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## **Wealth in People, Wealth in Things: a Materialistic Reading of Luke 16:1-9**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how Luke presents Jesus as a Graeco-Roman orator who employs parables as a rhetorical tool to define a new socioeconomic order for the early Christians. It focuses on wealth and poverty as an interpretive paradigm for the text, Luke 16:1–9. It suggests that this parable mirrors unequal socioeconomic statuses in first-century Roman Palestine, where a few elites created wealth in things (material wealth) via the exploitation and violation of the poor majority. The article argues that Luke's description of the client's shrewd action, his master's commendation, and the narrator's charge in Luke 16:1–9 reconciles the two opposing sources of wealth in Roman Palestine: wealth in things and wealth in people. The article suggests that the parable portrays wealth as holistic, encompassing both cash/commodities and socioeconomic justice. Thus, the parable aims to challenge the dominant Graeco-Roman values, encouraging a community of mutual dependence between the rich and the poor. The article concludes with some theological and hermeneutical reflections on potential responses to the problem of wealth in Africa.

## Introduction

The attention that the narrative in Luke 16:1–9 has received in scholarship may lead one to believe that there is nothing more to say about it. Bailey’s interpretation, critiqued by Bidnell (2011:188), posits that the parable portrays the ‘master [as] God, who generously, not foolishly, refrains from jailing his steward initially and continues to extend his mercy following the steward’s action in reducing the debts’. Except in the materialistic interpretation of what this parable is, very few, if any, would argue against this.

By comparing the socioeconomic and material conditions of the ancient world with those of the contemporary economy, this materialistic interpretation draws attention to the problem of wealth inequality and the detrimental consequences of prioritising commodities as a source of wealth over the well-being of the entire population (Hombana 2024a:6). Thus, the significance of the theme is enhanced by its usage in a number of circumstances. This connects the parable to a broader area of study that eventually supports Luke’s theme of wealth and poverty.

Most scholars have taken Bailey’s interpretation on board but do not see it as withdrawing the parable from its socioeconomic setting. However, Bidnell’s (2011:189) meticulous research, for instance, contends that this interpretation ‘removes the [parable] from its immediate social setting, with the result that questions regarding patrons and clients, such as exploitation [of people for wealth acquisition], indebtedness and survival are cast aside as irrelevant’. In response to Bidnell’s call to employ socioeconomic relations in ancient Roman Palestine as an interpretive framework, Yusufu Turaki (1999:122) identifies key components of the domains of wealth ‘production and accumulation’ or ‘exchange and consumption’, particularly in his description of a ‘wealthy individual doing business with merchants’ in things such as livestock, family land, and bridal wealth, ‘while the steward’ acquires wealth in people, ‘having to’ reconcile the matter of wealth, production, and prosperity with the moral and cosmological order ‘by satisfying those both above and below him’.

While detailed attention has been given to the steward’s unjust behaviour, the charge by the master, ‘Καὶ ἐγὼ ὑμῖν λέγω, ἑαυτοῖς ποιήσατε φίλους ἐκ τοῦ μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας, ἵνα ὅταν ἐκλίπη δέξωνται ὑμᾶς εἰς τὰς αἰωνίους σκηνάς’

(Luke 16:9, UBS4), in Luke 16:9, appears less problematic in scholarship. In this article, I argue that the verse itself provides us with a key to understanding Luke's theme of wealth creation and poverty. Noting the charge as it is used in this parable, I suggest that Luke portrays the client's action, the master's approval, and the narrator's charge in Luke 16:1–9 as reconciling two opposing sources of wealth, 'sociality and solidarity' and 'cash and commodities' (Ijatuyi-Morphé 2009:72), in the first century, and also propose how the Lucan Jesus' parable challenges the dominant Graeco-Roman values, encouraging a community of mutual dependence between the rich and the poor.

With a focus on the subject of wealth and poverty in ancient Roman Palestine, let us now examine the interpretive paradigm for the narrative in Luke 16:1–9. This study looks at themes from the writings of numerous scholars and draws on previous work to clarify the significance of the theme within its context. Discoveries are given as the subject serves as a lens through which the narrative in Luke 16:1–9 is viewed and understood. The article's conclusion provides hermeneutical and theological reflections on the theme's components within the Nigerian setting.

## **Wealth and Poverty in Ancient Roman Palestine**

In the preceding section, we hinted at the significance of interpreting Luke's parables within the socioeconomic setting of ancient Roman Palestine and how it serves as a key to reading and understanding the parable in Luke 16:1–9. The significance of the theme of wealth and poverty is primarily understood in the context of the pervasive idea of unequal economic status that was prevalent in first-century Roman Palestine. The fundamental issue that often surfaces here concerns the relative inequality of wealth. In a moment we shall return to this subject. With respect to wealth and poverty in ancient Rome, Malina and Rohrbaugh (2003:400) explain,

Wealth and poverty are integral to the honor-shame culture culture, where to be called poor represents the incapacity to uphold and defend a particular social status, and to be called rich represents greed and the capacity to deny others what is rightfully theirs.

Accordingly, we may draw the same conclusion as Malina and Rohrbaugh (2003:400) that, at least for the poor, the acquisition and accumulation of money in ancient Roman Palestine were not equal, since most scholars argue that one's access to 'wealth is limited'.

Bidnell (2011:208) sees a historical development in the functions of wealth and poverty in ancient Roman Palestine; central to wealth procurement is the idea of 'limited' access to wealth, whereby one person's gain necessarily means 'someone [else] is being deprived and denied something that is his'. The unequal distribution of wealth that existed in ancient society, between the rich and the poor, preceded the later development of the modern concept of wealth disparity in a socioeconomic sense. Bidnell (2011:150) observes that in the first century AD the 'capacity of wealth to offer security, well-being and freedom' did not yet exist. If wealth arbitrarily cannot offer security, food and water supply, or collective well-being, then Luke's gospel aims to reverse such a notion, by redefining wealth, using the parable in Luke 16:1–9. Thus, when people become rich, they use the notion that wealth is limited, have decided to keep and guard it, and have thus made themselves superior; in this way, 'for the amount of such property sufficient in itself for a good life is not unlimited' (Aristotle, *Politics*, III.9).

It may also be noted that this notion of wealth limitation appears central to the discourse on poverty in ancient Roman Palestine, with its stress on the prevalent attitude of the poor in ancient Roman Palestine – a category developed by Foster (1967:304). Now, according to Foster (1967:304) regarding the poor, which must include in ancient Roman Palestine, their behaviours are patterned in such a way as to suggest means of livelihood such as 'land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety' – and food, education, and employment – '*exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply [...] Not only do these and all other 'good things' exist in finite and limited quantities, but in addition there is no way directly within peasant power to increase the available quantities*'. (Foster 1967:304, emphasis original).

However, the basic idea expressed by the idea of limited wealth is to allow the rich to be richer and the poor to be poorer. The rich and the poor are thus brought together in an unhealthy competition – the rich uphold their position

by storing up their excess wealth while the poor pursue social justice and equitable wealth distribution (Hombana 2024a:5). The point of departure here is that one can only become rich by adopting the role of an ancient trickster. Jerome examines the reputation of the rich in ancient Roman Palestine. He notes that 'Every rich person is a thief or the heir of a thief' (*Hieremiam* II.V.2). In the same vein, Malina (1981:84) and Oakman (1991:159) both note that the rich adopt a defensive tactic fixated on upholding their existing social status instead of seeking to improve it. This then could suggest that the rich who jostled the poor in ancient Roman Palestine gained their wealth from the unequal relations they had with the society that surrounded them. The key point then in Malina's description of the rich is the argument that their means of wealth manifest greed. In this context, the rich are seen as evil persons. Such a presumption that one person's wealth increases at the expense of another's carries with it the view that wealth itself is inherently evil. This point leads to a basic issue regarding the source of wealth in ancient Roman Palestine: in people or things?

Malina (1981:75) returns to Foster's proposition to argue that the idea of 'limited good' includes 'all the desired things in life [...] literally all goods in life', but in a way that also implied the economic hardship which ancient Roman societies exhibited; all of this is premised on the existence of the rich, a social and economic minority group who enjoyed a life of ease and indulgence. Under such arrangements, as Luz (2007:189-90) shows, 'according to Semitic usage 'poor' means not only those who have no money but in a wider sense also the oppressed, wretched, dependent, [and] humiliated. [...] The general rule is that the [poor one] has to work, the [destitute one] has to beg'.

It is against this backdrop that Luz judges that neither the 'poor', who, through manual labour, can make out a living, nor even the 'destitute', whose prevalence was noted amongst early Christians as people who were reduced to begging, who had lost any standing in society, who had no means, no family, or any social connections, were able to enjoy a life of ease and indulgence. Luz (cited in Neyrey 1998:171) concludes: 'The poor often end up destitute as a result of loss of land to the rich'. He traces the evident condition of the poor through several realities, attesting that wealth in ancient Roman Palestine implied exploitation, violation, greed, and social injustice. Thus, the

inequitable wealth distribution in ancient Roman Palestine leads Hombana (2024a:3) to posit, reflecting Luz's evidence, that

Jewish society in the 1st century CE was characterised by a diverse range of social and economic classes. There were wealthy landowners and merchants, as well as many who lived in poverty. Disputes over inheritances and property were not uncommon, as is evident from the situation presented in [a case] whereby someone asks Jesus to intervene in a family inheritance dispute.

We seem, then, to have come full circle in trying to show how the rich in the first century might have defined themselves in relation to the poor, whereby material accumulation was prioritised without the 'enhancement of collective well-being and the harmonious integration of spiritual values' (Hombana 2024a:6). The relative struggle experienced by the poor in this unequal relationship is, perhaps, nowhere more evident than in their designation of the rich as evil. While the evidence of Hombana firmly supports the notion that the rich (generally as tricksters hoarding wealth and possessions among the poor) did come to the attention of Jesus (Luke 12:13–21), the evidence of Luke 16:1–9 would seem to depict another scenario.

It appears to me that the economic struggle in ancient Roman Palestine would have been occasioned instead by two contrasting sources of wealth: wealth in things and wealth in people. We may hypothesise here about the nature of the relations between the rich and the poor, along with their respective designations. Significant in this respect is the charge to the steward in Luke 16:9. The charge occurs within a context where the master is characterised by excessive materialism, as it resulted in breaking away from the enhancement of collective well-being; and the poor are oppressed by this. Jesus realises this and instructs his audience to make wealth in friends, due largely to societal injustice; thus, 'the parable warns against the accumulation of wealth for personal gain, aligning with the ideals of economic transformation and addressing historical injustices in the country' (Hombana 2024a:5).

## Interpreting Parables in the New Testament and Old Testament

Central to this study is an interpretation of the parable in Luke 16:1–9 and the way in which it may be used as a means to assess the validity and usefulness of poverty and wealth as an interpretative framework for reading and understanding the biblical text. It is important, therefore, that there is clarity concerning how the first century understood parables and how we can interpret and apply the lessons in our time. This discussion falls into two parts: a consideration of what may be understood by ‘parable’ and an enquiry into whether the locus of meaning is to be sought primarily in the original historical context or in the parable’s direct relevance to today.

Tolbert provides a definition in her *Perspectives on the Parables* that highlights a number of important aspects of parable interpretation in the New Testament. According to Tolbert, parables are metaphorical stories whose meaning is derived from the relationship between the story world and its suggested referent rather than from discrete allegorical features. Parables are rhetorical acts, thus their literary location, historical context, and target audience must all be taken into consideration when interpreting them. These factors all influence the impression the story aims to elicit. Their impact comes from drawing the listener into a decision-making or engagement moment where the story upends preconceptions and reorients reality (Tolbert 1979:40). She (1979:17) notes, ‘a parable is that short, unified story, embedded in a longer gospel narrative, that one chooses (or tradition has chosen) for various reasons to call a parable’.

Tolbert stresses that parables should be viewed as a supplement to other genres, such as narrative genres, even though parable obviously works in three distinct areas:

it denotes a proverb [...] it introduces a story by making clear the point of the narrative in advance [or] it illustrates a saying. (Bidnell 2011:42).

Having considered what a parable is, attention now turns to an analysis of how they function. Central to this question is how parables have been understood in the ancient world and how they should be understood by contemporary readers. Scott (1989:28) demonstrates that each gospel understands parables in a different way and that the gospel writers can be very directive in interpreting the story for the reader. For example, some parables function as figurative language, allegory, metaphor, or non-figurative language. However, all parables are about the kingdom of God. Thus, Dodd (1961:20) notes that

not only the parables which are explicitly referred to the Kingdom of God, but many others do in fact bear upon this idea, and that a study of them throws important light upon its meaning.

Interpretation of the parables raises two further significant questions. What did they mean *then*, that is, in their original setting? And what do they mean *now*, that is, in twenty-first-century African contexts? This study regards the narrative parable in Luke 16:1–9 as an open-ended story about different aspects of life in first-century Palestine. Parables are not to be read as allegories depicting something other than the content of the story, nor do they refer to some notion or concept of the kingdom of God. They are both historical artefacts, which reveal something about the society and culture of that time and place, and literary creations, which encourage the reader into an encounter with the text.

Let us move on to read the parable of the unjust client. The theme of unequal wealth accumulation provides our immediate link to the interpretation of the parable in Luke 16:1–9.

## **Reading the Parable of the Unjust Client in Luke 16:1–9**

Earlier I alluded to the functions of socioeconomic relations in ancient society. The relationship between the poor and the rich is mostly comprehended through the unequal distribution of wealth, with its accompanying limitations in accessing wealth, and this is how the poor, for instance, have largely been treated over the past centuries. A key issue that often surfaces here concerns how wealth is procured to the detriment of the poor and how respect for

human dignity is not prioritised. It is necessary, therefore, to read the parable of the unjust client in Luke 16:1–9 prospectively in relation to the socio-economic relations.

### ***Contextual Considerations***

The parable of the unjust client occurs in the larger narrative context of Luke 9:51–19:28, dubbed the Lucan travel narrative. The narrative begins in Luke 9:51. In this section Luke portrays Jesus as a Graeco-Roman orator who employs the agency of parables as a pedagogical tool to challenge the dominant Graeco-Roman socioeconomic relations by redefining wealth, poverty, and social relationships. In addition, within the travel narrative, Jesus encourages a community of mutual dependence between the rich and the poor. This theme is echoed in different parables of the Lucan gospel (Luke 14:15–24, 15:11–32). Given these webbed contexts of the unjust steward, we will explore below the meaning of the pericope under study.

In this pericope, Luke 16:1–9, the unjust client was reported by some anonymous people to his master for squandering his possessions, and both of them engaged in a dramatic conflict of interest. The unjust client was first called to give an account of his management at Luke 16:2. During this phase of the parable, the master had accumulated his wealth through material possessions (Luke 16:1), but Luke’s description of the manager’s act of wisdom suggests that wealth can be accumulated through relationships rather than just material possessions (Luke 16:9). This new socioeconomic identity is now closely defined more precisely by friendship. I have noted that Luke’s parables reflect how Jesus constructs a new socioeconomic identity for early Christians by redefining wealth, poverty, and social relationships. That new identity is now closely linked to this pericope and defined more precisely by Luke.

In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in 16:19–31, Luke provides us with a narrative parallel within the chapter itself. In the encounter following the parable of the unjust client in 19:1–9, Luke appears to give some precedent for the accumulation of wealth through relationships rather than just material possessions, however elliptical, in Lazarus and the rich man’s parable. In 16:19–31, Luke uses the name Lazarus (poor) in his encounter with the rich man. This parallel is significant, not least because it explains wealth as holistic, encompassing both cash/commodities and socioeconomic justice. It is here

that the poor are exalted and the wealthy are warned about their dependence on material possessions.

### ***The Master's Goods: Wealth in Things (verse 1)***

It is at the level of the materialistic interpretation of this pericope, Luke 16:1–9, that the theme of wealth and poverty becomes more prevalent in Luke's gospel. In verse 1, Luke presents the rich man via his wealth in things, which itself coheres well with the dominant Graeco-Roman culture of wealth in material possessions. The point here is that, given the rich man in verse 1, we may reasonably see in the text a reference to goods – entrusted to the management of his client.

Scholars have typically noted the master's goods (such as livestock, family land, and bridal wealth); within the socioeconomic context of this parable, this level of riches was characterised by exploitation, violation, greed, and social injustice in the Graeco-Roman world (Hombana 2024b:3). The wealthy man is possibly to be understood as a negative figure on account of his wealth (Combrink 1996; Kloppenborg 1989:487–488). That is, Luke aligns the rich man with the ideals of economic injustices in society and affords him the capacity to deny others what is rightfully theirs (Malina and Rohrbaugh 2003:400). While salutary, this opinion does not get to the heart of Luke's use of the theme of wealth and poverty.

It is clear that, in this verse, several things are brought to bear on the wealthy man. There is attention given to the relationship between the master and the client. There is more to be gained from asking why the master did not sell the manager as a slave but decided to dismiss him. Mann thinks that the two were in a patron-client relationship. The client serves as a commodities manager responsible for making deals and profits for his patron (Mann 1991). Indeed, they find themselves in precisely the patron-client relationship in which there is interdependence and mutual gain, though still characterised by hierarchy, inequality, and exploitation. The landowner can use the steward to make profits from the land while at the same time distancing himself from those he exploits (Herzog 1994:240–244). This then can be deduced as the patron's source of wealth, despite relationships, dependents or allies, and influence. Yet, it is material wealth in things gained by the exploitation of the poor that

the rich man prioritises. Within this social order are found certain complexes about the wealthy landowner that must be examined.

First, the master's social position of honour contrasts with that of the manager. Here we detect the socioeconomic imbalance in the ancient Graeco-Roman world. The manager was to give an account of his management to his master later; his occupation and livelihood are in jeopardy (Luke 16:2).

Second, the identity of the one who makes the initial charge against the steward remains hidden. It would seem that his attitude specifically identifies him as one who is close to the manager, whereas the identity of the reporter is left hidden, presumably suggesting that 'he could be anyone, and members of the audience may be familiar with the circumstances where they can identify who [the accuser] is' (Bidnell 2011:194). This then could mean that the manager was reported by people close to him. For example, Marshall (1978:617) observes that 'it may be that one or more characters have determined to get rid of this steward in order to usurp his position, ... Perhaps a fellow servant in the master's household has his eye on the job'.

Be that as it may, what emerges clearly from the rich man and his manager is the tension of prioritising the individual accumulation of material wealth in things over collective well-being in Luke's day, a tension to which the master himself was committed.

### ***The Master's Foolish Decision (verse 2)***

We may, then, explore more closely the master's decision to dismiss his manager – and here I think Luke provides a helpful insight into the master's just but difficult initiative and foresight. However, while the master's verdict is just in the parable, in the socioeconomic context of Lucan communities the master's verdict to his manager (Luke 16:2) would have been understood within a culture of shame. The flow of the narrative from the master's beckoning the manager (Luke 16:2) to his verdict, 'constitute[s] a significant feature of the honour and shame', or wealth and poverty, 'culture in which the story is set' (Malina and Rohrbaugh 2003:334). This verdict would have been understood as a declaration of dishonour and shame which, among other things, was reserved for those who lost their reputation in the society.

From the beginning of the parable, R. T. France (2013:489) notes that the manager was accused by people who probably wanted him to lose his job; this accusation was 'not merely of incompetence but of dishonesty (16:8)'. Be that as it may, what emerges clearly from this parable, it seems to me, is the wealthy man's verdict. For example, Bidnell (2011:195) notes that the wealthy man 'makes and announces his decision to dismiss' the client without substantiating the veracity of the charge of embezzlement 'and before he has even seen the accounts'. But perhaps more can be gained by asking why the wealthy man had made the decision at this point without waiting for his client's account. The answer, Parsons (2001:55) thinks, may be that the rich man 'wished to spare no insulting image to paint the client as a pathetic, even despicable, character [...] the image of a traitorous, small-minded and greedy [client who wanted to misappropriate wealth for himself]'. Bidnell (2011:196) effectively characterises the rich man's decision as that of someone who had been convinced to challenge and threaten the client's reputation in order to transfer his position to someone else.

The merit of this assertion may be judged by some of the extant evidence found in (traditional) societies, which suggests that such report conveyed to the master

constitutes a challenge, a significant feature of the honour and shame culture in which the story is set. Acquiring honour was often achieved by means of a [competition] in which two people of similar social status seek to increase their own personal honour by outdoing the other. The exchange is initiated by one challenging the other with a word or gesture or action, positive or negative which has the potential to undermine the other's honour. (Malina 2003:334)

Furthermore, the idea of wealth misappropriation seems to be at the heart of the discussion in Luke 16:2, which prioritises the master's financial gain and profits over the reputation and welfare of his client – a view argued by Jeremias (1972:181) and affirmed by Crossan (1992:107). According to Jane Guyer (1995), 'wealth' means power and status, as seen in this master passing verdict without confirming whether the charge against his client is true or false. This decision prioritises wealth in things over wealth in people, as it

resulted in breaking away from the enhancement of his client's well-being; and the client is oppressed by this.

However, the basic idea expressed by the idea of 'wealth in things' is that 'a wealthy man increased productivity by organising and controlling people for his selfish interest [...] (by) aggregating human dependents' (Miller 1990:251). Guyer (1995:83) describes this type of wealth as the items that people give value to, the stores they amass through various means, including extortion and exploitation, the allowances paid for their service, the 'treasures they hoard and eventually abandon, and all the intricate cultural constructs that count, glorify, and imagine these items as sources and tools of power'.

What seems to be happening in this story is that the rich man only cared about his material wealth, which depicts not just a habit of viciousness being exercised by the wealthy in society but, more likely, the dominant Graeco-Roman value of placing a higher priority on commodities as a source of wealth than on the welfare of the whole (Hombana 2024a:6).

### ***The Client's Unjust and Wise Decision (verses 3–7)***

It is necessary to view the client's unjust action in verses 3–7 in light of the master's contempt for his well-being. What is paramount here is that we hold suspect the client's lament in verse 3, 'ὅτι ὁ κύριός μου ἀφαιρεῖται τὴν οἰκονομίαν ἀπ' ἐμοῦ', that is based on the presumed distress of losing his means of survival and reputation, 'σκάπτειν οὐκ ἰσχύω, ἐπαιτεῖν αἰσχύνομαι' (Luke 19:3, UBS4). If Luke makes anything clear, it is that the client is 'determined to respond by going on the offensive and seeking to outdo the challenge voiced by his master' (Bidnell 2011:195). The response of the client to his master, then, may be equated with the opportunity to 'put his own challenge back both to his employer and to the [accuser]' (Bidnell 2011:195), who will take over his position.

The motive of the client is examined in two ways by Parrott (1991). He begins by noting, in line with Bidnell (1991:499; see also 2011:195), that the client 'does not wish to [...] beg'. This is significant because it suggests that honour and shame are central to this parable. Here, the client is begging for 'an honourable way out and must find a means of establishing some degree of honour in the challenge he throws back at his employer' (Bidnell 2011:196).

The decision occurs within a context where the rich and the poor are brought together in an unhealthy competition – the rich uphold their position by storing up their excess wealth while the destitute continue to beg and lament for equitable wealth distribution. Bidnell (2011:196) rightly sees the issue at stake here as that the ‘steward wants to avoid the “shame” of begging’, a state of relegated status. Since the client has experienced the luxury of riches and honour, the point of departure here is that he is unwilling to live in poverty once more.

In our analysis of this parable in verse 3, the second reason is crucial to our understanding. Against this large backdrop, Bidnell (2011:196) concludes that the client’s monologue reveals the ‘motivation behind the action he is about to take in an attempt to ensure his survival in the future by establishing friendships with people he has previously demanded payment of debts from’. Thus, we may safely conclude that wealth procurement and distribution between the rich and the poor in Luke’s gospel were incompatible, at least for the poor, for whom access to wealth seemed to be unattainable.

In verse 4, Malina (1981:76) sees a historical development in the socioeconomic relations of ancient Roman Palestine. The unequal relationship that exists in Lucan society, between the legal right of the poor to access material wealth and the exploitation of the poor for material possessions, created the socioeconomic context of ancient Roman Palestine. He observes that, in the first century, a unified concept of wealth in people did not yet exist. Thus, when people wanted to be rich, they used the notion that one could only become rich by adopting the role of an ancient trickster. In this way, because of the idea of ‘limited good’, one person’s gain necessarily means ‘someone [else] is being deprived and denied something’. Amidst dominant Graeco-Roman values, especially the concept of wealth in things, the client constructs a new identity for early Christians by redefining socioeconomic relations, encouraging wealth that is procured by a ‘community of mutual dependence between the rich and the poor, social justice, equitable wealth distribution, and collective well-being’ (Hombana 2024a:1).

Bidnell (2011:196) largely confirms this redefinition of wealth in ancient Roman Palestine. Indeed, the client’s ‘focus is on establishing new relationships for the future’ instead of amassing and retrieving his master’s

assets as he did in the past. The concept of wealth in people, which underlies these arguments about the client, is different from that of the master, which preceded it in the socioeconomic context of the parable. The master's wealth represented a wealth that used people as a means to an end as far as socioeconomic interaction with the poor was concerned. Wealth represented an individual's material possessions, power, and status. Wealth in people, on the other hand, contends that 'human beings could be explicitly valued in material terms' (Guyer 1995:86). The establishment of friendships provides our immediate link to the master's commendation in this parable.

### ***The Master's Commendation and Charge (verses 8–9)***

In the preceding section, we alluded to the redefinition of wealth in Luke's gospel. The client's unjust and wise decision should be comprehended under the notion of wealth in people, or friendship, with equitable wealth distribution and collective well-being, for instance, seen in the client's decision. It appears to me that the master's response here would have been occasioned by condemnation after hearing the news of such significant debt reduction. A key issue here in verse 8 concerns the relative discord of the master commending the steward for being unjust. The commendation occurs with respect to the Lucan gospel whose quest for social justice does not support the client's unjust decision. The Bible presents new Christians' '*converted* state, as having resulted in their *break away* from societal norms and practices' (Ijatuyi-Morphé 2008:67, original emphasis). This commendation would seem to justify the client's unjust action; it would also seem to be the socially calculated way to get at or take revenge against the rich.

However, with respect to the master's commendation, Fitzmyer (1965:23-42) explains that the client is not dishonest and is therefore worthy of praise. He treats the client's action as a pragmatic, reputation-preserving tactic in a crisis; the praise highlights skilful initiative, not moral approval. Fitzmyer's long treatment stresses the narrative context and rhetorical irony. He perhaps justifies the client's action, but it is unclear to the present reader. This line of interpretation gained common ground with Ireland (1992:47), who notes that the primary focus of the narrative is not a moral evaluation of the steward's integrity. Instead, the text emphasises his pragmatic drive for survival and the

strategic methods he employs to ensure his future security; an endeavour that, retains a distinct sense of social honour.

Ireland (1992:47) further notes that it is his wisdom that is praised, not his honesty or dishonesty. Such a justification cannot help but come across as advocating a sort of unfaithfulness in management. If the client's action is justified in this parable, why would the manager give loans to people without having his master know about it? Certainly, readers can resonate with elements of Fitzmyer and Ireland's line of interpretation, but injustice and unfaithfulness seem to be ringing in the air.

Be that as it may, in the socioeconomic context of ancient Roman Palestine, it is largely socioeconomic disparity and injustice that immediately strike one, especially in their wealth creation and distribution. Landry and May suggest that 'the [client] reduces the bills so that the debtors will appreciate the master's assumed generosity' (2000:309). Thus, in adopting this view, the observation would show that the client was haggling between three poles: (1) to reduce the bills and therefore make life easier for the debtors, (2) to make those who owe him acknowledge the master's supposed benefaction, and (3) to ensure his survival in the future by establishing friendships with people. Jesus emphasises this deed as a lesson in forethought. It could be characterised as social intelligence, the capacity to be relational, wise, and to take strategic action within human networks – a worldly cleverness in dealing with others.

Verses 8 to 9, which mirror the tension between the two opposing sources of wealth, may also be viewed as a form of reframing the dominant order of wealth creation in ancient Roman Palestine. With regard to their socioeconomic setting, Hombana (2024b:) notes that this parable speaks directly to a citizenry subjugated by Roman hegemony, thereby asserting the intrinsic value of individuals oppressed within contemporary economics and social structures.

By commending the client's action and the charge to 'make friends of the mammon of unrighteousness' (Luke 16:9, KJV), Carter (2000:560) notes that 'Jesus subverts the established order, positioning the downtrodden as the recipients of divine favour'. To this extent, the reconstruction and subversion

of contemporary values challenge the legitimacy of the oppressive structures and provides a framework for envisioning a just society grounded in God's kingdom, where true wealth is about loving and caring for God's people. (Hombana 2024b:4)

This line of thought is endorsed by scholars interested in materialistic reading, which illustrates how the parable resonates with the oppression and marginalisation of the communities of 'children of light by the children of this world' throughout history (verse 8). The parable offers a counter-narrative, encouraging the children of light to be tactical in securing their future. This notion is echoed by Tamez (1993), who reads the Bible from the vantage point of the poor and the oppressed. For her, the parable is primarily about social justice, structures of oppression, and God's preferential concern for the poor. She prioritises the socioeconomic context and the ethical demand the text places on wealthy and powerful actors. Similarly, Escobar (1980) maintains that this parable 'serve[s] as a call to action for the Christian community to stand in solidarity with the marginalised and to work towards the dismantling of unjust structures'.

Luke's gospel gives attention to wealth disparity against the marginalised groups, offering a framework that reconstructs and redefines the existing socioeconomic values in ancient Roman Palestine. For example, Hombana (2024b:5) notes that Luke presents 'them within a framework that challenges the socio-economic order upheld by the Roman Empire and its local collaborators. The parable serves as a poignant critique of those who benefit from and sustain the economic exploitation of the masses'. Through a materialistic lens, this parable underscores 'the inherent tension between the accumulation of wealth and the pursuit of spiritual and moral integrity within an oppressive economic system' (Hombana 2024b:5).

The client's shrewdness to create wealth in friendship highlights the moral and spiritual dangers associated with complicity in the imperial economic structures. For example, Hombana (2024b:5) continues,

This difficulty for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of Heaven underscores a broader critique of an economic order that prioritises material wealth over communal well-being and

justice. The critique of wealth in Luke's Gospel extends beyond the individual to a systemic level, calling into question the broader socio-economic structures that perpetuate inequality and exploitation. Biblical scholars argue that Luke's Gospel, through its emphasis on the difficulty for the wealthy to attain spiritual fulfilment, aligns with a broader theological narrative that champions the cause of the poor and marginalised.

## **Critical Comparison of Ancient and Contemporary Socioeconomic Relations**

The comparison between ancient Roman socioeconomic relations and those in contemporary African societies needs to be approached critically. In this article, the primary comparison is with the Nigerian context. Readers may find similar comparisons with other African contexts. While drawing parallels between the two is tempting, one must acknowledge the vast differences in their political, economic, and cultural landscapes (Smith 2020:134). In ancient Roman Palestine, socioeconomic relationships were institutionalised and formalised, often taking the shape of legal contracts, public recognition, and civic duties (Lenski 1996).

To appreciate fully the extent of this socioeconomic structure, Bidnell (2011:16) divides the category into nine levels. He notes,

At the top is the ruler, the autocrat with considerable powers, such as the Roman emperor [...] In second place, below the ruler, comes the governing class, about 1–2% of the population, made up of client kings [...], governors [...], or the religious hierarchy, such as the chief priests. In third place is the retainer class, about 5% of the population, comprising soldiers, bureaucrats and religious leaders [...] In fourth place is to be found the merchant class, not highly regarded, [...] while in fifth place comes the priestly class, the priests and Levites [...]

[I]n sixth place are the peasants who work the land and who live rurally, who are powerless and are taxed at considerable rates ranging between thirty and seventy percent of their produce. Below them, in seventh place, comes the artisan class, possibly peasants forced off their land and working for their survival in the urban centres. Jesus and the fishermen belong to this stratum. In eighth place is the unclean class, such as tanners, and in ninth place are to be found the expendables, about 5–10% of the population, landless itinerant people for whom one option is banditry.

Accordingly, we may draw the same conclusion as Malina and Rohrbaugh (2003:400), who explain, ‘to be called poor represents the incapacity to uphold and defend a particular social status, and to be called rich represents greed and the capacity to deny others what is rightfully theirs’. The unequal distribution of wealth that existed in ancient society, between the rich and the poor, preceded the later development of the modern African concept of wealth disparities.

In contrast, modern African socioeconomic relations tend to function less formally and more fluidly. In engaging this problem in contemporary Africa, culture bestrides the past and future. Ijatuyi-Morphé (2009:77, emphasis original) notes:

In (emergent) African ‘society,’ the problem of poverty/wealth has been understood on several fronts. It is often phrased or depicted in a *dualistic* way as: agriculture vs. infrastructure, rural (poverty) vs. urban (prosperity), people (= sociality and solidarity) vs. things (cash and commodities), humanizing the natural world (communalism) vs. naturalizing the human world via objects (capitalism), tropical regions vs. temperate regions, and primitive position vs. progressive orientation.

These relationships are frequently embedded in kinship networks and informal social structures. While there might still be socioeconomic classes in contemporary Nigerian society, the present issues-related poverty affects

every social class. For example, HIV/AIDS and malaria can be summarised as a problem of health that affects every social class. In a similar vein, Daniel Rikichi Kajang (2020:189) notes that ‘Africa is struggling with major health care challenges [...] African nations are still at the level of ‘disease care’ and are still struggling to provide very basic health services’.

Again, resurfacing here is the long-standing problem of food production and housing security in a country where ‘more than 50 million Nigerians are living in one-room apartments’ (Ijatuyi-Morphé 2011:318). Regarding these social/cultural challenges, Ijatuyi-Morphé (2011:318) observes, ‘Both food security and housing security are almost inconceivable of realisation without job security’. This challenge is often expressed by Africans as, and indeed also ascribed to, a ‘corruption problem’. Ijatuyi-Morphé (2011:318) probes: if food and housing security are integral to the problem of poverty in Africa, then it is not far-fetched to view corruption as a major cause of poverty and underdevelopment in Africa.

Socioeconomic justice emerges *vis-à-vis* the solution to the problem of poverty/development in Africa – an economy that does not only rest on ‘natural endowments of resources and labor’ but on ‘creat[ing] the conditions for rapid and sustained productivity growth’ (Ijatuyi-Morphé 2011:321). Indeed, this is the direction for which Ijatuyi-Morphé (2011:323) argues, as he shows how, in contemporary African societies, to be called poor is equated with ‘inappropriate use of values and beliefs’, which hinders the achievement of national prosperity, and to be wealthy is equated with ‘an appropriate use of values and beliefs which foster the achievement of national prosperity’.

This article has investigated how socioeconomic relationships in ancient Roman Palestine were often a means of survival in contexts marked by poverty, political instability, and the erosion of state services, which resemble contemporary African societies, which are more about maintaining social order and political stability within a relatively prosperous empire for the benefit of the minority elite group of that society (Carter 2008:1–14; Lee 2017:77). These contrasts give a sharp focus to how poverty and wealth adapt to different historical and political contexts (Nguyen 2018:21).

## **Hermeneutical and Theological Reflections on Luke 16:1–9 in Post-colonial African Context**

Many scholars have put forward the idea that African socioeconomic relations are similar to those of the New Testament or Graeco-Roman civilisation (Gathogo 2008; Hombana 2024a; Ijatuyi-Morphé 2008, 2009, 2011; Kaunda 2020). However, one wonders why, especially in recent biblical scholarship, a more critical approach to the study of this hermeneutical comparison between socioeconomic relations in ancient Roman Palestine and contemporary African society has been given little or no sustained attention. One could argue that this little or lack of sustained attention highlights a gap in scholarship that requires attention. One of the socioeconomic characteristics that Africa and first-century Roman Palestine have in common, particularly in their origins, interactions, and significance, is the issue of wealth and communal ethics.

The parable of the unjust client (Luke 16:1–9), for instance, has deep roots in the socioeconomic context of first-century Roman Palestine, where the procurement of wealth was mostly defined by exploitation, violation, avarice, and social injustice (Ijatuyi-Morphé 2008:67). In this context, the master's delight in material wealth and failure to protect the welfare of the client can be understood within the Lucan theme of wealth and poverty. However, Jesus' deliberate use of the poor client as one who seeks wealth in friendship challenges dominant Graeco-Roman values, encouraging a community of mutual dependence between the rich and the poor.

### ***'African Socialism' and 'Scientific Capitalism'***

In describing the overarching hermeneutical similarities between ancient and modern cultures, it is necessary to review Ijatuyi-Morphé's exploration of the sundry issues or problems within this social/cultural context. Ijatuyi-Morphé's 'The Religious Context of Poverty and Wealth in Africa' (2009) performs two main functions. Ijatuyi-Morphé first introduces the reader to the concept of 'African socialism' and 'scientific capitalism' (2009:71). He explains his frustrations with scientific capitalism, not that he is against scientific capitalism. Indeed, he will later call for the reconciliation of these two sources of wealth in biblical scholarship. He does get the feeling that there should be no disconnect between wealth and people. He writes,

In essence, it seems to me, what emerges from all this is not simply the coincidence of a discourse strategy of *subversion* or *inversion*, as both Isichei and Ferguson seem to argue. Rather, it is the need to work toward a more comprehensive analysis and solution. That is, to marry (*paradigms of discourse* (at the top/vertical level) with *development realities* (at the bottom/horizontal level). This, I suggest, will lead to a more judicious assessment of the true relation between ‘things’ and ‘people’. (Ijatuyi-Morphé 2009:74, original emphasis)

Second, Ijatuyi-Morphé delineates between scientific capitalism and African socialism. In summary, African socialism focuses on ‘moral and cosmological order’ (Ijatuyi-Morphé 2009:74), emphasising sharing, solidarity, and communal mutuality. This source of wealth creation does not view people as an end in itself and is based on mutual dependence between the rich and the poor.

The parable can be related to Ijatuyi-Morphé’s ‘moral dimension of African discourse regarding “wealth” – in people; set in the context of “African socialism” versus “scientific capitalism”’ (2009:71). The Lucan Jesus frequently addresses justice and righteousness, critiquing the scientific capitalist theory that relies on rational economic laws to justify wealth creation in ways that appear neutral, universally valid, and detached from moral, social, or religious concerns (Ferguson 2006:70). For example, in Luke 16,

Jesus condemns the hypocrisy of the master, who burden[s] the client with his goods and commodity while failing to practice mercy. This critique extends to economic practices, advocating for fairness and the protection of the vulnerable against imperial exploitation. (Hagner 1993:113)

Creation of wealth through the act of friendship in Luke, such as in Luke 16:1–9, ‘extend[s] beyond personal virtues, functioning as acts of resistance against the economic oppression of the Roman Empire’ (Hombana 2024b:5). Jesus’ teachings emphasise respect for human dignity and the *imago Dei*, contrasting with the scientific capitalism theory that dominates the modern African society

– ‘the elite, who used such acts to elevate their social status and maintain power’ (Hombana 2024b:5). For instance, while the wealthy often used people to secure favour or assert dominance, Jesus encourages an ethic of kindness and solidarity, where matters of wealth creation are reconciled with moral and cosmological order from communal wellbeing ‘rather than self-promotion. This promotes an alternative communal ethic, prioritising the welfare of the poor and fostering a sense of equality and resistance to the social hierarchies imposed by both Roman and local authorities’ (Hombana 2024b:5). Examples of this, as noted by Hombana (2024b:5), ‘include communal sharing among early Christian communities (Ac 2:44–45) and mutual aid networks that provided for the needs of the marginalised, which further emphasised a countercultural model of economic justice’.

The parable focuses on the ways in which, as James Ferguson (2006:71) proposes, the ‘moral and cosmological order might be reconciled with issues of wealth, productivity, and prosperity’. Four elements make up this cosmological ‘order’, according to Yusufu Turaki (199:123), ‘cosmic harmony; spiritual meaning; mystical/spirit powers; and kinship community’. This reconciliation of cosmological order is made evident in the client’s decision to reduce the bills and therefore make life easier for the debtors, to make the debtors appreciate the master’s assumed generosity, and to ensure his survival in the future by establishing friendships with people. As a result of the client’s decision (Luke 16:3–7), Ijatuyi-Morphé (2009:72) notes that the master’s areas of ‘production, accumulation, or exchange and consumption (such as livestock, family land, and bridal wealth) acquire a profoundly social significance and are imprinted with moral values’. The parable shows that, as Ijatuyi-Morphé (2009:72) identifies in African discourse, “‘cash and commodities” (= *things*) and “sociality and solidarity” (= *people*) [...] depict two contrasting “realms” or “domains”, and consequently, two different types of “wealth” or “prosperity”.’

In this parable, African socialism emerges fundamentally opposed to scientific capitalism ‘avoiding the emergence of social classes within society; integrating African identity and what it means to be African; and economic development [characterised by mutual dependence and] directed by a large public sector’. (Friedland and Rosberg 1964:20). For example, Senghor (1964:165) asserts that African socialism, ‘we must assimilate, not be assimilated’. Senghor

(1964:29) then argues that socialist structure already existed in African community before the arrival of the colonialist. He writes, ‘...Africans had already realized socialism before the coming of Europeans ...but we must renew it by helping it to regain a spiritual dimension’. According to Senghor (1964:14), African Socialism in all its forms, differs from the theory of scientific capitalism because Africa’s social background of tribal community life not only makes socialism natural to Africa but excludes the validity of the theory of class struggle.

In this regard, Ferguson (2006:75) sums up Senghor’s position: ‘The key oppositions [...] were not primarily between rival economic systems or modes of production, but between conflicting moral orientations: selfishness versus sharing, exploitation versus solidarity, individual acquisitiveness versus communal mutuality’. Consequently, the parable urges wealth in people and wealth things be reconciled; as Ferguson (2006:74) argues, a recurring African idea ‘is not that the human world is ruled by powerful objects, but that [...] the world, even the natural, bears the traces of *human* agency’. This parable opposes the prioritisation of cash and commodities over the human world where, as Ferguson (2006:74) argues against capitalist fetishism, ‘capitalism naturalizes the human world by imputing powers to objects’, or prioritising cash and social commodities.

What comes out of this narrative is not just a coincidental discussion about how to reconcile wealth, production, and prosperity with moral and cosmological order, as both Ijatuyi-Morphé and Turaki seem to contend. Rather, it is the need to strive for a democratic society that is equitable, inclusive, and based on mutual dependence.

### ***Reframing Wealth: The Influence of Ubuntu***

The shift in Jesus’ parable – from the master’s wealth in things without caring for the client’s welfare (Luke 16:1) to the client’s wealth in friendship with people (Luke 16:3–9) – is significant. This orientation aligns with the African concept of *Ubuntu*, which emphasises collective well-being and mutual dependence (Tutu 1999:35). *Ubuntu*, often summarised as ‘I am because we are’, prioritises communal well-being over individual legalism, mirroring Jesus’ portrayal of salvation as holistic, encompassing both spiritual transformation and socioeconomic justice (Shutte 2001:12).

In many African communities, however, prioritising commodities over collective well-being still functions as the source of wealth, exploitation, violation, and the unequal distribution of wealth, much like the struggle between the rich and the poor in the first century (Kaunda 2020:415). Jesus' parable thus serves as a radical critique of unequal wealth distribution, exploitation, greed, violation, and social injustice, guiding African Christians toward a just, inclusive, and spiritually grounded democratic society (Hombana 2024a:1).

### ***Wealth and the Challenge of Kidnappings for Ransom in Nigeria***

A crucial aspect of the client's action is the decision he takes to reduce the bills and therefore make life easier for the debtors, to make the debtors appreciate the master's assumed generosity, and to ensure his survival in the future by establishing friendships with people. In first-century Palestine, wealth is secured by adopting the role of an ancient trickster; one person's gain necessarily entails another's loss (Malina 1981:71–93). Similarly, in contemporary African societies, certain forms of greed, exploitation, and violation of human dignity for financial gain may carry heavy consequences. The parable challenges African communities to consider the cost of life and human dignity and the consequences involved in violating human dignity (Okure 1988:77).

For instance, in Nigeria, kidnapping people for ransom and beheading people for the so-called money ritual have led to violations of human dignity (Landau 2012:67). The client's actions challenge these prejudices by demonstrating that wealth must be secured through love and respect for the collective well-being of people and society. The implication for African Christian ethics is clear: true wealth is not about the 'treasure we hoard' (Guyer 1995:83) but is about loving and caring for God's people through building a community of mutual dependence between the rich and the poor, social justice, equitable wealth distribution, and collective well-being (Hombana 2024a:1).

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