

## Abraham, Wealth, and Social Identity in Luke 16:19–31

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### Abstract

*This article presents Abraham as a social identity marker in Luke 16:19–31 (the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man) by using elements of social identity theory to analyse Abraham’s role in the parable. After an introduction to elements of Social Identity Theory (SIT) that are relevant to the discussion, the analysis shows how they relate to the characters in the pericope. Significantly, the essay examines how a character might be expected to function in relation to Abraham as an exemplar, and how the characters in the parable have acted with reference to Abraham as an exemplar for the social group “Children of Abraham”. A further theme of wealth disparity is put on display vividly in this parable, therefore, the discussion also deals with how wealth and wealth inequality affect one’s social identity with reference to the group, “Children of Abraham”. It ends with a summary that ties all these ideas together.*

**Keywords:** Abraham; Social Identity Theory; Luke; Gospels

### Introduction

This essay considers how Abraham functions as a social identity marker in Luke 16:19–31, the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. It begins with an introduction to Social Identity Theory (SIT), followed by a synopsis of Luke’s general use of Abraham as a social identity marker throughout Luke-Acts and in the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man specifically.

Furthermore, this essay examines how wealth affects the social identities of the characters in the parable and how the improper use of wealth can lead to a negative social identity. With reference to Abraham, the discussion focuses on how the use of wealth conforms to what it means to be part of the social group, “Children of Abraham”.

Social Identity Theory derives largely from experiments performed by a Polish psychologist named Henri Tajfel. The theory attempts to describe intergroup relations, with one significant finding that people tend to be heavily biased towards their own groups over outgroups, even if the groups are put together for seemingly insignificant reasons (Tajfel et al. 1971; Tajfel & Billig 1974:168). Shared beliefs are also an important factor. These beliefs, which are not always entirely intellectual, are held in common by members of the group, and these shared beliefs bind the members of the group together (Bar-Tal 2007:1435). These commonly held beliefs can in extreme cases lead to protracted conflict—each group holds common memories (which tend to be selective

memories) shaped by their own group, with members believing that their group is in the right and the other group is in the wrong (Bar-Tal 2007:1436–1438).

### **Social identity terminology**

Kuecker (2011:48–50) offers some important SIT terminologies for studying the New Testament. Here, we will list a few that are relevant to the present discussion, namely:

Terminal Identity – The social identity that one sees as one’s most important identity.

Status Illegitimacy – Belief that a group’s status, particularly a high status of another group, is held illegitimately.

Exemplar – One who embodies the values of their group well and whose example is to be followed.

Group Entitlement – Something a person can expect to have the right to receive due to membership in a particular social group.

### **Contribution of Social Identity Theory**

The field of SIT has a valuable contribution to make to New Testament study. There is a tendency in modern times to think in more individualistic terms, whereas the New Testament authors thought in more collectivistic terms (Malina 2001:59–62). Using concepts from modern psychology, SIT has the ability to help a more individualistic audience to understand the collectivistic nature of the thought patterns of the authors of the New Testament documents, thus, bridging the gap between individualistic and collectivistic thought patterns and preventing anachronistic understandings of the New Testament.

In reading the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man specifically, SIT helps in understanding the relationship between wealth and righteousness. Scholars have asked whether it is wealth in itself that disqualifies the Rich Man for entrance into Abraham’s bosom (Bauckham 1998; Brawley 2020) or whether there is merely a misuse of wealth that contributes to the Rich Man’s ultimate separation from Abraham (Marshall 1970; Hock 1987; Osborne 2018). Bringing SIT into this discussion is useful in analysing how wealth affects the social identities of the various characters. There are factors unrelated to wealth that contribute to social identity formation, but wealth is highlighted in this parable. The use of wealth and its relation to the social identities of the characters will therefore be examined in this article.

### **Structure of this essay**

The introductory discussion in this study relates to how Abraham is used in the entirety of Luke’s narrative. This section will certainly not be an exhaustive account of the use of Abraham throughout Luke-Acts, as this merits an entire study on its own. Rather, it offers only a brief overview of Abraham in Luke-Acts to show how the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man fits into the narrative as a whole. This section is not intended to be comprehensive. Rather, it intends to serve as a summary of Abraham’s function as a social identity marker within Luke-Acts as a whole in relation to how the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man fits into the narrative as a whole.

The study will then introduce the social identities present in the parable. Roman and Jewish social identities would have been in the minds of the characters and the Palestinian society at the time of Luke’s writing (as well as during the time of Jesus’

ministry) (Carter 2006:ix, 1, 15). While Romans are not directly mentioned in the parable, it is safe to suggest that Jewish and Roman identities would have formed part of the ideological background of those hearing the parable (whether the hearers heard the parable from Jesus directly<sup>1</sup> or from Luke's Gospel). Regarding this idea, Tate (2013:39–41) argues that historical/cultural/social assumptions form part of the historical background, the unspoken assumptions, which would have been in the mind of the reader and the reader's contemporaries. Furthermore, as Carter (2006:30) also shows, Luke considers the Roman imperial world to be a significant background to Luke. For instance, Luke 3:1–2 situates the ministry of John the Baptist within the context of the Roman imperial world with a list of Roman and Roman co-operating rulers who benefit from their co-operation with Rome to the detriment of their fellow Israelites. Interestingly, many who call themselves "Children of Abraham" in Luke 3:7–8 are presented almost in an unflattering light, while verses 10–14 present agents of Rome, such as tax collectors, as repentant. Therefore, one key controlling interpretive grid for Luke's Gospel is that people who thought themselves to be associated with Abraham are found not to be so, while many who are considered beyond the reach of redemption are grafted into this group (and agents of Rome often fit into this group). To bring this idea into an SIT analysis, Brawley (2020:41) suggests that such ideas are important to identity, as they describe the space in which the various characters wrestle with their identities. The characters are in "a quandary of belonging in many places" and these include the empire and the nation of Israel (Brawley 2020:41). Furthermore, Osborne (2018:443) notes that the description of the Rich Man would have evoked images of upper-class Romans and the Herodians. However, because the characters we see before the parable are Pharisees, the image of the upper-class Herodians which would have been evoked compares the Pharisees to the Herodians.<sup>2</sup> Thus, even though the Roman Empire is not mentioned explicitly in the text, it is justified to take the empire into account when describing the identities of the characters, as the empire functions as an unspoken framework that is used when thinking of identities. These identities will be analysed with reference to how members of one group can take on the social identity of another group.

Next, the study will analyse how wealth functions with reference to social identity and try to determine whether wealth is an inherent vice, according to the parable. The issue of how the wealth inequality between Lazarus and the Rich Man fits into the social identities of the characters in the parable will also be analysed.

How the concept of shared beliefs fits in with the social identities of the characters in the parable and the effect of taking on the social identity of another group on shared beliefs will be discussed.

Finally, the essay will end with a summary of the results of the previous sections.

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<sup>1</sup> It is likely that at least a kernel of the parable goes back to the historical Jesus himself (see for instance Crossan 1973:67–68; Blomberg 1990:203–204). This essay, however, focuses on the parable as it stands in the text of Luke's Gospel.

<sup>2</sup> The essay will not be exploring whether this is a historically accurate description of the Pharisees.

### **Luke's general use of Abraham as a social identity marker in Luke-Acts**

In Luke-Acts, especially in Acts, Abraham is used as a social identity marker to describe the relation between Judaism<sup>3</sup> and the various Gentile nationalities. We have foreshadowings in Zechariah's Benedictus (Luke 1:68–79) that Gentiles will be included among the people of God and the term will no longer be restricted to only Jewish people. Although we see in Acts that the designation "Children of Abraham" is not used for Gentiles<sup>4</sup>, this does not mean that Gentile inclusion is absent.

In Luke's Gospel, we see instances in which the social identities of Jewish characters match better the social identities of those opposed to Israel (a concept discussed by Brawley 2020:41). The parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, as we will see, is one instance in which this occurs. In another account, Zacchaeus, a tax collector, repents and vows to return fourfold everything he has obtained by cheating people (see Luke 19:1–10). He has collaborated with a foreign occupier (Rome) and given himself a Roman social identity rather than a Jewish one (Carter 2006:8). Unlike the Rich Man, however, he repents, and is therefore included in the group, "Children of Abraham". In short, in Luke's Gospel, we see who within the Jewish social group is included in the social group "Children of Abraham".

In Acts, we see that there is an inclusion of Gentiles into the movement that follows Jesus. However, it is still emphasised in the passages in Acts that discuss Abraham that the root of the movement is Jewish, which has been argued to mean that Gentiles are included, although as those "untimely born" (1 Cor 15:8; van Groenigen 2024:228–233). In this way, Luke affirms the Jewish roots of Christianity while accepting the fact that in Christianity there is a degree of separation between itself and the rest of first-century Judaism. Christianity, according to Luke, is indeed the fulfilment of promises made within a Jewish worldview, even if a large portion of the Jewish population have not joined the movement that followed Jesus.

### **Social identities of Lazarus and the Rich Man**

Lazarus has the social identity of a *πτωχός* (*ptochos*). Roughly, this means that he has the social identity of a beggar (Adewale 2006:32; Bredenhof 2019:44). He also has the social identity of an Israelite. While Jesus does not specify that the characters in this pericope are Jewish, it is likely that they are. Given that the parable is told in Palestine to Jewish characters and that Abraham is present as a highly significant figure in this parable, it is reasonable to conclude that the characters are Jewish. It is therefore highly unlikely that there are Gentile characters in this parable. That said, the Roman social identity can nevertheless be discussed in the parable, even if it is more in the background than in the foreground.

The Rich Man has a social identity of a rich man. This is significant, as it gives him access to more resources than Lazarus (Johnson 1991:251–252). As will be discussed in the body of this essay, Abraham shares this identity with the Rich Man, but the Rich Man does not act towards his fellow Israelites in a way that Abraham would have approved of. Abraham and the Rich Man are both rich, with access to large amounts of wealth. The

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<sup>3</sup> While there were different Jewish groups in first-century Palestine, it is valid to talk about "Judaism", as they have a common core of beliefs despite all their differences (Dunn 1991:18–35; Sanders 1992:47, 191–192).

<sup>4</sup> This is especially true in Acts 13:26, where Paul appears to be referring separately to "descendants of Abraham's family" and the Gentile members of his audience.

discussion will examine how the Rich Man's use of his wealth accords with the way in which Abraham used his wealth. It will examine how Abraham functions as an exemplar and how the Rich Man compares to or differs from his exemplar, especially in the way he used his wealth. How the Rich Man acts toward Lazarus is not in accord with the example of his exemplar, Abraham, therefore, he cannot legitimately be called a "Child of Abraham".

### **Taking on the social identity of an outgroup**

Brawley (2020:41) points out that one can be genetically a member of one social group while embodying the characteristics of another and thus effectively put oneself into the other social group. In this parable, this concept is significant because the Rich Man could well have acquired his wealth at Lazarus' expense, such that through his actions, the Rich Man would have placed himself in the social group "Roman" more than the social group "Israelite". He could quite likely have been involved in taking land from Lazarus in order to obtain his wealth (Wi 2019:24–25). This is not stated explicitly in the parable but it could well have been the picture in the mind of the hearers of this parable.

Significantly, this means that the Rich Man has acted more in line with the ways of those oppressing the Israelites, as he has taken from them just as the Romans have. This said, it is important to note that the way that the Rich Man lives goes much further than the Romans would have considered acceptable. Even though it can be said that the Roman occupiers were oppressive, they nevertheless believed that one should act in line with virtue. Most significantly in this case, one should not live a hedonistic lifestyle in which one seeks only to gratify pleasure, as the Rich Man has done (Stove 2007:1–3). Thus, Jesus satirises the view that the Romans as a whole ethnic group are the most immoral or oppressive people group. In other words, the Rich Man has behaved so much like the Roman and even much more than a member of the Roman social group would. He is more of a Roman than the actual Romans. He has lived hedonistically, seeking to maximise only his own pleasure, without regard to any type of virtue, be it Jewish or Roman.

As will be discussed below (under the heading "wealth inequality"), we see in Lucian's *Cataplus* that a certain virtue was expected of the Roman populace. The hedonism of the rich tyrant in the story is used as evidence against him when he goes to Rhadamanthus for judgement in the afterlife. Here it will suffice to say that virtue was always expected of a Roman, even in how a Roman person would interact with a member of one of the nations ruled by Rome.

### **Group entitlements**

Lazarus, as an Israelite, theoretically has the right to live off his land in the land of Palestine. The Rich Man, who is also an Israelite, theoretically has the same right as Lazarus in this regard. The two characters are fellow Israelites and are theoretically members of the same social group, with the same social identity and the same group entitlements (Brawley 2020:157). Therefore, both Lazarus and the Rich Man should have the group entitlement to a piece of land in Palestine and to make a living off their own land.

However, this is not how events play out. They both hold the same ingroup entitlement to live off their land in Palestine, but this group entitlement is not given

equally to both characters. The Rich Man has taken more of the land than Lazarus has access to and he takes more of the resources than Lazarus does. As noted above, it is likely that the Rich Man is in this position because he took land from Lazarus. He thereby consumes the resources to the extent that Lazarus no longer has access to his group entitlement to land and being able to earn a living from his land. He thereby deprives Lazarus, as his wealth is acquired to the detriment of Lazarus who no longer has access to his group benefit. By acting that way, the Rich Man shows that “Child of Abraham” is not his terminal identity, as he does not respect the rights of another person who is part of this group.

### **Wealth inequality**

Since the parable deals with a contrast between an extremely wealthy man and an extremely poor man, it is inevitable that the question of wealth and its related virtues and vices will come up when reading this parable, including from a social identity perspective. This is especially true, as the parable forms part of a section in which Jesus is teaching on wealth (Osborne 2018:439–443). Regarding SIT, we have here what can be referred to as “relative deprivation”; the Rich Man has access to the resources, while Lazarus is deprived, relative to the Rich Man (Esler 2014:24).

There is debate over whether it is the wealth disparity in itself that is the main sin of the Rich Man or the Rich Man has another vice that ultimately separates him from Abraham. Bauckham and Brawley argue that the wealth disparity is the problem, while Hock and Marshall argue that there is more to the parable than just the wealth inequality. To put it differently, Bauckham and Brawley argue that the Rich Man’s vice lies in the wealth disparity, while Marshall, Hock, Edwards, and Osborne argue that the Rich Man’s vice is not merely his wealth, but perhaps improper use of his wealth.

Bauckham (1998:107) cites similar parables from antiquity. For instance, he refers to the story of Si-Osiris (Bauckham 1998:98). A father wishes to live the life of a certain rich man but he does not have the whole picture, therefore, Si-Osiris is tasked with taking him on a tour of the underworld. He is shocked to find that the rich man’s bad deeds outweigh his good deeds and that he has been relegated to an unpleasant afterlife. The good deeds of a poor man in his midst, on the other hand, have been found to outweigh the bad deeds, and he now has a pleasant afterlife.

There is also the Greek story of Micyllus, a shoe cobbler, and Megapenthes, a tyrant. When they go to Hades, Megapenthes is shown to have committed so many bad deeds that even his bedside lamp witnesses against him (Lucian *Cataplus* 27). Such a depiction is of course satirical, but it shows the extent of the bad deeds of Megapenthes the tyrant. Micyllus, on the other hand, has no marks on him because of his good moral standing (Lucian *Cataplus* 25, 28).

Bauckham (1998:107) notes that there is no such moralising in Lazarus and the Rich Man, which leads him to conclude that there is no immorality in Lazarus and the Rich Man other than the wealth disparity. Brawley (2020:155–156) agrees, arguing that the Rich Man could only have obtained his wealth by exploitation, most notably by taking land from Lazarus.

Hock (1987) counters by referring to the parallels, including the story of Micyllus and Megapenthes. In Hock’s (1987:160) view, the fact that the moralising occurs shows that there is no inherent vice in wealth itself, but rather the abuse of wealth or the

immorality present in the lives of those who have it. In other words, this genre of the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man suggests that there is immorality in those that have wealth, not that wealth itself is an immorality. Even though a sin unrelated to wealth is not explicitly mentioned as part of the reason for the Rich Man's ultimate exclusion, the fact that such a motif tends to form part of similar parables suggests, to Hock, that it also forms a part of the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, even if only implicitly.

Edwards (2015:472–473) takes the parallels as evidence that wealth is not the vice in the Rich Man. Referring to the story of Si-Osiris, he notes that the Rich Man is condemned because his bad deeds outweigh his good deeds.

Lehtipuu (2007:173–183) also makes much of the parallels with the *Cataphus* and with the book of Enoch. In Enoch 94–105, sinners are punished in the afterlife. They are presented as having lived in luxury while the righteous have lived in poverty (Enoch 95:5–8; 96:22–25; 97:13). According to Enoch, there will come a day when this is made right (Enoch 97:9–16). Lehtipuu (2007:179–181)<sup>5</sup> sees a close connection between the righteous and the poor as well as between the wicked and the rich. However, she sees Luke as having a more nuanced view of the rich characters than the view found in Enoch, as Luke still believes that by almsgiving and similar activities the rich can be redeemed (Luke 3:10–14; 12:32–34; 14:12–14; 18:22). (Lehtipuu 2007:181). It would seem then that Lehtipuu does not see Luke as condemning mere wealth in itself.

Similarly, Marshall (1970:142) argues that it is generally the poor in Luke's Gospel who accept the gospel, while the rich tend to reject it, as they trust in riches rather than in God. A reference in Luke's Gospel to this effect is Luke 12:21, where a rich man is rebuked for trusting in his riches rather than God. The Rich Man in Lazarus and the Rich Man is, in Marshall's view, a rich man who trusts in his wealth rather than in God and therefore one who does not accept the gospel. It is for this reason, according to Marshall, that it is likely that Lazarus accepted the message of the Kingdom while the Rich Man rejected it. This is not to say that a refusal on the part of the Rich Man to share his wealth is of no significance; rather, it is to say that the mere fact of his wealth does not constitute vice on his part.

Osborne (2018:443) takes a similar position. He is of the view that this parable clearly teaches about "the Pharisees with their love of money" and the "downtrodden sinners who are neglected and looked down upon by the Pharisees" (Osborne 2018:443). Rather than take the position that wealth is responsible for the Rich Man's condition, Osborne (2018:44) takes the position that this parable emphasises "wise use of resources now", a theme that he sees as following from the previous parable of the wicked steward (Luke 16:1–9). Thus, based on the context of the parable, according to Osborne, the Rich Man's sin lies more in improper use of wealth than merely the acquisition of wealth.

In my view, Marshall, Hock, Lehtipuu, and Osborne are on the right track. We read in Genesis 18 that Abraham was himself a rich man; therefore, it is doubtful that Luke intended to disparage wealth in itself, especially because Abraham functions as an exemplar. The way Abraham and the Rich Man are contrasted, however, is that Abraham uses his wealth to help two hungry travellers who show up at his dwelling (see Gen 18:1–8). In contrast, the Rich Man does not act hospitably towards the hungry man at his

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<sup>5</sup> Lehtipuu does not deal at length with the wealth question, as her focus is on the nature of the afterlife in Luke's theology. She nevertheless makes a few remarks on the subject that are relevant to our discussion.

doorstep. Therefore, it follows that it is lack of hospitality on the part of the Rich Man and his gaining of wealth by exploitation that place him in torment in Hades. He has not used his wealth for the benefit of those around him, including one of his fellow Israelites, and this is the vice associated with his wealth.

To put this in social identity terminology, the Rich Man has not followed the example of his exemplar Abraham. Abraham is shown to be hospitable with his wealth. He does not live hedonistically but rather uses his wealth to be hospitable to those around him. The Rich Man, on the other hand, uses his wealth to live a life of luxury, possibly even at the expense of those around him, the *πτωχοί* such as Lazarus. He has placed himself outside of the social group “Children of Abraham” despite being an ethnic Israelite. His earthly life as a “Child of Abraham” is therefore an example of status illegitimacy.

The Rich Man’s status as a rich man, with all the associated benefits, appears to have formed his terminal identity. If he held “Child of Abraham” as his terminal identity, then, he would have followed the example of his exemplar Abraham, honouring the rights of his fellow “Child of Abraham”, in this case sharing his wealth with one who was destitute at his gate. His failure to do this shows that he assigns less significance to his status of “Child of Abraham” than he assigns to his social status as a rich man.

### **Wealth and social identity**

As previously stated, both Lazarus and the Rich Man hold an Israelite social identity. They hold a shared ethnic social identity as Israelites, physical descendants of Abraham. However, the different experiences of both Lazarus and the Rich Man do not conform to what would be expected given their shared social identity of Israelites, fellow “Children of Abraham”.

Rather, they live according to the social identity of “rich” and the social identity of “beggar”. In terms of social identity, the social identity of “rich” and all the benefits associated with this particular identity do not last beyond the grave. The social identity of one who is a “Child of Abraham”, on the other hand, will last beyond the grave. Lazarus therefore receives his group entitlement of sitting in Abraham’s Bosom, while the Rich Man places himself in an outgroup and ends up in Hades. The Rich Man receives no more than a group entitlement of those who oppress the “Children of Abraham”, as he has acted against his fellow “Child of Abraham” instead of helping him.

It is hereby shown that both Lazarus’ status as a beggar and the Rich Man’s status as a rich man are the results of status illegitimacy. It is illegitimate that Lazarus, as a member of the group, “Children of Abraham”, should experience destitution at the hand of his fellow Israelite, who is supposedly his fellow “Child of Abraham”. It is also illegitimate that the Rich Man should experience luxury at the expense of his fellow Israelite. This status illegitimacy was not by Lazarus’ choice, while it was the Rich Man’s choice.

This status illegitimacy is rectified in the afterlife. The Rich Man has placed himself in an outgroup and therefore experiences the fate of the outgroup, which has oppressed the “Children of Abraham”. And because he failed to make the right choice in his earthly life, the Rich Man finds himself in Hades. While he had the power to bring himself into the ingroup, “Children of Abraham”, by following Abraham’s example of hospitality during his earthly life, he chose not to do so. Rather than share his wealth and ensure the survival of his fellow Israelite (theoretically his fellow “Child of Abraham”), he hoards

it for himself and thus put himself outside of the ingroup, “Children of Abraham”. Now he has no choice. Lazarus is raised to his legitimate position in Abraham’s Bosom and shown to be the one who can legitimately hold to a social identity of “Child of Abraham”.

Brawley (2020:154) emphasises that the social identities of “children of light” and “children of darkness” predominate the entire text of Luke 16. In Luke’s presentation, the Pharisees, with whom Jesus is arguing in this section of Luke’s Gospel, have both social and financial capital (Brawley 2020:154)<sup>6</sup>. They no doubt would have seen themselves as “children of light” and therefore as “Children of Abraham”. As stated above, Brawley views the financial inequality as the vice of the Rich Man. Thus, he places the Rich Man and all others who similarly find themselves among the rich of society into the category of “children of darkness”.

While, as stated above, I am more in agreement with Hock and Marshall than Brawley and Bauckham regarding whether wealth itself is the inherent vice, Brawley’s categories of “children of light” and “children of darkness” are nevertheless valid categories for social-identity interpretation in this parable. Those who have wealth but use it in a way that is inconsistent with the values of the “Children of Abraham” will find that they are part of the group, “children of darkness”. They are thereby severed from the “Children of Abraham”.

In short, Lazarus’ status as a “Child of Abraham” is affirmed, while the Rich Man’s status as a “Child of Abraham” is shown to be status illegitimacy. The “children of light” may not have much to show in terms of earthly wealth, but the parable does affirm them as “Children of Abraham”. On the other hand, the “children of darkness” may have much to show in terms of earthly wealth, but this does not help them when it comes to their final social identity.

### **The nameless Rich Man**

The name “Lazarus” has been related to the Hebrew name Eleazar, which means “God helps” (Bock 1996:661; Johnson 1991:252; Bredenhof 2020:46–47). This is in contrast to the nameless Rich Man. The choice of this name for Lazarus therefore shows that he trusts in God, therefore, God helped him. This serves to mark Lazarus as a “Child of Abraham”, as he trusts in the God of Abraham, while the Rich Man trusts in his wealth. Here there is irony in that the named character is the one who appears lowly at the beginning, not the one who appears to be in a high position (Edwards 2015:466).

Significantly, Lazarus is the only character in all Jesus’ parables in all the Gospels who has a name. Therefore, it is doubtful that Lazarus would be given a name if his name held no significance (Edwards 2015:467), which suggests that his name is likely significant to his social identity (Smit 1978:635; Brawley 2020:156). Smit (1978:635) notes that there is something of a correlation between poverty and righteousness in Luke’s Gospel, and it could well be the case that Lazarus having a name meaning “God helps” serves to emphasise Lazarus’ righteousness over against that of the Rich Man, i.e. the named Lazarus is shown to be righteous compared to the nameless Rich Man.

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<sup>6</sup> The Pharisees as presented in the narrative of Luke’s Gospel.

### **Shared beliefs**

Regarding Bar-Tal's emphasis on shared beliefs, there is common ground between Lazarus and the Rich Man in that they have a shared belief in descent from Abraham (Ludlow 2019:41, 54–56; Xeravits 2019:35–36; Stark 2020:4). This, in theory, should put them in the same social group. As fellow Israelites, they theoretically hold a shared belief in descent from Abraham. The shared belief in their descent from Abraham should have kept them in the same social group (Children of Abraham) and theoretically caused them to stand together against those who opposed their social group.

What we see in the parable, however, is the opposite. The Rich Man shows that he does not hold shared beliefs with Lazarus. If he held shared beliefs with Lazarus, particularly regarding descent from Abraham, he would have helped the “Child of Abraham” that lay at his gate. By depriving a “Child of Abraham” in this way, he shows that he is not part of the social group, “Children of Abraham”, and he is treated as such in the afterlife. “Rich” forms his terminal identity whereas “Child of Abraham” should have formed his terminal identity.

### **Patron-client reversal**

A feature of Roman hierarchy that also extended to Palestine was that people tended to be in patron-client relationships (DeSilva 2000:107; see also Luke 22:24–27). This essentially meant that the client gained access to certain resources (influence, money, relief for crop failure) in return for the client doing anything they could do to increase the fame and honour of the patron.

Significantly for our purposes, the patron-client system reveals another way in which the Rich Man positions himself as more Roman than Israelite. He positions himself as one who has a great deal of authority within the social hierarchy and he expects Lazarus to act accordingly (Brawley 2020:157). The Rich Man refused to help Lazarus when he was in the position of a potential patron. Now Lazarus cannot help him when he is in the position of a potential client. In his earthly life, Lazarus had little to offer as a potential client. Now, it is the Rich Man who has nothing to offer as a potential client. Even more significantly, the Rich Man continues to assume that he has the status of a patron in the patron-client relationship, even after his death and separation from Abraham (Brawley 2020:157).

This is a significant area in which the Rich Man holds shared beliefs with the Roman rulers rather than with the “Children of Abraham” who live under Roman rule. He believes in the validity of the Roman system of patron-client relationships, as shown by the fact that he acts according to its dictates, most significantly by using his perceived power to accept or reject a patron-client relationship with Lazarus. During his earthly life, he chose to reject Lazarus as a client and now during his afterlife, Abraham refuses to make Lazarus an active client of the Rich Man.

### **Summary**

The Rich Man has chosen to act as the oppressors of the “Children of Abraham” act. He has acted like those who oppress the “Children of Abraham”, like the Herodians, agents of Rome, who are complicit in Rome's overlordship of Palestine. He hoards resources from other “Children of Abraham”, and leaves Lazarus, another “Child of Abraham”,

deprived. In other words, the Rich Man has more of the group benefits than he is entitled to, while Lazarus has none of what he is entitled to as a “Child of Abraham”.

In the afterlife, proximity to Abraham rectifies the status illegitimacies present in the characters’ earthly lives. Lazarus’ closeness to Abraham rectifies his illegitimately low social status, while the Rich Man’s distance from Abraham rectifies the illegitimately high status he held in his earthly life. Lazarus gets to enjoy the bliss of paradise in Abraham’s bosom while the Rich Man is in torment in Hades. The Rich Man is now cast away from the social group “Children of Abraham” that has access to the benefits that come from being part of the group “Children of Abraham”. Lazarus has access to the group entitlements he could not access during his earthly life. He now has his good things.

The Rich Man attempts to place himself in a different group from Lazarus. Now in the afterlife, he has done so successfully. However, this does not occur in the way he expects it to occur. The Rich Man finds that he has inadvertently placed himself outside of the group “Children of Abraham”, and he no longer has access to the benefits of being a “Child of Abraham”. Lazarus is affirmed as a “Child of Abraham”, and the Rich Man has placed himself into the group that will not enjoy a status as “Children of Abraham”.

Regarding wealth, parallel stories from antiquity, most notably the *Cataphus*, suggest that there are vices in the rich characters not related to wealth, with the misuse of wealth being the vice of the Rich Man in the parable. The Rich Man has not used his wealth in a way that is consistent with being a “Child of Abraham”. He has kept it for himself and quite possibly gained it through oppressive means, and in doing so he has kept back what another “Child of Abraham” is entitled to as a group benefit.

With the controlling identities of “Children of Light” and “Children of Darkness”, Luke shows that the Rich Man, by acting against his exemplar Abraham, has put himself into the group, “Children of Darkness”, and Lazarus is shown to be among the “Children of Light”. The namelessness of the Rich Man also emphasises his exclusion from the “Children of Abraham”.

In the context of Luke’s narrative, this parable does not further Luke’s idea of Gentile inclusion. However, it suggests that within the Israelite identity, there are those who do not legitimately hold the social identity of “Children of Abraham”. Some of the “Children of Abraham” act in ways that are harmful to other “Children of Abraham”, and so they are shown to hold this identity because of status illegitimacy.

In short, Abraham in this parable functions as a social identity marker as both an exemplar and one who determines who belongs to the social group of the people of God, the “Children of Abraham”. While the Rich Man was in control, he kept Lazarus away in an attempt to separate himself from someone whom he believed to be beneath him. But now Lazarus now spends his afterlife in Abraham’s bosom while he is tormented in Hades. By his closeness to Abraham, Lazarus’ identity as a “Child of Abraham” is affirmed while the Rich Man’s status as a “Child of Abraham” is shown to be an example of status illegitimacy.

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