Applying the results of social-historical research to narrative exegesis: Luke as case study

Isak J du Plessis

ABSTRACT
Two approaches in exegesis have gained much ground in the last couple of years—namely, narrative and social-critical analysis. The first is based on a literary reading of the text and the second is based on the findings of research into the social and cultural milieu of the New Testament period. This article attempts to point out how the results of social-historical research can be successfully applied to narrative exegesis. It is based on the notion that communication of texts should improve if a more comprehensive interpretation can be attained. The value, as well as the problems of applying historical material to a literary text is discussed. The important question as to whether the contextual information (social and cultural) should be the dominant factor in this process or whether the internal (textual) material should dominate in the interpretation of a text, is also discussed.

1 GENERAL INTRODUCTORY REMARKS
Interpreting and preaching the New Testament has become very hazardous towards the end of the twentieth century. The escalation of exegetical and interpretive methods has opened up new vistas for New Testament exegesis, but it has also made it extremely difficult for any preacher who wishes to present a sermon based on sound exegesis to determine which method would be most effective for communicating with his/her audience (cf Berg 1991). Using one specific method in order to give a controlled and objective analysis of a biblical text might be scientifically correct, but how useful is this for communicating the text? Are we as New Testament scholars giving the guidance others are looking for, or have we become prisoners in an ivory tower?

* When I use the term 'social-historical' in this article I understand it simply as referring to information available from the studies of the social world of the New Testament as a historical document. It is well known that there exist a number of various approaches and models in the emerging social study of the New Testament, such as social description, social history, the sociology of knowledge and the use of models from the social sciences, particularly cultural anthropology. I do not consider myself an expert in the field of the social sciences but wish to implement the information available as I deem it applicable to my research as New Testament scholar.
Should we not seriously consider a new hermeneutic with a more olistic approach for our fragmented society?

No one could deny the plurality of methods or should attempt to prove certain methods as the only suitable ones for interpretation. How then do we deal responsibly with this plurality of available exegetical methods? What is the relationship between what the text ‘meant’ for the first readers and what it ‘means’ today? No doubt, we have to recognise the complex nature of texts and the complexity of their interpretation. In this article I would like to point out some of the opportunities and dilemmas facing an exegete when dealing with different methodological approaches and see whether it is possible to integrate or reconcile some of these approaches. I will try to point out the potential and the value of using and applying the results and information of one approach to that of another approach in order to optimise the understanding of a text as applied to some passages from Luke’s Gospel. Perhaps the term ‘integration’ is a too loaded concept, but I will stick to it because it best expresses my wish to emphasise the benefit derived from combining the information available from more than one method or approach. This should become clear in the following argument.

2 A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

The underlying motivation for this article is my conviction that any cognitive work—exegesis, philosophy et cetera—should keep in mind that the human mind is largely capable of, and even inclined, to integrate the results of more than one process, based on past and present experiences. We have been influenced too much by the natural sciences in trying to apply a single method to our research work and interpretation. The human mind is loaded with information when faced with any problem or situation, and it works much more comprehensively than any specific scientific method can offer. It would automatically and even subconsciously connect and combine the stored information with any new impulse. I believe that we should accept this in our interpretation of texts and try to work much more comprehensively when doing exegesis, applying various methods and using the diversity of information available when interpreting a text. This might lead to a clash of results and therefore to some exegetical dilemmas which have to be tackled and solved if possible.

I have recently finished a commentary on Luke’s Gospel in which I made extensive use of a narrative analysis approaching the Gospel as a whole narratologically (Du Plessis 1995). My research revealed some stimulating insights, but it also proved that any one method has its shortcomings. Situations inevitably arise where information from another methodological angle—for instance historical exegesis—gives a better or broader perspective. It opens up new insights which are simply not possible when bound by a
single discipline.

Although it is common knowledge that the historical-critical method (specifically source criticism and form criticism) has manoeuvred itself into a cul-de-sac (cf Culpepper 1984:476-478) this method still offers some very good results when applied to the comparison of the synoptic Gospels. Another historically-based approach offered itself in the quest I was involved in, namely, a social-historical reading of texts. In recent years this approach was applied to the New Testament and came up with some fascinating new insights and perspectives. Understanding the New Testament within its social milieu and interpreting the text from its social matrix has opened up some exhilarating results. The sociological approach is not without difficulties, especially because it represents different schools of thought which may come up with different results. There is also at present an unfortunate struggle between the exponents of social-historical and literary methods (cf Rohrbaugh 1993:221–233 and the attempt of Robbins 1992:303 to encourage dialogue between these two groups). Various questions are raised in this friendly battle, for example: are Biblical narratives about real or fictive events? (cf Funk 1988:296). Do the texts refer to something outside themselves in real history? Should the information internal to the text dominate or should the contextual information have the last say? (cf Petersen 1985:6). The choice between these two positions could be illustrated in the two extremes to be found in the radical determinacy of E D Hirsch and the radical indeterminacy of J Derrida (Petersen 1985:6).

The struggle between literary and social critics is unnecessarily vehement because both of these can support one another to the benefit of all students of the New Testament. There is a complementarity in the social-scientific approach and literary criticism which enriches our understanding of the text. Funk (1988:296) has rightly argued that it is patent nonsense, in historical narration, to claim that there is no relation between the historical event to which the text refers and the narrative text. The literary as well as the social critic should not make any absolute claims. What remains important is the question whether the information which is internal to the text is the dominant factor, or whether it is the contextual information from outside the text which is dominant?

In this article I would like to enter into a discussion of some passages from Luke’s Gospel where the consequences of using or integrating the
information from social-historical readings into the newer literary study can be demonstrated. These various approaches are indicative of different elements of the well-known communication model\(^3\) namely:

\[
\text{author—text—reader}
\]

reference

Whereas the historical method (including the social-historical) is based on the author and his milieu, a literary approach focuses on the text. A narratological approach, focusing on the text, also has its consequences for the reader which has lately received much attention in reader-response criticism. Rudolf Bultmann, in his existential hermeneutics, had already taken the present-day reader as his point of departure. This was elaborated in the New Hermeneutic, where the concept of ‘Sprachereignis’ or ‘language event’ is indicative of the involvement of the reader in the process of understanding (cf Lategan 1989). Although many reader-response critics follow an autosemantic reading of the text, I do not intend to pursue this approach. One could not deny the (potential) polyvalence of a text, but that should not lead to ignoring or denying the value of understanding the intention of the author—without of course falling into the trap of the so-called ‘author’s intention fallacy’. It is, however, also true that if a text can mean anything, it does not mean anything at all! I will therefore point out how and why the reference of the text is not to be ignored in a literary reading of the text. But whatever the point of departure in this communication model the reader plays a very significant role which I will discuss below.

It is also true that no reader (or hearer) reads (or hears) a text with a blank mind, especially not a religious document. When Luke used language in a certain way to write the text, and when people read this text, this language created a social, cultural and historical way of thinking about the world in which they lived. This applies to the first readers as well as the present readers. It is thus important, in both a narratological and a historical approach to the text, to ask who the reader is and what he/she knows when determining how a text will be understood. This question has already been discussed in numerous publications and therefore I will deal with it briefly.

3 \hspace{1cm} WHO IS THE READER?

Reader-response criticism has confronted us with a dilemma, namely to determine which reader we are dealing with when approaching a text. Men-

\(^3\) Many elaborations of this model exist. See for instance Hernadi 1976:374.
tion was made of the implied reader, the informed reader, the flesh-and-blood reader, the model reader, the competent reader, the encoded reader, the intended reader, the subjective reader, and even the wilful misreader (cf Moore 1988:141). This diversity is indicative of the problem we are faced with. Who is the reader we have in mind when doing exposition or preaching?

Many protagonists of narrative criticism depart from the view that a text is autosemantic. This I regard as a very naïve approach. In theory it is possible, but in reality each reader has some perception of the intention and milieu of the real author (and his implied author and implied reader). A reference to the ‘reader’ may refer to various readers. It will normally refer to the first readers who had some knowledge—for example about the Greek Old Testament; about the social, cultural and political world of Jesus’ time; and about the death of Jesus on the cross. In this regard I would like to refer to the distinction Petersen (1985:7) makes between the contextual history of a text (the situation and events in the real world at the time of writing), and its referential history (the history referred to in the story that comprises its narrative world). He argues that both historical worlds are reconstructed by the critic from the narrative world itself. This is, however, not compatible with what social historians have in mind when speaking of the social world of the text. On the other hand the present readers are also informed about these matters and will have a different perspective than the original readers. For example, in a commentary on Luke the commentator provides information to his present-day readers with regard to the social world of the text, redactional remarks like the significance of Mark and Q. The reader of a commentary is thus informed. For example, if the present reader is aware of the sources Luke might have used, and of the social and cultural world of that time, he/she will read and understand the text differently. Even if the priority of Mark is rejected, the parallels may still be used to get a better perspective on Luke’s version. This means that the determination of narrative reference depends in part upon how much the actual reader knows (cf Aichele 1992:58).

When we speak of a ‘reader’ we must keep in mind the orality-literacy studies of recent years. The Gospels were probably read aloud in public and not silently by a single reader (cf the work done by Kelber, Ong, Lord and others). Time and space would not allow us to linger on the whole debate regarding the orality/aurality of the text—fascinating as it might be. We must keep in mind that the text is an event (cf Leitch 1983: 79-80) and that words are acts inviting participation (Kelber 1983: xvi), and not objects. Preaching is thus a form of reading and very much an invitation to participation. The personal experience of the reader, his/her social background and position, reli-
gious history, denominational links and so forth, play a most significant role in the way he/she reads the text. It is, however, our contention that interpreting and participating in the text require proper understanding of what the text refers to. The reader/hearer has a significant role in determining the narrative reference of a text like Luke’s Gospel. We may speculate about the history and production of the text, but the primary text with which the present-day reader is confronted, is the final text. That is where our main task lies: how do we explain this final text to our readers?

In the light of what has been said above I have serious doubts whether the idea of a ‘virginal’ reader (exposed to the text for the first time) is a workable proposition. A virginal reader is very much an anachronistic construct for gospel research. Although reader-response gospel criticism often makes use of a ‘virginal’ reader, I would prefer to presuppose a more ‘experienced’ reader. The experience of reading is always mediated and boundaries are determined by the premises and practices that govern reading in the social structure of which the reader is a part. One should not attempt to ignore the reader’s knowledge and experience external to the text. It is very difficult and perhaps a vain exercise to seriously look at the text as if it happens for the first time. In a first reading a passage receives its meaning principally from everything that precedes it. That, however, is radically changed when the reader is reading the text a second or an umpteenth time—or when the reader was already informed about the contents of the text he/she was reading (like Theophilus, Lk 1:4).

I consider it necessary to approach the text as a total message. Even for the modern reader it is hardly to be expected that they have not been informed and influenced by the over-all information and effect of the Christian message through many centuries of Christian civilization. Our experience as we interpret the text of the gospels will be a cultural construct instead. It could therefore be influenced and even prejudiced by its own conventionality (Moore 1989:14). Only the informed reader has the information required to penetrate the details that enhance the interpretation of a text. The reader is not totally unaware of the outcome of the plot. This explains why the Greek tragedies were repeatedly performed in classical times even though the audience knew very well what the plot was, and what the outcome would be, but was time and again intrigued by and enjoyed the intricacies, the irony, and the symbolic undertones of the drama. Because of the degree of knowledge the narrator in Luke’s gospel presupposes in his readers he may hark back to or repeat certain important themes, or point forward to events to come. Every obscurity in the text may affect how the reader (any reader—present or past, real or implied) understands and identifies with the plot, or the hero of the story. The reader’s role is one of intimate familiarity because he/she has been acquainted with the contents. It is perhaps a fallacy
to think that there is such a difference between the author’s ‘deliberate construction’ (‘intentionality’), and what the text actually effects. It is rather a matter of how much the reader (whichever) knows.

4 WHAT DOES THE READER KNOW?

I take it that the author of Luke-Acts had a mainly Christian audience in mind when he wrote. He did not think in terms of a first-time hearer unfamiliar with the unfolding story. The question is of course whether this audience is confined to the original or the contemporary (present-day) audience. Reader-response critics prefer to examine how a reader reads the story depending basically on the knowledge provided by the text itself. This agrees with a narrative approach where the text would guide and educate its reader. Even if we think of the reader only in terms of what can be construed by the text we are still faced with the problem of how much he/she knew or what was his/her competence. How will the social milieu of the reader affect his/her reading and understanding of the text? And how will it be affected by the social position or the gender of a present-day reader? It seems to me the correct approach to give the contemporary reader a role next to the reader-in-the-text (so also Resseguie 1984). That is where Iser’s reader comes in handy: for him the reader is neither wholly actual nor wholly ideal (Iser 1974, 1980).

Whereas an ideal reader—according to some response-critics—would be manipulated entirely by a text, Iser’s implied reader will bring a cultural and personal history to the text (cf Moore 1988:155). Iser’s implied reader will in part be a creation of the text, and in part an individual person. That is what I have in mind when thinking of ‘the reader’. The reader, in my mind, can never be tied down and limited to a single entity. I think that the competent reading of the text is guided by the text but not over determined by it. That is why I believe that a narrative analysis can and should be integrated with a social-historical approach.

It was Stanley Fish who reminded us what an important role is played by the community in the interpretation of a text. Following Fish’s notion of the role of interpretive communities many scholars have more or less abolished the distinction between texts and readers regarding the text as entirely constituted by interpretive conventions. Thereby they totally opposed the idea that a text is an entity which always remains the same. For Fish meaning is not something embedded in a text to be extracted like a nut from its shell, but rather an experience one has in the course of reading. This obliterates the traditional separation between reader and text. Although Fish shifts the focus of criticism from the text to the reading process the text retains its manipulative role in relation to the reader. Fish had turned the process of understand-
Applying Social-Historical Research to Narrative Exegesis

...ing and interpretation around: it is not the intention of the author that produces interpretation, but interpretation that creates intention by creating the conditions in which it becomes possible to pick them out. I 'see' what my interpretive principles permit me to see, and then I turn around and attribute what I have 'seen' to a text and an intention. The interpretive framework thus creates the data upon which reader response rests. It is the fragile but real consolidation of interpretive communities that allows us to talk to one another (Fish 1980:172-173). It seems to me that this notion of Fish would support the sociological approach in exegesis where the social milieu of the author, the social conditions for the production and even the reception of the text are affected by the contemporary social conditions. Only if these conditions of production and reception (primary and contemporary) are taken seriously can we speak of real understanding of the text. Understanding the gospel story as story, as well as understanding the social milieu of the story world and of the contemporary scene, should go hand in hand to get the most comprehensive picture and understanding of the gospel.

Perhaps we have been too concerned with the theoretical reader neglecting the real reader in the process. This situation has changed lately and we have become much more aware of real readers and the interpretive communities to which they belong. The realisation has grown that the abstract reader in the singular must be replaced by the real readers in the plural. Real readers, who are primarily not creative and imaginative individuals, are formed in reading communities. They read according to conventions they have learnt in particular communities of interpretation. This facet must play a significant role in our task of determining how and what texts communicate. Because real readers are less creative, imaginative and informed, biblical scholars should take their informative role quite seriously.

Recently the importance of a cross-cultural dialogue between the social and cultural world of the New Testament and present-day interpreters has been emphasised by scholars who propagate an anthropological approach to New Testament exegesis (see the discussion in Joubert 1994). They base their standpoint on the recognition of the alien historical and cultural nature of the New Testament documents, and the recognition of the fact that language has meaning within a social system. This approach represents the view that ethnocentrism, as well as a false attempt to turn native with regard to the ancient world and documents, is both unrewarding and one sided (Craffert 1994:6). This anthropological and social perspective can be put to good use as long as it is used in conjunction with a proper literary analysis. It would be shortsighted to approach the text solely from an anthropological or social perspective because that would be a denial of the role of the author/narrator in the production of the text. Social-scientific perspectives and models should
be applied as part of a larger theory of the generation and interpretation of literary meaning. In this regard I can agree with Green (1992:471) when he says: ‘...we have insisted on attention to narratological presentation as a potential means of re-presenting or even reversing the social dimensions of the Mediterranean world within which Luke's narrative was generated.’ Green put his finger on the spot with regard to this issue when he stated: ‘Luke might not, and on occasion certainly does not, re-present the ‘real world’ so straightforwardly. He can, for example, provide an alternative view of that world, choose aspects of that world to emphasise while playing others down, or parody normal expectations in his culture so as to present a strikingly alternative way of understanding social reality’ (1992:459-460).

The question remains as to whether the contextual information (social and cultural) should be the dominant factor or whether the internal (textual) material should dominate in the interpretation of the text? It is our contention that the internal material is the decisive factor in the interpretation of the text. Even though we argue for the integration of these two above-mentioned perspectives, the problem of which is the dominant factor will surface from time to time in the following discussion of Lucan material.

Let us now turn to the text of Luke's Gospel and see how literary and historical analysis affects our understanding of the text. In some of the examples the argument will be weighted on the side of the effects of literary and narratological analysis, while in others it will be weighted on the historical and social-historical interpretation. We will discuss some more problematic passages indicating that great care should also be taken in any attempt to integrate the diverse approaches. We must continuously be aware that we are dealing with an ancient document produced in a different social world. Lastly we must keep in mind that we are looking at a social world through the eyes of people living at the end of the twentieth century.

5 APPLYING THE RESULTS OF SOCIAL-HISTORICAL RESEARCH TO A LITERARY EXEGESIS OF LUKE'S GOSPEL

5.1 The significance of the prologue (Lk 1:1-4)

Luke's prologue (1:1-4) is a key to the way he communicates with his audience. The way in which he presents his story, the order in which he combines the material, the faith foundation of his narrative, the historical content, and the cultural references, indicate his attempt to integrate his presentation and his communication with his readers.

The wording of the prologue gives the impression that Luke acts as a true historiographer, using terminology like 'traditions handed down' (παρέδωσαν), 'eyewitnesses' (αὐτόπται), 'one who has gone over the whole course of these
events in detail’ (παρηκολουθηκότι ἀνωθεν πᾶσιν ἀκριβῶς καθεξῆς). The reference to ‘eyewitnesses’ as well as ‘many writers...’ is an indication that the author finds himself in both the world of orality and literacy (cf Ong 1982:147–148). The use of certain terminology, however, also gives expression to the narrative character of the Gospel. Luke is the only evangelist who calls his Gospel a διήγησις. This word indicates an extensive and complex narration, but it also includes the basic notion of faith. The aspect of faith was present in this term even in the pre-Christian rhetoric (Güttgemanns 1983:15). This keyword, indicating the genre he is using, links the narrative character of his presentation with a specific faith foundation. By using this word at the outset the narrator gives his readers an indication of the form (story) in which his presentation will be offered, and the aim (God’s universal plan of salvation through Jesus of Nazareth) he wants to attain. This is even further enhanced by the reference that the episodes in this story have been joined together (καθεξῆς γράφατοι) in such a way that the reader’s faith will be strengthened (ασφαλέσθω). We would like to investigate how these features of his Gospel, namely the claim of good historiography, the narrative character, and the purpose of strengthening faith, can be integrated in an effective communication and interpretation of the text.

5.2 The correct use of social-historical information in Luke’s gospel

We start our discussion with two examples of the use of social information in our exegetical endeavours. We point out how it can positively contribute to our understanding of the social world and the text of the New Testament. We then discuss how it can also negatively affect our understanding if we succumb to the danger of superimposing ideological and political preference on a biblical text.

5.2.1 Luke 12:16–21 and 1:39–45

Understanding of the social situation reflected in this passage (12:16–21) determines to a large extent how this passage will be understood. Knowledge of the social structure of the period gives us insight into the matter of possessions and an honourable name. The description of the conduct of this man is such that the reader gets a picture of a man who wants to enjoy himself. The use of the word ἀγαθά for ‘possessions’ gives the picture an ironic undertone. Here an adjective often used for ethical evaluation is used with a physical connotation. For this man his ‘goods’ meant one thing only: earthly goods. He thinks that he alone controls his life (ψυχή) but has to be reminded that God alone disposes over life. When God addresses him he does not call him ψυχή but ἀφρων (fool). Socially speaking this last word was the opposite
of an honourable or honoured person. In the social terms of those days an honourable name was only attained by being generous towards the underprivileged, and not solely because of the multitude of possessions. Money, goods, and any sort of wealth were considered as a means to an honourable name, and any other use of wealth was considered to be foolish (cf Malina & Neyrey 1991:57). Earlier on this insight was expounded by Derrett (1977:150) when he pointed out that the parable shows that the right use of the fruits of the soil is to spend a high proportion of them in good works. According to him Jesus teaches that the law of the kingdom requires that superfluous fruits be spent in ways beneficial to the poor, whereby the charitable obtain assets in heaven. This insight might be of tremendous value to present-day situations in countries with large poor populations—like South Africa. This example from Luke’s Gospel illustrates how cross-cultural dialogue can be extremely helpful to overcome the gap between a western economic viewpoint and the economic viewpoint of the Middle-East of Jesus’ time. Insight into the economic viewpoint of the poor in biblical times will help us to put our exegesis within the framework of social verisimilitude in Mediterranean society.

This insight should, however, not blind us to the danger of falling into the trap of superimposing our ideological and political preferences on a biblical text. To illustrate the danger of reading our social awareness into the text we refer to the way in which the Magnificat in Luke 1:39-45 has been misinterpreted. Any attempt to replace a spiritualising of the Magnificat with a social-existential exposition will end up in the same way, namely, being more eisegesis than exegesis. An example of what we consider such one-sided exegesis can be found in O’Day (1985:209) who makes the following claim: ‘Mary does not sing of spiritual poverty and spiritual hunger, but of gnawing and aching poverty and hunger...’ In this regard Schottroff (1978:312) rightly warned that the social struggle of our time was not part of the Lucan social horizon. Social awareness and involvement by the present reader must not blind him/her to the historical context of the text. This example illustrates how careful we have to be that our social sensitivities do not become an interpretive obstacle.

5.3 The optimal outcome of using both social-historical and literary analysis

5.3.1 Luke 7:1-10

When we read Luke 7:1-10 the question springs to mind: Is it possible that Luke is more aware of the social structures of Palestine and its ramifications than Matthew for instance? In this story an officer sends a delegation of
Jewish elders to request Jesus’ help. It is not without significance that Luke says that the officer did not go to Jesus himself, whereas in Matthew 8:5–6 the man confronts Jesus personally. By maintaining this distance between the pagan officer and Jesus, Luke shows an awareness of the social position of this officer. In the social structure of that period the officer was an outsider (being a non-Jew) and a representative of a foreign military power. His position was probably that of a broker between the local community and the central authorities (cf Moxnes 1988:59). On the level of the story the officer recognises Jesus as the ‘ultimate patron, with the power to grant healing’ (Moxnes 1988:65). Jesus ignores and breaks down the well-known ‘patron-client’-relationship (cf Malina 1988:2–32) to which the people have been accustomed, and shows himself as the one who can give most without claiming any compensation. In view of this distance between the two we find a strong undercurrent of irony in the story when the delegation says of the officer: ‘He deserves this favour from you...’ (Lk 7:4). In spite of the man’s reticence to approach him, Jesus reacts positively by going to the officer’s home. The officer, however, reacts again by twice referring to his unworthiness. This reference to unworthiness is used by the narrator as a literary technique to underscore Jesus’ power to heal, and to demonstrate the officer’s faith. Understanding the social structure and customs and integrating them with the use made by the narrator of specific literary techniques gives a deeper understanding of the meaning of this passage. It is specifically the understanding of the social world of the text which opens our eyes to the irony in the text and the significance of distance created between the main characters on the narrative level.

5.3.2 Luke 1:24–25

In Luke 1:24–25 we have an interesting example of how our perspective can be enriched by the understanding of the social structure of the Mediterranean world and the contribution of narrative criticism, but it is also an example of the care we have to take in our utilization and interpretation of the social situation. In these verses we read that Elizabeth thanked God because ‘he has deigned to take away my reproach among men.’ This gives expression to the shame-culture within which she found herself, where society considered it shameful for a married woman not to have children. Conventions in the society to which she belonged were such that her husband was not considered responsible for their being childless. Because of our knowledge of physiology our views on this have changed today. In Luke’s time, however, this was a serious matter. The cultural gap between them and us therefore necessitates a very careful appraisal of the matter. In Elizabeth’s case the dis-
grace resulting from childlessness is treated as almost worse than the deprivation itself (Daube 1982:363). Elizabeth thanked God, not so much for the pregnancy, but for taking away her disgrace among men, which was due to the shame-culture of that day. However, the fact that she thanked God seems to be contradicted by the reference that she ‘lived for five months in seclusion’. Hiding herself looks like a clear sign of shame, but it is not necessarily due to the shame-culture we have referred to. Nor is it necessarily because of psychological reasons that she hid herself—because of her advanced age. That may have been the case if this event had taken place today. It shows how easily we could read the text through our contemporary glasses. This illustrates the care exegetes should take not to be entrapped by their present social disposition when reading and evaluating the text. It also illustrates how careful we should be not to impose our social structure and disposition onto the text.

A possible solution for the remark about Elizabeth hiding herself could be offered from a narratological point of view. It is quite feasible that the narrator made this remark for literary purposes, namely that he wished to parallel her conduct with that of her husband’s dumbness as reaction to God’s action. Her retirement could also have been dictated by the plot of the story: namely that the news of her pregnancy is not to reach Mary as yet. That presupposes that the author wanted to retard the revelation of John’s birth until the visit of Mary to Elizabeth (Lk 1:26, 41). But even so her conduct must make sense to the readers and it does so in a shame milieu. The fascinating but paradoxical thing about Elizabeth’s seclusion is that it would fit into our present notion of shame (regarding pregnancy of an old woman —although even this seems to have become a matter of sensation nowadays!). It does not explain it from the perspective of shame-culture of Luke’s day however. That is why we would deem it better to explain Elizabeth’s seclusion from a literary point of view (plot).

This issue underscores the importance of integrating the significance of the social conditions of the time of the text-production with the literary point of view of the narrative to determine what the text really means. The social conditions of Luke’s time help us to get a specific perspective on this text, but the best perspective can be achieved if we include the literary viewpoint of the narrator in the narrative. Even though it is important for the present reader to understand the cultural context of the text (shame-culture) and integrate it with the literary intent of the author, there is the danger that we interpret the text through our contemporary social customs which differ from those of the text. The contingent similarity of the contemporary notion of shame and that of New Testament times should therefore not be allowed to cloud the issue.
5.3.3 Luke 11:5-8

Another passage where the shame-culture played a significant role can be found in Luke 11:5-8. The parable in this passage appears only in Luke's Gospel and it is inserted between two passages from Q (between 11:2-4 and 9-13). Thereby Luke gives this section, which consists mainly of pronouncements of Jesus, a more narrational character. In all three paragraphs the theme is prayer and this theme unifies the three sections (vv 2-4, 5-8, 9-13).

Looking at this parable as a narrative, we note that the word of\(\Delta \nu\alpha\iota\theta\iota\alpha\varsigma\) is repeated no less than four times. It is clear that we are dealing with people who are 'friends', whose friendship is being stretched to the limit. A man's friend comes to him in the middle of the night and insists in a shameless way to be helped because he in his turn had to provide hospitality to an unexpected guest. The Greek word translated with 'shamelessness' is \(\Delta\nu\alpha\iota\theta\iota\alpha\varsigma\) and it occurs only here in the New Testament which makes comparison difficult. It can also be translated as 'insolence' or 'impudence', indicating in general a lack of sensitivity to what is proper (Louw & Nida 1988:628). Social-historical research has shown that mutual help was expected within the village community (Oakman 1991:166). The friendship of these two people is severely put to the test by the oriental custom of hospitality. To expect such at the hour of midnight, is, however, stretching the issue to its limits.

The question is of course: To whose shamelessness does this story refer? The man inside the house or his untimely visitor? The way it is used here indicates that the very negative connotation which \(\Delta\nu\alpha\iota\theta\iota\alpha\varsigma\) had in the Old Testament had changed by the time of the New Testament. In the wisdom literature (Proverbs 7:13; Sirach 40:30) it had already begun to obtain a positive connotation in so far as shamelessness can bring about new revelations (e.g. in Herm vis 3.3.1-2; cf Heininger 1991:107). The word 'shamelessness' could refer to the person inside the house who is concerned that he will be blamed for callousness if he dismisses a friend in need. Such a viewpoint was held by Jeremias (1970:158) who referred to Sirach 6:5-17 where much weight is attached to old friendship (see also Job 31:32). Such a standpoint would be supported by our knowledge of the social situation and shame-culture in New Testament times.

It could, however, also refer to the insolent stubbornness of the petitioner outside. He has been embarrassed by being unable to feed an unexpected guest. He has undertaken to show hospitality but he is without stock and therefore desperately needs help from a neighbour. He persists in his endeavour to convince his neighbour to help him out of his predicament to fulfil his duty to a wanderer. His persistence, even to the level of acting
shamelessly, is in line with the plot of the story and the literary context of this passage. The parable appears within the two passages dealing with prayer and the command to persevere with prayer to obtain what you really need. It could therefore be understood as an example of what is meant by the sayings about persistent prayer—to ask, seek and knock for what is needed.

Here we have a good example of how both the literary and social perspective on the text might sometimes be required to come to the best understanding of the text. Knowledge of the social conditions and customs—shame culture in this case—helps us to solve the problem of whom is referred to and what is meant regarding the statement of 'shamelessness'. On the other hand a literary analysis of the passage and the context helps us to understand that the theme of this whole section—namely, prayer—brings a specific perspective concerning the point the parable wishes to make—namely, that it focuses on the man inside the house who metaphorically represents God's willingness to answer the sincere prayer of someone in need.

We end up realising that shamelessness refers to both the person inside the house and the one outside. The persistence of the petitioner indicates shamelessness, but the reaction of the man inside the house also suggests this. Although the characters in the story are both considered to be friends, in the end it is not their friendship which is decisive for the outcome of the story. In spite of the repeated reference to 'friendship' (φίλος is used four times in the passage) it is not their friendship but the ἀναίδεια which is decisive for the granting of the request. The narrator concludes that even if the man inside the house does not help for the sake of their friendship, he will do so for the sake of not being considered to be 'shameless' (ἀναίδεια, cf Bailey 1976:119–133). The inference is that the αὐτῷ in the phrase φίλον αὐτῷ refers to the man outside while in the phrase ἀναίδειαν αὐτῷ it refers to the man inside. Because of our knowledge of oriental hospitality we can deduce that shamelessness need not only refer to the persistence of the petitioner—in spite of the context of the story which stresses the need for persisting in prayer—but could also refer to the man inside the house. From Jesus' instruction on prayer we learn that persistence is very important (18:1–8). In this parable in Luke 11:5–8, however, it is God's willingness to give what is needed and asked, which stands in the centre. This is one of those 'how much more' stories in which the reader experiences how much more God will do than could be found in any human analogy (cf Talbert 1982:132). The outcome of the two-pronged approach is that we notice how the perspective from the literary point of view is given a different slant when the social-historical perspective is added.
5.4 Some problems when using social-historical information in a literary approach

We have given an indication of some of the benefits and new avenues opened for exegetes when integrating the results of narrative and social-historical analysis of an ancient text. In our discussion it has already become clear that such a comprehensive approach is not without its problems. The question and problem facing the reader today is what role should be allocated to available social-historical information when it clashes with the literary presentation of the text? What should be done when the picture the author/narrator wishes to convey to the reader is in conflict with the social and cultural picture offered by social-critical research? What should be done when the plot and theological point of a passage conflicts with the information available through social-historical research?

The dilemma facing the exegete is clear. One cannot escape the fact that any person can only look on reality through his/her own eyes. Our own social position will largely determine how we read this text. There is therefore the danger that we will look at the ancient text through the mould of our own sociological principles and try to interpret the old text according to modern sociological principles—and even those principles may be the ideas of a particular social construct or a particular school of thought. The question is: How time-bound are our principles? Can we research the ancient world with our modern anthropological and sociological principles? The correct answer to this problem is one of the most fiercely contested in recent social-historical studies. We cannot debate this problem here but would like to refer to the discussion of this problem in Davis (1977), Boissevain (1979) and Gilmore (1982). Sociologists and cultural anthropologists, and even theologians using social criticism, are becoming increasingly aware of the need of a cross-cultural dialogue between the ancient world and our own in order to overcome the cultural gap (see the discussion in Craffert 1994). A few of the problems will be indicated in the following discussions, and will illustrate the need to get the most objective view possible of social conditions in biblical times, and at the same time be aware of the ever-threatening danger of a subjective disposition.

On the whole it will not be difficult to determine the usefulness of historical extra-textual information, but there will be the occasion where the different theological orientation of readers might lead to different interpretations. This will be especially crucial when the reader will have to make a choice between following the narrator's point of view in the existing text or be led by the extra-textual context supplied by social-historical information.
5.4.1 Luke 7:36-50

The role of the reader in this passage is significant. Our modern view of women, influenced by our acceptance of the liberation of women, may easily jeopardise our understanding of the revolutionary and shocking behaviour of a female character in this story as well as Jesus’ revolutionary conduct. For ideological reasons we may be inclined to read and understand this event as proof and support for our modern western cultural value system (cf Schüssler-Fiorenza 1983), but this would violate the historical situation which we are trying to understand.

Luke was the only evangelist not to link his story of the sinful woman with the passion narrative like the other Gospels (see Mk 14:3-9; Mt 26:6-13; Jh 12:1-8). In contrast he included it within a different context where God’s forgiveness is emphasised. It is on this theme of forgiveness that we should focus. In 7:36–50 Luke gives an example of God’s grace as revealed in Jesus. If the story is approached from a literary point of view one can point out how the narrative itself achieves the overturning of the initial social situation (Tannehill 1986:116-118). Already at the beginning of the story (7:36) the narrator tells the reader that the woman is a sinner. The woman appears on the scene and dominates the scene with her actions. On the story level the narrator is clearly implicating her as a sinful woman. By presenting the woman as ‘immoral’ (in contrast with the other evangelists) she becomes a suitable opposition for the Pharisee. In contrast to the woman, however, the narrator just refers to the man as ‘one of the Pharisees’ (7:37). Later on in the story the Pharisee is characterised negatively for his conduct, but the present reader has to include information from outside the text to properly understand this character. From the rest of the Gospel he/she gets a mostly negative picture of the Pharisees. Much of the picture presented to us with regard to the Pharisee as well as the woman is coloured and influenced by our knowledge of the social structures of that period. Therefore it becomes easier to picture him as the one who represents the other extreme of the social hierarchy. As representative of the upper end of the status hierarchy he represents the stereotyped view in the story, while the woman represents the lowest point and here also the exotic perspective. In this regard Resseguie (1991:137-150) differentiates between the ‘automatized’ (=stereotyped) and the ‘defamiliarized’ (=exotic) perspective.

The narrative critic therefore has to bolster his/her narrative analysis with social assertions to increase the understanding of the dramatic events (Robbins 1992:308). Social criticism has helped us to understand why this woman’s conduct would have been frowned upon in that society. In that society she is present in the space of male persons, namely in the dining room (Malina & Neyrey 1991:63). The fact that she unties her hair in the presence
of males was considered as improper. She is risking her own position by exposing herself in this way. For the first readers her presence and conduct are tokens of her transgression of the general social order. In the process, however, she overcomes a serious social obstruction by approaching Jesus in a space where she is an intruder. By allowing her to approach and touch him, Jesus supports this woman whose poor social position has landed her in a very precarious situation. Her actions (expressed by means of four aorist participia) give a concise and effective description of her reaction to Jesus. The use of the imperfect (κατεφίλεται and ἥλειφεν) indicates the purposefulness of her actions. The narrator puts the woman in the centre of attention and compares her conduct with that of Simon the Pharisee and host. Her conduct is in sharp contrast with that of Simon (v 44). The Pharisee argues that Jesus—if he were really a prophet—should know that the woman is a sinful woman. Sociologically the Pharisee is labelling Jesus negatively, and on the story level this should add to characterising Jesus as deviant (cf Malina & Neyrey 1991:97–122). He rejects Jesus by implication as a prophet. The narrator of the story, however, wants to indicate that Jesus was indeed a prophet who is prepared to be touched by the woman, because his mission was to offer forgiveness for people such as this woman. This kind of paradox had already been visible at the end of the previous pericope (7:34–35).

It is clear that even narrative critics are inclined to presuppose and include social assertions and social dynamics in their interpretation of Luke's story. The social implications of the conduct of the main characters in the story are presupposed even though the analysis is focused on the inner texture of the account. Narrative critics might therefore be accused of using information from outside the text, but this is indeed the kind of integration of approach and method which I would like to encourage. In terms of a one-method approach this might seem to be a transgression of methodological purity, but in terms of the final understanding of the text and for the sake of the broadest perspective it should be encouraged. It seems to be a better approach because it reflects something of how the narrative works, and it reveals something of the values and attitudes the narrative wants to propagate.

5.4.2 Luke 15:11–32

The last example I would like to discuss, is the well-known Lucan parable of the so-called prodigal son. A lot of research has gone into the social and cultural customs appearing in this parable (Rengstorf 1967; Derrett 1967–68: 56–74; Schottroff 1971:27–52; Pohlmann 1979: 194–213; Daube 1982). We will focus on a particular example within this parable to illustrate the fascinating but also complex problem we are sometimes faced with when trying to integrate social-cultural and literary analyses of a biblical text.
The problem of cross-cultural dialogue between the reader and the narrator, each within their own frame of reference, is very real in this passage. The question is: What does the text refer to? Can the juridical correctness of the story be accepted? The problem we will focus on concerns the inheritance of the youngest son. In 15:12 we hear that the father divided his goods between the two sons, but later on he again offers the younger brother the best clothes et cetera (15:22–24), and in 15:31 the father says to the oldest son: ‘Everything I have is yours’, as if he still owns everything himself. Daube (1955:326–334) tried to prove that we are dealing here with a ‘pay-off’ (Abschichtung) which is in agreement with the requirement of the Talmud. This refers to an arrangement according to which a son receives a portion of his father’s possessions while he is still alive. This happened so that the older son may get his proper share of the inheritance. The younger son then relinquishes any further claim to an inheritance. Such a ‘pay-off’ went hand in hand with an expulsion from the family. Something similar was raised by Rengstorf (1967), namely the qesasah, which literally means ‘cut off’. If a son brings shame on the family by marrying the wrong blood or by selling off the family land, a ritual demonstrating this cutting off took place in public. Rengstorf thinks that this is the reason why the father refers to the son who ‘was dead’. This custom was meant as a social-protective measure. Although Rengstorf makes a lot of interesting comparisons from other Jewish literature they are fairly speculative and he was consequently severely criticised by Bailey (1976). In spite of this criticism Pöhlmann (1979) again tried to prove that the juridical custom of a ‘pay-off’ (Abschichtung) played a role in this parable.

The problem with Daube’s suggestion is that it views the story too much from the father’s side. It was not the father who initiated the giving of the inheritance but it was the younger son who did. If the father had taken the initiative it would not have fitted into the development of the plot of the story. It is also questionable whether we are in fact dealing with a ‘pay-off’ when we read that the father ‘divided his estate between them’ (15:12b). The contradiction between verse 12b and verse 29 (‘you never gave me so much as a kid’) and the father’s reply in verse 31 (‘everything I have is yours’) cannot really be explained by a single juridical custom. It just does not fit into the flow of the narrative.

Rengstorf’s suggestion that we are dealing here with a qesasah is more in agreement with the plot of the story. This could lead to a better integration of the social-historical and the literary approach. The individual points of criticism by Bailey on Rengstorf’s explanation, however, make this social-historical explanation less satisfactory. The idea of a qesasah also does not solve the problem of 15:12b (‘he divided his estate between them’). Added to this we never find any reference in this parable to the two conditions for
applying a *qesasah*, namely to sell land to a gentile, or to marry an unclean/impure woman. Most of the detail required for identification of the cultural situation is absent. It is of course true that the reader has to fill in the gaps (cf Iser 1980) left open in the story. The competence of the reader does play a significant role, but there should not be any obvious contradictions between the social-cultural customs and the story we find in the text. It is very significant that Daube acknowledges that the custom (‘pay-off’) which he used from the Mishnah (*Baba Bathra* 8.7) is not that which Luke had in mind when he wrote his parable (1955:330).

It is clear that scholars disagree as to which juridical customs are at stake in this parable. There should be a minimum of agreement between narrator and reader/hearer for proper communication. We are faced here with two problems: first to determine which cultural and juridical situation could be applied here; secondly, how do we reconcile the narrative presentation with the social-historical situation as presented by various researchers? Some of the questions arising are: did the author/narrator take cognizance of the existing cultural patterns, or did he purposely change the social landscape to fit his theological aim? I have no doubt in my mind that the narrative itself—the text as it stands—should be decisive in determining the understanding of the parable. Understanding the narrative-world of the parable gives the present reader a better perspective than the available information on the contemporary juridical customs. The father's conduct bears witness to a juridical order which differs from the present-day situation, but his conduct did not originate from the worldly juridical order of his day but rather from the metaphor the narrator is using. In this case it looks as if it is not the juridical information which is decisive for understanding the parable, but rather the general trend in the story. The reference of the story to realities outside the text does not seem to be compatible with the point the parable wants to make. Without falling back into Jülicher’s one-point-of-comparison the reader must give priority to the metaphoric tendency and the symbolic meaning of the text. It is not the juridical customs of that time which determine how we should interpret this parable, but rather the plot the narrator is following in his story. The reconciliation of the father with his two sons is in contradiction with any juridical conventions. It is not justice (the law) which is being rejected in this story but self-righteousness. This parable is focusing on the father who tries to overcome the selfishness and self-righteousness of his two sons and to reconcile them with himself and with each other. The reader has to make a choice in favour of the story as presented in the narrative against some explanation based on our knowledge of the social world of New Testament times.

The outcome of our discussion of this parable illustrates the fact that parables have a problem of their own. Because they were used by Jesus to
preach his view of God's reality they have a dynamic of their own. Within the story world of the parable the reader/hearer is defamiliarised (estranged) from his/her day-to-day reality and drawn into the reality of the world of the parable. Jesus confronts the reader with his own view of God's reality and what He offers. This means that he goes beyond the restrictions and limitations the contemporary world offers. This parable shows the care which has to be taken when trying to integrate the social-historical information available with the intention of the parable at hand. Recent studies with regard to fantasy and the fantastic in the New Testament show the necessity of realising that the external referents of a text could not and should not dominate our reading of a biblical text in such a way that we forget the religious character and the theological thrust of the text we are dealing with (Zipes 1992; also Aichele 1992:83-89). On this topic Dewey (1992:89) gave us much to ponder on when she said: 'The idea of alternate realities empowering people to begin changing present realities makes sense in the oral/aural world of early Christians—one in which they experience the performance of a narrative, not seek out its external referents.' I do not intend to discuss here the aspect of the fantastic or the mystery involved in understanding the New Testament, but eventually these aspects should also be included in how we read and what we make of the text.

The important question we raised earlier on is again applicable here, namely whether the information which is internal to the text be the dominant factor, or whether it be the contextual information from outside the text? It should be clear that social and cultural insights can only offer a specific perspective with regard to the text. If the social (external) information clashes with the internal information available from the text, one will have to decide what one's purpose with the text is. If you are just looking for possible historical correctness you should be satisfied that there is an unavoidable clash. If you are interested in the theological significance of the text the internal information will have to determine the interpretation. For this last option a literary and rhetorical approach lends a better hand for our understanding of the text.

6 CONCLUSIONS
It should be clear by now that human communication and religious experience are as diverse as the cultures of mankind. This diversity also causes the means of communication—texts amongst others—to be diverse and complex. Because of human nature, physiology, experience et cetera, a comprehensive approach to interpretation and understanding is required for proper communication. In this article we have focused mainly on a literary (especially a narrative) and a historical (especially social-historical) approach to the text of
Luke's Gospel. The importance of the reader and his competence (and experience)—both the original and the contemporary reader—became clear. In the process it was clear that what the reader knows, is of the utmost importance for the interpretation of the text. The textual referents cannot be ignored when determining the effect of the text on both the original readers (implied or otherwise) and modern readers. That there are also problems involved in a comprehensive reading was illustrated through the analysis of some passages. Understanding social conditions in biblical times is important, but we must guard against the danger of reading an ancient text solely through our own sociological theories, ideological expectations, and even political convictions (or prejudices). If our research and understanding of the social conditions at the time of the text production can help us get a better perspective on the text and the ideological point of departure when it was produced, it can be of tremendous advantage to our understanding of the text.

WORKS CONSULTED


Prof I J du Plessis, Department of New Testament, Unisa, P O Box 392, Pretoria, 0003 South Africa.