral economy of the peasant is ‘an economy and a value system not based on market and profit but on subsistence’. The basic need for a peasant household is the need for reliable sustenance, because the pressing problem is that most of the time the peasant and his family live very close to the subsistence margin. This situation prevails because ‘he is always subject to forces outside his range of control: changes of weather and claims from landlords, patrons, or the state’ (Moxnes 1988:80). Malina and Rohrbaugh (1992:375) states as well that peasants who farmed their own land had economic obligations that severely limited their prospects for moving beyond a subsistence level. In virtually any ‘traditional agrarian society, the peasants managed a marginal economic existence at best’ (Horsley 1989:88).

They had internal and external obligations to their families. Internal obligations included (1) subsistence, (2) seed for planting and feed for livestock which amounted to a substantial portion of the annual produce, and (3) trade during which some produce was reserved to acquire other necessary equipment. External obligations included (1) social and religious duties such as participation at funerals, weddings and festivals and (2) taxes, varying between 35 to 40 percent of total agricultural production, which together required yet another portion of the annual produce. Recent attempts to estimate how much of the annual produce of peasant families was actually available for family subsistence, put the amount at 20 percent. ‘In the case of

---

22 See Hengel (1986:163-7) for a description of the social tensions which originated from the contrast between the ‘great landowners and the small peasant farmers’ in Palestine. Malina (1981:85) states that it would seem that ‘being classified as poor was the result of unfortunate personal history or circumstances. A poor person seems to be one who cannot maintain his inherited status due to circumstances that befall him and his family, like debt, being in a foreign land, sickness, death (widow), or some personal physical accident’.
tenant farmers who owed land rent in addition to the above, the amount available would have been far less' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:376). The chief reason for the indebtedness of peasants was the excessive demand placed on their resources. As mentioned above, apart from their internal obligations, the demands for tithes, taxes, tribute and the endless variety of tolls kept small landowners under heavy pressure (Horsley 1989:89). 'Peasants unable to repay loans of seed or capital frequently became tenant sharecroppers on their own land' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:333), because they were indebted in smaller or greater amounts to the rulers-owners themselves (those who controlled large estates or stores of grain, oil, or money) or to their servants-stewards (Horsley 1989:89).

3.3 An interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward

Although many interesting interpretations of this parable have been presented, I would like to attempt an interpretation of the parable of the Unjust Steward in the light of the social-scientific perspective presented above.

Verse 1: The master in this parable was most probably a rich landowner who resided in a preindustrial city, while he employed an estate manager (or broker) who had the authority to rent property, make loans and liquidate debts in his name. Usually such agents were 'paid in the form of a commission or fee on each transaction they arranged' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:374). Being rich, the master would have had some economic and/or political influence. The word χρηστός is probably not necessary (for only a rich person would have had an οἰκονόμος), but 'evokes elements from the social repertoire of the patron-client model in which a rich man and a steward represents values for a hearer' (Scott 1989:260). The master is thus characterised by this word in a social and moral way so that the first century reader most probably responded in a negative way (Gillman 1991:81) to this master who would have been strong, powerful, greedy and dishonourable (because he accumulated wealth) in their eyes. This verse 'casts the man in a predetermined role: being rich distances and alienates him from a hearer who expects him to behave in a stereotyped manner' (Scott 1989:261).

---

23 See Grant (1977:45) for some information on the taxes in the first century.
24 To name just a few, I refer to the christological interpretation of Loader (1989), the interpretation of Porter (1990) who sees irony as the key to understand the parable, that of Flusser (1992) who interprets the parable in the light of Essene social ideology and practice, and the interpretation of Parrott (1991), who looks at the parable in the light of the collection of 'the L parables, those found in the Gospel of Luke alone'.
The steward (οἰκονόμος) was a broker or agent who mediated (Moxnes 1991:244) the goods and services his master had to offer. The steward challenged the honour of the master by 'wasting' (διασκορπίζω) his goods and putting him in a bad light. The steward thus 'shamed' the master and challenged his social position and that of his family.

Verse 2: As word of the neglect or dishonesty of his steward has already become public knowledge, the reputation of the master has been damaged. To avoid further loss of face, the master has to take action. The master has to respond to secure his honour amongst his peers, but cannot go to court as this would further dishonour him. According to traditional Israelite law, an agent was expected to pay for any loss of his master for which he was responsible. If he failed, he could be put in prison so that the funds could be extorted from his family. In other words, severe punishment could be expected. Therefore, it is startling that he is simply dismissed. It would seem that the punishment of the offended is a secondary matter to the master—'recovery of honour is the central problem' (Kloppenborg 1989:489). Nevertheless, the master acts against expectations and very graciously indeed. He acts and dismisses the steward. Dismissal was effective as soon as the agent was informed of it, and from that time on nothing he did was binding on the person who employed him (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:374). In order to carry out his plan successfully, he had to act quickly (ταχέως in v 6 signifies his actions) before word of his dismissal got back to the village.

Verse 3: The steward remains silent because he probably knows that 'a defense is beside the point, and that if he is to save himself, he must act quickly' (Kloppenborg 1989:490). Because of all the buildings erected by Herod in Jerusalem and in other places, many people had work. 'Trotzdem gab es Arbeitslosigkeit, so daß jemand, der seine Stellung verlor, um seine Zukunft bangen mußte. Armut und Bettelei waren weit verbreitet' (Lohse 1978:107). The steward has to find work again in some way or another. The words σκάπτεω οὐκ ἰσχύω, ἐπαήειν αἰσχύνομαι should be read against the background of the first-century Mediterranean society, where in the light of the honour-shame system, it is no shame for the steward to admit that he is not a labourer or a beggar—in fact, it only points to his social status (Kloppenborg 1989:491). Therefore these words evoke sympathy rather than contempt, since 'the audience would not expect a person of his status either to

25 The same word is used in Lk 15:13 (διεσκόρπισεν) with the implication of 'neglect of duty or misappropriation of funds' (Marshall 1978:617).
work or to beg' (Donahue 1988:164) because that would dishonour him (Theissen 1989:131).

Verses 4–7: The steward devises a plan of action, which he knows will help him in his situation. His master, as one of the elite of society, had to live up to his socially ascribed self-image by heeding to the obligation of serving as a patron for clients of lower social strata. The master was thus honoured for entering into a patron-client relationship and received additional honour by having many client dependents. The steward was a clever man, and he had the 'key to success', because he knew how to use the wealth of the rich landowner for his own ends and for his 'salvation' in a time of crisis. Utilising the rich man's wealth, the steward entered into patron-client relationships with the patrons of his master (Kloppenborg 1989:491; Moxnes 1991:253, 1988:141) and so ensured his future.

The steward thus disturbs the 'balance' of honour in the society by reducing the size of the debtors' debts. The tenants would probably have been peasant farmers who lost their land through heavy indebtedness. They would be sharecropping on their own land (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:375) and paying rent in the form of a fixed percentage of harvest of the land to the landlord (Applebaum 1976:659). As such they would scarcely be living above the subsistence level, due to all the taxes they had to pay. By reducing their debts, the steward relieves their burden in a very real sense. For an overburdened peasant, the remission or reduction of debts could become an image of divine grace (Theissen 1977:43). The size of the debts involved in this parable is extraordinary. They are 'probably equivalent to 900 gallons of oil and 150 bushels of wheat', large enough 'that they may be the tax debts of an entire village' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:375). These 'gifts' place the tenants in debt with the steward and require a reciprocal action—they will have to show him hospitality and honour by receiving him in their houses (δέξωνται μὲ εἰς τοὺς οἴκους αὐτῶν) in time of need (Moxnes 1991:253 and Moessner 1989:160). Most probably the audience would not be surprised by the actions of the steward. According to Roman sources, 'the possibility that an owner might be defrauded by a clever manager was never far from his mind' (Kloppenborg 1989:491). The behaviour of the steward is not surprising at all.

Verse 8a: The surprising action is once again that of the master in the parable. As rich landowner he has acted contrary to expectations by being gracious and not throwing his steward in prison, when he had full right to do just that. Now again, he has been challenged by the steward and has to take action to regain his honour. He could easily have canceled the transactions of the steward, as they were not binding according to law (because he had been
already been dismissed). But the steward had placed the landowner in a very awkward spot. 'If he retracts the actions of the manager, he risks serious alienation in the village, where they would have already been celebrating his astonishing generosity. If he allows the reductions to stand, he will be praised far and wide (as will the manager for having 'arranged' them) as a noble and generous man' (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:375; see also Bailey 1983:102). The steward counts on the latter, because he has come to know the landowner as a merciful and generous man, and he knows that the master would rather receive honour from the tenants than money. If he insists on getting his money back, public ridicule will 'kill' him. The rich landowner qualifies his steward as ἀδικία, which must certainly have come as a surprise to the audience, as they would have expected such behaviour from the steward because he was actually redistributing wealth and re-establishing balance in the society of limited good. The steward acquires public praise and therefore honour through his clever act, and the master acquires public praise and honour as well by sanctioning the reductions. For both it is true that 'public praise can give life' (Malina 1981:36).

4 CONCLUSION

In this parable we see the threat to the honour of a rich landowner by the clever actions of his steward. The master has to recover his honour, but undoubtedly so at the cost of the steward. Instead of living up to the expectations of the audience, the actions of the rich landowner frustrate their expectations and shatter their stereotyped thoughts. He honours the steward, a social inferior who has threatened his reputation, with praise (ἐπήρεια). Reading the parable as a narrative which 'evokes and then challenges the social codes of honour and shame' has two important consequences. Firstly it interprets the story as a true parable, not merely an exemplary story to illustrate a virtue like decisive action in a crisis. Secondly, it serves to challenge elements of the symbolic universe of the audience, like the 'self-evident appropriateness of insisting upon one's honour' (Kloppenborg 1989:494).

An interpretation like this treats the parable as metaphor. As such the parable challenges the commonplace beliefs of the audience and shapes a new, alternative world. It accomplishes this by letting the parable explode the prevailing world view of the community, so that they can see the world in a new way. The parable jolts the readers' expectations and challenges the audience to reflect again on elements of their symbolic universe. Because parables are polyvalent in nature, the meaning of a parable cannot be exhausted by any one interpretation of it. As such the parable of the Unjust Steward is open-ended. This does not mean that any reading of the parable is a legitimate reading, as the interpretation of the parable is limited by the gen-
eral constraints of the meaning it had in its original socio-historical context. Through a sociological approach to the parable, I have tried to immerse the twentieth-century reader of the text in the cultural context of the first-century Mediterranean world and its values and culture. By doing this, I have tried to help facilitate a responsible reading of the parable. The master's praise with which the parable closes, has not without reason created so much trouble for commentators. The stereotyped image of the master is shattered by his praise for the steward, and the stereotyped image of the steward is shattered by being typified as ἀδικία. Because the last line of the parable 'deconstructs its own metaphorical structure' (Scott 1989:265), it escapes any 'final' interpretation and has a disturbing but lasting effect on the listener. That in itself has the positive effect that we can apply the parable in our context to our lives and let the parable deconstruct our symbolic universe by challenging our values and beliefs, as it did to the original first-century listeners.

WORKS CONSULTED


H J B Combrink, Department of New Testament, University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, 7600 South Africa.