

What Are They Saying About the Parables?
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CHAPTER 6

Parables and their Social Contexts

One of the most fruitful developments in New Testament scholarship is the emergence of studies concerning the social and cultural contexts of the first-century Mediterranean world [1]. Many social and cultural elements found in ancient literature are not usually self-evident to modern readers, so aspects of the parables are virtually incomprehensible without an understanding of the social and cultural processes which influence these texts. The aim of this chapter, then, is to explore some of the significant social elements reflected in these parables.

Parables and the Social Sciences

In 1976 Kenneth Bailey noted that despite numerous scholarly investigations of the parables, the "cultural milieu" still needed serious attention [2]. To overcome the "cultural foreignness" between modern readers and first-century Palestine, Bailey proposes an "Oriental exegesis" (29–43) which combines standard critical tools of "Western scholarship" with cultural insights gained from ancient literature, contemporary peasants, and Oriental versions (Syriac and Arabic) of the New Testament (30, 36) [3].

This approach and ones similar to it provide an abundance of useful information and enrich our insights of first-century Palestine, but the gain in information is at times offset by the lack of theoretical models for analyzing, evaluating, and processing data [4]. How can we assess, for example, whether selected data is implicit in these texts or whether we are imposing another interpretive matrix on them? Bailey's eclectic, inductive approach does not clarify or make explicit a guiding theoretical structure, so his readers do not have the opportunity to see clearly all of the implications, limitations, and biases inherent in his agenda [5].

Bernard Brandon Scott provides a more explicit approach [6]. He schematically organizes the parables around three basic elements of first-century life ("Family, Village, City, and Beyond," "Masters and Servants," and "Home and Farm") [7] because Mediterranean and Jewish culture employed these aspects to represent symbolically its organization of the sacred. Jesus' parables utilize these patterns and "most often play against them" (74), so it is critical to understand this social-world perspective if we are to understand Jesus' parables even at the most basic literary level.

William Herzog's *Parables as Subversive Speech* provides the most explicit and detailed analysis of the social setting of the parables. In contrast to Scott's work, Herzog's approach does not subordinate social analysis to literary analysis. In fact, Herzog claims that the differences between the "Dodd-Jeremias" historical-critical tradition (see Chapter 1 above) and the literary-critical tradition (see Chapters 2 and 3 above) were minimal. Both produced "idealist" readings of the parables and

generated a discourse that was finally unrelated to the material details of its story world (13).

The crucial difference in Herzog's approach is that he views the parables through the lens of a "pedagogy of the oppressed." [8] The focus of the parables, Herzog argues, is not on a vision of the glory of the reign (kingdom) of God, but on the gory details of how oppression serves the interests of a ruling class. Parables explore how human beings could respond to break the spiral of violence and the cycle of poverty created by such exploitation. Therefore the parables of Jesus were forms of social analysis just as much as they were forms of theological reflection (3).

Honor and Shame

One of the pervasive social elements of the culture in which Jesus' parables were created is the "cultural code" of honor and shame. In the first century, a person of honor attains and maintains honor by conforming to traditional patterns of behavior.[9] As Malina and Neyrey succinctly summarize, "Honor is the positive value of a person in his or her own eyes plus the positive appreciation of that person in the eyes of his or her social group" (25–26). Honor includes one's publicly-acknowledged social standing, which can be divided into three major areas: the appropriate ability to control others (power); appropriate male/female roles (sexual status); and appropriate relationship in the fixed hierarchy of superiors and subordinates.[10]

All interactions between people outside of the family setting are inherently connected to competition with others for recognition of one's "honor rating." Therefore honor may be acquired through a social dialectic of challenge and riposte.[11] As Malina and Neyrey note, even a public question initiates an honor/shame challenge, as the verses just preceding the parable of the Good Samaritan illustrate (Luke 10:25–29). The lawyer's question about eternal life is no innocent request for information; instead it is a challenge that puts Jesus "to the test" (10:25). As common in an honor/shame defense, Jesus responds with a question, which puts the lawyer on the spot instead (10:26). The lawyer is forced to answer in a traditional fashion, so Jesus successfully withstands this honor challenge (51).

The lawyer is shamed by his unsuccessful challenge, so he asks a second question. Once again, he is trying to stump Jesus and recoup his own lost honor.[12] Note that he desires to "justify himself" when he asks, "Who is my neighbor?" (10:29). Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan and with another counter question concerning who, among the priest, levite, and Samaritan, proved to be a neighbor (10:36). And, once again, Jesus wins the honor/shame contest when the lawyer is forced to admit (albeit indirectly) that the Samaritan is the one who proved to be the neighbor by his merciful actions. Finally, the parable itself directly challenges the code of honor held by the members of Jesus' audience, since it shockingly elevates a Samaritan outsider over Jewish priests and levites as examples of covenant compassion (51).

William Herzog claims that a recognition of the social code of honor significantly alters our understanding of the Laborers in the Vineyard parable (Mt 20:1–16).[13] Previous interpreters negatively evaluated the voices of the complaining workers so that the action of the owner of the vineyard symbolized God's gracious, generous goodness (82). Herzog proposes instead to divest the parable of theological accretions in order to focus more clearly on the social world depicted: the agrarian world of rural Galilee and Judea.

The characters of the parable are not abstract theological types but belong to identifiable social groups in advanced agrarian societies. The landowner is a member of the urban elite who owns a large estate which produces a great harvest. The day laborers, on the other hand, are members of the "expendable" class who live at or below subsistence level.[14] Although the wealthy landowner has a steward as retainer, Jesus portrays him as hiring the workers directly, in order to depict a direct confrontation between these two social groups. They represent the two extremes of agrarian society: a ruthless and exploitative landowner and the poor, desperate peasants who are fighting a losing battle of survival

(90).

Herzog argues that when the last-hired workers get paid first, the landowner deliberately insults the first-hired workers. Since he pays the workers who worked just one hour the same as the workers who toiled all day, he shames the labor of the first-hired (20:8–10), and they respond to his provocation (20:11–12). Therefore, the wage settlement initiates an honor/shame contest with the steward delivering the insult (20:8). The workers, however, fight to maintain their meager position in society. The episode concludes with the final riposte from the shrewd but exploitative landowner (20:13–15) who feigns courtesy with a condescending form of the word "friend," banishes the spokesperson of the workers with an "evil eye" accusation, and blasphemes by asserting his control over what should properly be seen as Yahweh's land (94). The landowner thus demonstrates his sinful allegiance to the aristocratic view of the elites: despising peasants enabled them to rationalize their exercise of power over these "expendables" and to justify their exploitation (69). So this parable, instead of using the landowner as a symbol for God, codifies the incongruity between the coming reign of God and the earthly systems of oppression that pretend to be legitimate guardians of its values (97).

John H. Elliott's analysis of the "Evil Eye" in this parable provides a different interpretation.^[15] Belief in the Evil Eye includes the notion that certain individuals had the power to injure another person just by a glance. Since the foremost malevolent emotion associated with the Evil Eye was envy, Elliott believes that the parable contrasts divine compassion with invidious human comparison: an Evil Eye accusation (20:15) is employed to denounce envy as incompatible with life in the kingdom of heaven (52–53).

Elliott believes that the landowner appropriately contrasts his goodness with the evil of his accusers and deservedly shames them by exposing their "Evil-Eyed envy" (60–61). Such envy manifests a failure to comprehend God's benefactions, an unwillingness to renounce "business as usual," and a refusal to rejoice in the blessings of others. Thus, for Elliott, the householder represents God: the story illustrates the unlimited favor of God, condemns Evil Eye envy as incompatible with social life as governed by the rule of God, and affirms Jesus' solidarity with the poor and undeserving (61–62).

The analyses by Herzog and Elliott appear incompatible, and Herzog's interpretation seems closer to demonstrating Jesus' solidarity with the poor. In my view, however, the differences primarily stem from the ideological perspective taken on a social-scientific level: Elliott's analysis is closer to an "emic" perspective — an interpretation that centers more on the viewpoint, categories of thought, and explanations of the group being studied.^[16] Herzog's interpretation, on the other hand, even though it evaluates the first-century social contexts, comes from a more "etic" perspective — the perspective and classifying systems of an external investigator.

Elliott focuses on the pervasive notion of the Evil Eye and its implications for the story, especially in its Matthean context. Herzog, on the other hand, openly declares his etic agenda, in part by speaking of the "peril of not modernizing Jesus."^[17] He believes that it is important to minimize our anachronizing tendencies, but it is also crucial to acknowledge that every interpretation "modernizes Jesus." Such modernizing is not only unavoidable, it is absolutely necessary in order to make Jesus' teachings understandable and relevant to modern persons.

Thus Herzog utilizes Paulo Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed" to assert that the "social construction of reality" of peasants was dependent on the elites in their society. In other words, peasants internalize the world as understood by their oppressors, because the elite deposit their worldview in the peasants' minds and hearts (e.g., through dominant language patterns). It takes a new vocabulary and "outside teachers" to bring peasants to realize their situation and to facilitate building a new social construction of reality (19–21). For Herzog, Jesus served as this type of "outside facilitator," because his parables were designed to stimulate social analysis and to expose the contradictions between the actual situation of their hearers and the Torah of God's justice (28).

Ancient Economies: Limited Good and Patron-Broker-Client Relationships

Since most persons in the first-century Mediterranean world lived on a subsistence level, this lack of sufficient goods helped to generate and sustain the idea that all resources were limited, in short supply, and already distributed. In addition, most people were at the mercy of power-holders outside their social realm. Their sense of powerlessness was reinforced by the rugged climate and lack of natural resources available to them in many areas of the Mediterranean world, which also led to the belief that *all* positive values (e.g., honor, love, power) were also "limited goods."

This belief in limited good resulted in a system of horizontal and vertical reciprocal relationships to ensure social stability — an honorable person did not want to be seen as improperly attaining any social or material advantage. Vertical alliances were built around patron-client relationships. A patron has social, economic, political, or religious resources that are needed by a client; in return a client expresses loyalty or honor to the patron. A mediator between these two parties functions as a "broker."

As Halvor Moxnes demonstrates, patron-client relations are reflected in several of Jesus' parables.^[18] The Lukan parable of the nobleman who went abroad and the servants/clients who served him well (19:11–27) is typical of patron-client relations between central power and peripheral vassals. The parable of the dishonest steward (16:1–9) tells the story of a landowner's client who served as a broker between the landowner and the tenants. The steward uses his position as broker to establish patron-client links between himself and his master's tenants. When he reduces their debts, they become indebted to him and thus obliged to receive him as a guest in his (future) time of need. Moxnes concludes that such parables clearly show the dependent relationship of the villagers to a central ruler and/or to rich absentee landlords in the cities. Since the distance (social and otherwise) between village and the center is so vast, there is little direct contact; an intermediary is needed, and this broker becomes an important figure. This role is so important that it is also used as a model for the leadership within the Jesus community.

This model of leadership in the Christian community is possible because God is the ultimate patron, and Jesus is depicted as the broker of God's blessings to the people. But in the parable of the Wedding Feast (Luke 12:35–40) a paradox appears: the master (patron) takes the role of a servant (12:37). Jesus here and elsewhere identifies greatness with serving, rather than being served. The result is a transformation of the traditional concept of patronage (258–259), and it bypasses the established urban and legal central power of Temple and Torah by proclaiming the immediacy of the kingdom of God (265).

Ancient Economies: Peasant Readings/Hearings of the Parables

Douglas Oakman cogently argues that Jesus' words and actions articulate a coherent response to first-century economic realities.^[19] Jesus critiqued both the peasant ethos of self-sufficiency and the exploitative redistribution of the Temple in Jerusalem.

In antiquity, economic exchanges within and between villages were based on reciprocity (exchange by gift or barter). The larger "political economy," however, was characterized by redistribution — the politically or religiously induced extraction of a percentage of local production from the powerless to the powerful (e.g., taxes, tithes, or rents). The Temple in Jerusalem, as one agent of redistribution, existed as a powerful means of exploitation which threatened ancient economic values through the impoverishment of the peasant population and which heightened tensions between elites and non-elites. Since peasants were left struggling to maintain their lives at a bare subsistence level, they were often forced to curtail consumption or enter into a hopeless, downward spiral of debt. Such oppression disturbed the reciprocal economic relations within villages and promoted what Oakman calls a "survivalist mentality" (78–80), because of the narrow margin between subsistence and starvation.

A peasant's view of "the good life" revolved around three interrelated values: a reverent attitude toward the land, strenuous agricultural work as good (but commerce as bad), and productive industry as a virtue.^[20] Jesus created his parables within the context of these peasant realities (100–102). Yet Jesus — since he was a peasant artisan (a carpenter) — also had social contacts and familiarity with the social circumstances of the wealthy. Many of the parables thus demonstrate a detailed knowledge of large estates, the behavior of slaves and overseers, and other economic aspects of the elite.^[21]

The parable of the Sower, for example, agrees with the peasant view of the primary producer in an immediate relationship with God. The sower is not negligent, as some modern interpreters suggest; instead God provides the harvest in spite of all the natural, inimical forces that threaten the crop. But through this parable Jesus critiques the peasant values of frugality and strenuous labor by declaring that God will provide the harvest (107–109). The providence of God is also clearly seen in the parable of the Darnel Among the Wheat (Mt 13:24–30), which invites non-elites to stop "hoeing" and to wait for the imminent reign of God (129). This advice, once again, undermines the values of Jesus' peasant audience which focuses on frugality and hard work.

In the face of the exploitative urban elite (e.g., redistributive institutions like the Roman state and Jewish Temple), the concentration of land holdings in the hands of a few, rising debt, and other destabilizing forces, Jesus responded by calling for a reversal of the centralization of political power and economic goods. In addition, Jesus advocated exchanges built on "general reciprocity" — giving without expecting anything in return (e.g., the remission of debts; 168). Such general reciprocity fosters unity and propitiates potential enemies, but, for Jesus, it also fosters the reestablishment of kinship among all peoples. Love for enemies is a corollary of this general reciprocity, which profoundly expresses human dependence on God's graciousness and willingness to provide for material human needs.

Oakman explores in a later work how the parable of the Good Samaritan epitomizes this love for one's enemies.^[22] Since peasants were compelled to give up a precious amount of their hard-earned sustenance to outsiders, the common orientation of peasants was to distrust strangers — especially those who dealt in commerce. Outsiders were seen as possible threats to their existence or livelihood, and a cultural chasm existed between city-dwellers (where landowners tended to live) and peasant villagers (118).

The parable of the Good Samaritan presupposes typical peasant valuations of the characters, but does not simply identify with their interests. Peasant sympathies, Oakman argues, would have been with the bandits of this parable. Yet Jesus abhors the violence of the bandits while accepting some of the basic goals of banditry — justice and the securing of subsistence for the poor. In addition, most modern interpreters ignore the indications in the parable that the Samaritan was a trader — a profession despised by peasants. For Jewish peasants, the Samaritan is a cultural enemy (Samaritan), an evil man (a trader), and a fool. The Samaritan was foolish because he treated the injured man graciously, as if he were a family member, and was naive about the situation at the inn: since inns were notoriously synonymous with crime and evil deeds, for this gullible Samaritan to trust the injured man to the care of such an evil place — and to give the innkeeper a blank check! — was a folly that could prove deadly to the injured person (122–123).

Oakman concludes that Jesus fully expected peasants to laugh all the way through this story. But Jesus compares the enormity of God's generosity to the actions of a hated foreigner of despised social occupation, and, in fact, God's mercy even reaches the point of danger and folly. God's kingdom is found in the most unlikely, even immoral, places. And God, like the Samaritan, is indebted to pay whatever may be required (123). As Oakman reiterates in another work,^[23] the parable subverts traditional village morality and opens up the countryside to new possibilities: general reciprocity as characteristic of the kingdom of God and as a radical protest against the exploitative agrarian situation in early Roman Palestine (175).

The parable of the Good Samaritan creates a reversal of expectations. In a similar way, once we read

these parables with (acquired) peasant eyes and hear them with peasant ears, our Western, post-enlightenment interpretations of them are often reversed. Richard Rohrbaugh's "peasant reading" of the Parable of the Talents/Pounds illustrates this very well.[\[24\]](#) Modern interpreters often understand this parable as praise for "homespun capitalism" (33). Yet a modern market economy is completely foreign to ancient agrarian societies. The purpose of labor was not the creation of value, but the maintenance of the family and the well-being of the village. Rohrbaugh explains how peasants, with a perspective of "limited good," would see the rich master in the parable as greedy to the core. In fact, from the peasants' viewpoint, the parable is a "text of terror" that confirms their worst fears about the kingdom of God: that it mirrors their daily lives in which the strong are rewarded for trampling on the weak (35). In addition, the third servant who protects the existing goods of the master (who is denigrated in modern interpretations) acts in the way that is most honorable in the eyes of peasants.

Thus, once again, social location helps to determine one's reading of the parable. The elite view the master as rightfully angry with the third servant, and Jesus is therefore warning about a lack of industry. To peasants, however, the master is terribly wrong in his rebuke, and Jesus is therefore admonishing the rich concerning their unholy reactions to peasant behavior (38).[\[25\]](#)

The Household, Gender Roles, and Parables' Portrayal of Women

Only nine female characters appear in a cast of one hundred and eight characters in the parables. This domination of male characterization in the parables cannot be easily brushed aside.[\[26\]](#) On the other hand, John H. Elliott demonstrates that the narrative of Luke-Acts contrasts the household with the Temple in Jerusalem.[\[27\]](#) The parable of the Pharisee and the Toll Collector depicts the Temple as the place where social and religious differences are demarcated; the household is the place where God's promises are realized (213–214). This contrast is seen throughout Luke-Acts: the Temple, with its exclusivist holiness ideology, hierarchical stratified social order, and exploitative economic redistribution proves incapable of mediating the inclusive salvation envisioned by the prophets. The households of Jesus' followers, though, are communities of "brothers and sisters" which embody repentance, faith, forgiveness, generosity, mercy, and justice, all within a social unity of generalized reciprocity (234–239).

In antiquity the household was the basic building block of society and the dominant economic unit. The household had important political, social, religious, and economic implications and became the model for social forms of communal life. A system of roles constitutes most family relationships inside the household, and Stuart Love's macrosociological analysis of the household in the Gospel of Matthew examines the role of gender in these relationships.[\[28\]](#) Matthew presupposes a rigid, hierarchical, authority-centered social structure largely based on the paradigm of the household. The social stratification in Matthew reflects the advanced agrarian society in which it was written, a society which has a crystallized, hierarchical, male-dominated social order (22). Within the marriage relationship, women are usually subordinate, seen as inferior to men, and possess few rights. The domestic care of the household is the wife's world in which she pleases her husband by preparing food and clothing, which enhances his status among his peers. The public realm, on the other hand, primarily belongs to men. Because of the separation of the public and private realms, women do not usually participate in political, educational, or public religious functions (23). Although Matthew presents some significant deviations from this gender-role norm, it does not burst the societal boundaries of the household (26–27).

In a later article, Love notes that although there were expected "public roles" for men and "private roles" for women in ancient societies, recent studies now stress the "complementarity" in these relationships. Women exercised "informal public power" (e.g., the use of gossip) to affect (indirectly) male public decisions and behavior (54).[\[29\]](#)

The kingdom of heaven parables in Matthew 13 are located "outside the house" (13:1) and then "in the house" (13:36), a public/private spatial distinction which divides the discourse. In both places,

however, only the disciples enter into dialogue with Jesus; the crowds remain silent. The public teachings contain four parables that might have been for a "mixed multitude" (i.e., including women). The first three involve outdoor agricultural activities: the Sower (13:3–9, 18–23), the Weeds (13:24–30), and the Mustard Seed (13:31–32). The fourth, the Leaven (13:33), compares the growth of the kingdom to a domestic procedure, a woman hiding leaven in flour — a stereotypical feminine role. The teachings of Jesus to the disciples in private are appropriate for a male audience (60–61).

Even though the male disciples reflect the social realities of advanced agrarian societies and have the authority to teach and lead the church, there is an important difference: the paradigm for faith and service is found among women and other marginalized persons scattered throughout Matthew. This new male hierarchy, Love concludes, eschews patriarchal authoritarianism. The presence of women in the crowds opens a real but limited alternative: the Matthean Jesus acknowledges their presence, considers them worthy, treats them as persons, and receives their hospitality and ministry. Thus there exists a new inclusion in a hierarchy that is based on the old androcentric social framework, but, in Matthew, women unfortunately still "watch from a distance" (63).

Alicia Batten agrees that women in antiquity generally were the most active within the domestic realm, but she points to evidence that some women took on more public roles during the New Testament era.^[30] In addition, she concurs that a woman in antiquity had some informal power over her husband and exercised limited control over his public actions (45). The woman orders the house, raises the children, and assumes many financial tasks. Most importantly, the woman upholds male honor not only through her sexual purity, but also in acts of hospitality. In addition, she can subtly manipulate opinion by informal gossip networks in the village community — a type of power never acknowledged in male-authored literature (45).

In her study of the "Q source," Batten readily admits that its language is androcentric. Women appear hiding yeast in dough, grinding meal, and being married, but only as men see them. Yet parables concerning men are paired with parables concerning women (e.g., Mustard Seed; Leaven), which seems to be a deliberate attempt to address both men and women (47–48). Further, the parables of the Leaven and the Mustard seed "liberate" these symbols from their "unclean" status by turning them into metaphorical ingredients of the kingdom of God. Indirectly they place value on both the woman's and man's activity, which is especially significant because an acknowledgment of women's labor is unusual in patriarchal societies (48). Thus we catch parabolic glimpses of a more inclusive environment for women in a predominantly patriarchal society.^[31]

Carol Schersten LaHurd also takes a cautiously optimistic view of these androcentric texts in her article concerning the "lost women" in the parables of Luke 15.^[32] LaHurd rereads the parables of Luke 15 through the eyes of Arab Christian women in modern Yemen — a test case to demonstrate the rewards and difficulties inherent in applying contemporary models from cultural anthropology to New Testament texts. She encounters some striking differences in interpretations. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, for example, the Yemeni women had much more empathy with the older brother and observed that it was typical for the youngest child to be lazy and irresponsible. Even more striking was their interpretation of the father's actions. Most modern commentators stress the unexpected acceptance of the errant son when he returns. These women, however, understood the family as the location of unconditional care and were not surprised at the father running out to give his son a loving welcome (67). LaHurd surmises that these women see fathers "as they are, not so much as they wish to be seen" (70). The absence of female characters in the parable was also of little concern to these women. They viewed the mother's role as being inside the home, whereas it was the father's role to be "outside" and welcome the son back home.

LaHurd concludes that the negative assessments of the role and status of women in Luke's Gospel are significantly guided by Western cultural assumptions about what constitutes status and power for both men and women, as well as the modern tendency to give primacy to the public sphere (71). Peasant societies, in contrast, see household gender roles as complementary. Orderly household management and effective raising of children appear to have a worth equal to the more typically male role of

earning the family income in the public realm. In such cultures women control some aspects of things most valued by men — honor, children, and a happy, well-organized household (72).[\[33\]](#)

Diane Jacobs-Malina, in her book *Beyond Patriarchy*,[\[34\]](#) argues that the image of Jesus presented in the Gospels is analogous to the idealized role of the wife/mother (of the absent husband/father), because Jesus' primary role was to create and maintain the household of God on earth (1–2). The feminine/domestic aspects of the image of Jesus in the Gospels have been suppressed by the selective inattentiveness of male scholars. A closer look demonstrates that Jesus found the idealized role of women to be more amenable to the designs of God: nurture, healing, and restoration. Thus he chose these values and goals which support the domestic sphere as the ones around which the (male) public sphere should be organized in relation to both men and women (177–118).

Jacobs-Malina's study provides an essential critique of the traditional, androcentric theological interpretations of Jesus' life and message. Similar assessments can be seen in the work of some of the male scholars mentioned above. Halvor Moxnes's investigation of the patron-broker-client relationship notes that Jesus transformed the traditional concept of patronage by identifying greatness with serving, rather than being served. Douglas Oakman describes the kingdom of God as being built on general reciprocity as a means of reestablishing kinship among all peoples. And John Elliott finds general reciprocity in the domestic associations of Acts within a community of "brothers and sisters."

All of these descriptions are imperfect analogies, but each one attempts to portray the image of a loving God who joyfully runs out to meet prodigal children. To most modern readers from the United States, the patriarchal household reflected in these texts is clearly oppressive to women. On the other hand, from a more emic perspective, women from modern Yemen can see their personal and social realities positively portrayed. As LaHurd observes, women and men socialized and educated in the industrialized West may not be the best judges as to what constitutes oppression in other societies (72). Yet, as Herzog notes, victims of oppression often internalize the world as understood by their oppressors even through the language system that is imposed upon them (19).

These complex issues cannot be decided here, but they are critical ones for modern interpreters of the parables. Some scholars, for example, still seek to reaffirm the patriarchal traditions found in biblical texts,[\[35\]](#) so these texts continue to be (ab)used to justify the oppression of women.

For a growing number of Christians, however, this approach is extremely inadequate, and the gap between these ancient texts and modern society grows wider. No longer can many Christians depend upon cultural analogies of ancient societies to portray the activity of God. Yet the standards of the kingdom of God as depicted in Jesus' parables, while incorporating elements of that patriarchal system, actually provide a devastating critique of that system. Those higher standards, even while seen within their social system, may also serve as criteria by which all social systems are to be evaluated.[\[36\]](#) In the words of Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza: "Thus liberation from patriarchal structures is not only explicitly articulated by Jesus but is in fact the heart of the proclamation of the *basileia* of God."[\[37\]](#)

Conclusion

We utilize models that give us partial glimpses of these ancient cultures — important glimpses that sometimes include the "voices of the silenced" — and these insights demonstrate the great cultural differences that divide us from ancient Mediterranean peoples. Such knowledge is instructive, but can be destructive in the sense that previous suppositions and "certainties" are torn down. But what then? The gap between then and now has widened, and as Carolyn Osiek states, "the bridge is not long enough" to cross the interpretive chasm (113).

On the other hand, as Osiek also notes, for non-Western persons the cultural and social contexts may suddenly become more familiar now that the Western, post-enlightenment framework undergirding

most New Testament study is illuminated and (partly) dismantled. We do not have to anachronize Jesus' parables to make them relevant. The challenge is to modernize them authentically.

Social-scientific criticism allows us to understand better the first-century social, cultural, and historical contexts of the parables, but part of what it also teaches us, as do recent literary approaches, is that achieving the status of an "objective observer" is an elusive chimera which can never be captured by any interpreter. Pieces of the puzzle will still be missing; parables remain recalcitrant and delightfully enigmatic. But armed with the knowledge gained from social-scientific criticism, we can begin to understand the writings from other cultures and ages more fully and can avoid much of the patronizing interpretations that have pervaded many studies in the past.

[1] For cogent analyses of this development, see Carolyn Osiek, *What Are They Saying About the Social Setting of the New Testament?*, rev. ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992); and John H. Elliott, *What Is Social-Scientific Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

[2] Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976). See also his *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

[3] Like Jeremias, Bailey had lived in the Middle East and was able to incorporate many cultural insights in his work. A comparison of their interpretations of the Good Samaritan (*Through Peasant Eyes*, 33–56) finds many similarities (e.g., the assumption that an ancient hearer would have expected an Israelite layperson to be the third person coming down the road; 47).

[4] As noted by William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech* (Louisville: WJKP, 1994), 54.

[5] The necessity of clarifying these ideological boundaries is made clear by Vernon K. Robbins in his *Jesus the Teacher*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992), xxxviii. Such methodological ambiguity spills over into Bailey's literary analyses. It is not clear, for example, whether he is more concerned about the parables' literary audience (e.g., *Poet*, 87, 108) or the historical audience (e.g., *Poet*, 139–141).

[6] Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

[7] The first group of parables focuses on aspects of social relations. Social exchanges were organized around the family as the central social unit, and social organization moved out in concentric circles from the family unit. These artifacts of daily life were often used to symbolize the larger transcendent values of life. The second group of parables embodies the model of patron-client relationships as organizations of power exchanges, which, in Jesus' parables, usually involve a test between master and servant. The third group of parables invests the artifacts of daily life with "metaphorical and symbolic significance" (73–74).

[8] The term comes from Paulo Freire, a modern Brazilian educator (16–29). Herzog's brief critique of the facade of an "objective observer" is one of the most cogent I have read (15–16). Thus Herzog brings his own ideological perspective into the open, a move which should be applauded and emulated, even if one does not agree with his perspective or his interpretations of specific parables.

[9] For males, shame is a negative value that involves the loss of honor. For females, however, shame is a positive value of sensitivity to and defense of honor. The literature is vast, but see especially, J. G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1966); J. G. Peristiany and Julian Pitt-Rivers, eds., *Honour and Grace in Mediterranean Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Frank Henderson Stewart, *Honor* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994). For applications to New Testament studies, see, for example, Bruce Malina and Jerry Neyrey, "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World," in Jerry Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 25–65.

[10] Carolyn Osiek, *Social Setting*, 26.

[11] "Ascribed honor," on the other hand, is derived from birth or inheritance, and it situates you into your appropriate place in the social hierarchy.

[12] What Malina and Neyrey do not make explicit are the additional reasons the lawyer is shamed. Not only does he lose the honor/shame contest, it becomes clear to the people standing around that since the lawyer already knew the answer (10:27), he was only trying to put Jesus to the test — something the narrator already made clear to the readers (10:25).

[13] Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 79–97. For a critique of Herzog's analysis, see V. George Shillington, "Saving Life and Keeping Sabbath (Matthew 20:1b–15) in *Jesus and His Parables*, ed. V. George Shillington (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 87–101. Shillington argues that Herzog pays too little attention to the subjects in the parable who did not have a full day's wage. Shillington thus has a more positive view of the landowner who "learned from his trip to the marketplace at the end of the day that gross inequality of life exists between worker and worker, and between the workers and himself" (98). One wonders, however, if Shillington has accurately gauged just how new and shocking this information would be to a first-century landowner. Cf. Herzog's statement about the elite "despising" peasants (69).

[14] Herzog notes that the "excess" children (i.e., those who cannot be fed) of peasant farmers and others constitute members of the "expendables." The percentage of expendables ranged from 5% to 15% of the population. The elites in the ancient world squeezed the dwindling resources of the peasants through taxation and other forms of redistribution, so these persons were forced into the most degrading and lethal form of poverty. Herzog estimates that they typically lived no more than five to seven years after entering this class, but many more came to take the place of those who died (65–66).

[15] John H. Elliott, "Matthew 20:1–15: A Parable of Invidious Comparison and Evil Eye Accusation," *BTB* 22 (1992) 52–65.

[16] For succinct definitions of *emic* and *etic*, see Elliott, *What is Social-Scientific Criticism?*, 129. No modern interpreter, of course, can truly take a fully emic perspective.

[17] This chapter title is a reference to Henry J. Cadbury's important critique of interpreters' anachronizing tendencies in *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus* (London: Macmillan, 1937).

[18] Halvor Moxnes, "Patron-Client Relations and the New Community in Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 241–268.

[19] Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1986). See also his "The Ancient Economy in the Bible," *BTB* 21 (1991) 34–39.

[20] An elite, on the other hand, would consider such labor as shameful.

[21] Oakman cites several sources (176–193) which seem to indicate that Jesus, before his public ministry, would have been under great pressure to travel to nearby urban areas, such as Sepphoris or

Tiberias, in order to find enough work to provide for his family (i.e., mother and siblings).

[22] Douglas E. Oakman, "Was Jesus a Peasant?: Implications for Reading the Samaritan Story (Luke 10:30–35)," *BTB* 22 (1992) 117–125.

[23] Douglas E. Oakman, "The Countryside in Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 151–179.

[24] Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "A Peasant Reading of the Parable of the Talents/Pounds: A Text of Terror?," *BTB* 23 (1993) 32–39.

[25] See also Rohrbaugh's intriguing reading of the Prodigal Son in his "A Dysfunctional Family and Its Neighbors (Luke 15:11b–32)" found in the collection of various essays in *Jesus and His Parables* (141–164). Rohrbaugh envisions this parable, as he does many parables of Jesus, as a story where people break all the conventional rules of honor: a foolish father divides his estate while alive, runs to rescue a shameless son, and begs another son bent on humiliating him in public. Because of peasant society's exaltation of social conformity, the well being and future of the entire extended family is at stake.

[26] Noted by Nicola Slee, "Parables and Women's Experiences," *Religious Education* 80 (1985) 232–245. Domestic affairs are also rarely mentioned.

[27] John H. Elliott, "Temple Versus Household in Luke-Acts: A Contrast in Social Institutions," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, 211–240.

[28] Stuart L. Love, "The Household: A Major Social Component for Gender Analysis in the Gospel of Matthew," *BTB* 23 (1993) 21–31.

[29] Stuart L. Love, "The Place of Women in Public Settings in Matthew's Gospel: A Sociological Inquiry," *BTB* 24 (1994) 52–65.

[30] Alicia Batten, "More Queries for Q: Women and Christian Origins," *BTB* 24 (1994) 44–51.

[31] The Q community was not unique in this inclusion (e.g., other groups such as the Jewish *Therapeutae* were similar in this regard), but it is unusual.

[32] Carol Schersten LaHurd, "Rediscovering the Lost Women in Luke 15," *BTB* 24 (1994) 66–76.

[33] Women have "informal power," but LaHurd agrees with Kathleen Corley that their power was ultimately derivative in nature and more a matter of influence rather than direct control (71). See Kathleen Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 454–456. LaHurd concludes, however, that the parables of Luke 15 bring together both public and private, male and female realms into one narrative of celebration.

[34] Diane Jacobs-Malina, *Beyond Patriarchy* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1993).

[35] See the categorization of the four basic approaches to women and the New Testament in scholarship by Carolyn Osiek in "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 93–105.

[36] See Jacobs-Malina, *Beyond Patriarchy*, 9.

[37] Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads

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