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Jesus, Debt, and Society: Bringing David Graeber into Dialogue with Social-Scientific Research into the Historical Jesus

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and human society

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Résumé:

Cet article examine les références de David Graeber à l'enseignement de Jésus et à certains textes chrétiens anciens contenus dans *Debt* (2011) afin de mettre l'approche de Graeber en dialogue avec la recherche scientifique sur le Jésus historique et son mouvement, en particulier avec les études de sciences sociales. Cette démarche permet d'explorer les implications des idées de Graeber pour l'étude de ces sujets et offre la possibilité de contribuer à l'étude des idées du Jésus historique sur l'annulation de la dette, le « royaume de Dieu » et sa relation avec la société humaine, telles qu'elles peuvent être reconstituées à partir de textes tels que Matthieu 18,23-34 et 6,12. Les conclusions de Graeber sont ici comparées aux analyses de chercheurs attentifs au contexte socio-historique et culturel-anthropologique des paraboles de Jésus. Jésus a utilisé l'imagerie du royaume de Dieu pour aussi proposer une transformation sociale; Graeber (bien qu'il apporte quelques réflexions stimulantes) ne tient pas suffisamment compte de la discontinuité entre Jésus et ses disciples, et de l'allégorisation postérieure de certains enseignements de Jésus.

Abstract:

This article delves into David Graeber's references to Jesus's teaching and to some early Christian texts contained in *Debt* (2011) in order to bring Graeber's approach into dialogue with scholarly research (especially social-scientific studies) on the historical Jesus and his movement. This enables one to explore the implications of Graeber's ideas for the study of such topics and offers the opportunity to contribute to the study of the historical Jesus's thoughts on debt relief, the « kingdom of God », and its relation to human society, as they can be pieced together from texts such as Matthew 18,23-34 and 6,12. Graeber's conclusions are compared with the analyses of scholars attentive to the sociohistorical and cultural-anthropological background of Jesus's parables. Jesus employed the imagery of the kingdom of God to also promote a social transformation; Graeber (although offering some stimulating thoughts) does not sufficiently take into account the discontinuity between Jesus and his followers, and the later allegorization of certain Jesus's teachings.

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Jesus, Debt, and Society: Bringing David Graeber into Dialogue with Social-Scientific Research into the Historical Jesus

Andrea Annese

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In *Debt*, a book as brilliant as it is controversial, David Graeber includes in his five-thousand-year history of debt some references to Jesus and early Christian texts. In particular, his attention focuses on the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18,23-34) and on the Lord's Prayer (see especially Matthew 6,12), both concerned with debt relief. This part of Graeber's analysis finds its theoretical background in the thesis that «all the major world religions» borrowed «the language of the marketplace as a way of thinking about the human condition»¹. According to Graeber, even when the religious traditions make objections to a form of ethics conceived of in terms of «debt» (usually in sociohistorical contexts of debt crises and conflicts between classes), they use a language – and a conceptual arsenal – which is based on the language of the marketplace and of debt. Here Graeber sees the inconsistency or the ambivalence of the world religions. First, they describe all morality as debt (for example, in speculations about the remission of debts/sins), but then, they demonstrate «that morality cannot really be reduced to debt, that it must be grounded in something else». Their alternative proposal, in the end, would take the form of «cosmological answers»: «the alternative to the morality of debt lies in recognition of continuity with the universe, or life in the expectation of the imminent annihilation of the universe, or absolute subordination to the deity, or withdrawal into another world»².

This article aims to delve into Graeber's references to Jesus's teaching and to some early Christian texts in order to bring the approach of Graeber's *Debt* into dialogue with scholarly research on the historical Jesus and the early Jesus movement, especially with social-scientific studies. This will enable us to explore the implications of Graeber's ideas for the study of such topics and will offer us the opportunity to contribute to the study of the historical Jesus's thoughts on debt remission, the «kingdom of God», and its relation to human society, as they can be pieced together from texts such as Matthew 18,23-34 and 6,12. Graeber's conclusions will be compared with the analyses of historians, anthropologists, and exegetes attentive to the sociohistorical and cultural-anthropological background of Jesus's parables and sayings. It will be fundamental also to evaluating the grade of continuity and discontinuity between the historical Jesus and later Christian doctrines. Thus, among the questions that one should address, as we

¹ DAVID GRAEBER, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, Brooklyn, NY, Melville House, 2011, p. 80.

² DAVID GRAEBER, *Debt*, p. 89.

will see, there is the following one: For Jesus, is it really the case that « the alternative to the morality of debt », ultimately, only lies in some « otherworldly » event or status³?

For the sake of clarity, I begin my analysis by reporting the text of the parable transmitted in Matthew 18,23-34 and by summarizing Graeber's brief but dense remarks on it. The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant reads as follows:

²³ For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents [εἷς ὀφειλέτης μυρίων τάλαντων] was brought to him, ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, « Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything ». ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii [ὃς ὤφειλεν αὐτῷ ἑκατὸν δηνάρια], and seizing him by the throat he said, « Pay what you owe ». ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, « Have patience with me, and I will pay you ». ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt [τὸ ὀφειλόμενον]. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, « You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt [πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἐκείνην ἀφήκᾰ σοι] because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you? » ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister [ἐὰν μὴ ἀφῆτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ] from your heart.⁴

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Graeber introduces this parable as an example of the way in which Jesus faces the problem of « what is possible in the meantime », that is, before the « final redemption » (with the debts/sins cancelation) expected by many religions⁵. The sum of 10 000 talents that the first servant owes to the king is an incredibly high one and, Graeber continues, it simply stands in for a sum no human being could ever repay, that is, an infinite debt. The king/lord, however, cancels the servant's debt. But « the amnesty has a condition »: the servant should act in an analogous way to other humans. He does not comply with this implicit rule, therefore he is cast into hell for all eternity (since his debt is inextinguishable). Graeber further comments that this difficult parable « has long been a challenge to theologians. It's normally interpreted as a comment on the endless bounty of God's grace and how little He demands of us in comparison » (Graeber does not provide bibliographical references for this allegedly « common » interpretation). But it is particularly interesting what Graeber adds in the ensuing lines. The parable would advance « the tacit suggestion that forgiveness, in this world, is ultimately impossible ». For Graeber, this is also the meaning of the petition included in the Lord's Prayer, « And forgive us our debts, as we

³ As Graeber seems to imply *ibid.*, p. 84, « When he [i.e. Jesus] calls on his followers to forgive all debts, refuse to cast the first stone, turn the other cheek, love their enemies, to hand over their possessions to the poor – is he really expecting them to do this? Or are such demands just a way of throwing in their faces that, since we are clearly not prepared to act this way, we are all sinners whose salvation can only come in another world – a position that can be (and has been) used to justify almost anything? ».

⁴ Trans. NRSVue; Greek text NA28.

⁵ DAVID GRAEBER, *Debt*, p. 82. The following quotations are all from pp. 82–84.

also have forgiven our debtors [καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν]»⁶. In this passage, the Greek term ὀφειλημα plausibly translated the Aramaic *ḥōbā*⁷, which could mean both «debt» and «sin» (the Greek term, before Matthew, was more related to the financial sense); the metaphor of debt was used for «sin». Graeber comments that «most Christians reciting the prayer are aware that they do not generally forgive their debtors. Why then should God forgive them their sins?». Then, those words attributed to Jesus (both the parable and the Lord's Prayer), for Graeber, confirm that kind of «ambivalence» which the world religions are full of, in their employing the language of debt (and describing morality as debt) while criticizing the morality based on debt. Graeber seems to imply that Jesus advances an otherworldly-oriented ethics, for when he calls on his followers to forgive all debts, Jesus probably does not *really* expect them to do this. Such moral conduct is too high a standard for imperfect humans, who can only trust God to forgive their sins in another world.

These remarks by Graeber touch upon several significant issues, such as the link between the parable and the Lord's Prayer; the polyvalent/ambiguous meaning of the word for «debt» (debt/sin) in those sources (and in cognate ones); the socio-economic and historical background of the parable – although Graeber seems to interpret the parable as a mainly allegorical and «otherworldly» teaching –, a background he also takes into consideration when speaking of the concept of Jubilee in Judaism and of the social crisis faced by Nehemiah⁸; the «condition» for debt cancelation in the parable; the idea of an impossibility to pay the debt. But some of Graeber's conclusions should be put to the test.

At this juncture, then, I will analyze the parable to try recovering its meaning and context, and to reconstruct the thought of the historical Jesus⁹. There is extensive bibliography on this text, so I will focus on some specific elements¹⁰.

Although Graeber discusses the parable of Matthew 18 as one of the religious texts that originated from a historical, concrete background of debt crises in antiquity and introduces it as a text that addresses the problem of what people can do in this world, his conclusions seem to imply that this parable is basically metaphoric. Obviously, any parable has a symbolic message – but Graeber's interpretation suggests the idea that this narrative, given its «absurd» (Graeber's word) elements (the premise, the sum, and so on), ends in shifting from an earthly praxis to an otherworldly expectation. In sum, it cannot really function as a basis for morality in the human sphere (and the same would apply to the Lord's Prayer petition about debt). Graeber's book *Debt*, in the

⁶ Matthew 6,12, trans. NRSVue; Greek text NA28.

⁷ See, among others, MATTHEW BLACK, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, 3rd edn, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1967, p. 140.

⁸ DAVID GRAEBER, *Debt*, pp. 80–82.

⁹ Bibliography on how to construct an historical approach to Jesus is enormous. Here I just refer to a synthetic essay that advances some stimulating methodological considerations: DALE C. ALLISON, «How to Marginalize the Traditional Criteria of Authenticity», in TOM HOLMÉN, STANLEY E. PORTER eds., *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols., Leiden, Brill, 2011, vol. 1, pp. 3-30.

¹⁰ See MARTIN LEUTZSCH, «Verschuldung und Überschuldung, Schuldenerlaß und Sündenvergebung. Zum Verständnis des Gleichnisses Mt 18,23-35», in MARLENE CRÜSEMANN, WILLY SCHOTTROF eds., *Schuld und Schulden. Biblische Traditionen in gegenwärtigen Konflikten*, Munich, Kaiser, 1992, pp. 104-131; JOACHIM JEREMIAS, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd rev. edn., London, SCM, 1972 (*Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), pp. 210-214; ULRICH LUZ, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 2001 (*Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 3. Teilband, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener, 1997), pp. 468-77; ARLAND J. HULTGREN, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2008, pp. 61-77; and ERNEST VAN ECK, «Honour and Debt Release in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Mt 18:23-33): A Social-scientific and Realistic Reading», *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 71.1 (2015), pp. 1-11 [<http://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i1.2838>].

end, aims at proposing an ethics that would not be based on the conceptual mechanism of debt. We have to inquire whether the story narrated in the parable is really «absurd» and whether Jesus's intention was to point to an otherworldly solution for the social crisis. First, I suggest that it is necessary to pay attention to both the continuity and the *discontinuity* between Jesus and his followers¹¹. Some «allegorical shifts» should be situated at the historical level of later generations of Jesus's followers, rather than at the level of the historical Jesus. The «delay of the *eschaton*» (that is, the fact that the eschatological realization of the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and expected did not arrive) pushed Jesus's followers to reinterpret some of his words and, progressively, some statements that had concrete social and political implications were transformed into allegories and metaphors. The parables of the kingdom were reinterpreted.

The original socio-economic context of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is very concrete: the system of indebtedness and the debt crises in Roman agrarian Palestine. This context has been well studied. It can be noted that even the details of the story which Graeber considers as «absurd» and implausible have been deemed by some exegetes as not unprecedented. The first «servant/slave» (δοῦλος, v. 26 and *passim*), in particular, is not to be necessarily seen as a debtor from the lower social classes – quite the contrary. It is possible that the story is about «some sort of dignitary – perhaps a minister or a major tax collector – so that the amount remains somewhat plausible»¹². There are several attestations for the use of δοῦλος in the sense of a king's minister or official¹³, and the parable could speak of a vassal or a «provincial satrap» (for some exegetes, the conceptual background is that of a Hellenistic ruler of the ancient Near East and his vassals, but this is not so relevant here) who was entrusted to collect taxes in a certain region¹⁴. In such context, even the language of «settling accounts» («a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants») is not absurd¹⁵. I am not denying the possibility that the sum of 10 000 talents is hyperbolic, nor that this parable may use metaphoric language to refer to God and to the final judgment; some terms are intentionally polysemous and are meant to suggest religious connotation («debtor», «to owe», «to forgive»). But the possible use of a hyperbolic and/or metaphoric language does not imply that the parable, in Jesus's original intention, did not have material social implications and that its key point was simply «God's grace», as we will see.

For the moment, let us briefly address some other important features of the parable in the light of its historical background. Another element that challenged the exegetes is the reference to debt slavery (18,25). Selling debtors into slavery was permitted in both Hellenistic and Roman law, but scholars dispute whether this practice occurred in Judea. According to Exodus 22,2, thieves could be sold into slavery; other texts from the Hebrew Bible seem to indicate that also debtors (and/or their children) were actually sold (see 2 Kings 4,1; Isaiah 50,1; Amos 2,6; Amos

¹¹ On this topic see, for example, ADRIANA DESTRO, MAURO PESCE, *From Jesus to His First Followers: Continuity and Discontinuity. Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, Leiden, Brill, 2017.

¹² ULRICH LUZ, *Matthew 8-20*, p. 471.

¹³ See *ibid.* for further bibliography; and FREDERICK W. DANKER ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4th edn., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2021, p. 230 for some references to the sources.

¹⁴ On the first debtor as a major tax collector, see, for example, JOACHIM JEREMIAS, *The Parables*, p. 210; ULRICH LUZ, *Matthew 8-20*, pp. 471-72; KLYNE R. SNODGRASS, *Stories*, p. 68. JOSEPHUS, *Ant.* 12,176 reports that the Tobiad Joseph offered 16 000 talents to buy the right to collect taxes in Coele-Syria and Phoenicia under the rule of the Ptolemaic Egyptian king (end of the IIIrd century BCE).

¹⁵ See FREDERICK W. DANKER ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, pp. 856-857 for references to the papyrological evidence.

8,6; Nehemiah 5,2.5). A rabbinic parable tells of a king who ordered that sons and daughters of one of his debtors were sold¹⁶. On the other hand, certain other rabbinic texts are often quoted as evidence that a man was not permitted to sell his wife¹⁷. Yet, as Ulrich Luz rightly notes, « But what happened to women and children whose men were sold into slavery for the payment of debt? »¹⁸. However, more common was the *imprisonment* of debtors, with the aim of compelling the debtors' relatives and friends to pay the debt. Although this practice does not occur in Jewish law, this does not mean that it did not exist in Hellenized Palestine, especially under Gentile kings¹⁹. Even the following episodes told in the parable are not unprecedented. As shown by the analysis of the socioeconomic background of the parable conducted by Martin Leutzsch in the light of a wide range of ancient sources, the debtor's request for an extension of time, as well as the remission of the debt (even a very large one), are not without parallels²⁰. Others, however, point out that such kinds of remission usually happened on special occasions (such as the enthronement of a new king) and, what is more important, not simply because of the debtor's need (and not for such a sum)²¹. Documentary papyri from Ptolemaic Egypt (but also additional sources from other areas of the ancient Mediterranean, including Palestine) provide evidence for general amnesties from debts: royal decrees that proclaimed the remission not only of debts to the Crown, but all debts (« the global cancellation was extended to what each subject in the kingdom owed to another »), as part of a strategy intended to stabilize society in periods of social and economic crisis²². Other details of the story, such as the debt of 100 denarii (which the second servant owes to the first one), pose no problem from the point of view of historical plausibility.

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Overall, the parable of Matthew 18 is rooted in a very concrete historical and social background, and this should invite, first, to reconsider Graeber's reading of one or another element of it as « absurd » or « a joke ». But Graeber himself suggests that there are multiple levels of reading: « On one level it's a joke; in others, it could hardly be more serious ». The serious meaning, for Graeber, is twofold: 1) « forgiveness, in this world, is ultimately impossible »; 2) « we really couldn't live up to those standards, even if we tried » – thus the « otherworldly » escape²³. It is this twofold conclusion that we now have to verify, and this leads to the core of my investigation. The key point is not whether *all* or *several* elements of the parable are historically plausible or not. We can agree with the balanced conclusion by Leutzsch: « [A]lmost all individual traits can be substantiated in social reality. The special feature of the narrative lies in the combination of the

¹⁶ *Sifre Deut.* 26 on 3,23; cf. JOACHIM JEREMIAS, *The Parables*, p. 211.

¹⁷ *M. Soṭah* 3,8; *t. Soṭah* 2,9. Graeber writes that, in first-century Palestine, it was not normal for a man to sell his wife (*Debt*, p. 128), and in an endnote refers to « Bender 1996 » as the source of this information. Unfortunately, « Bender 1996 » is not present in the bibliography at the end of Graeber's volume (2011 edn.) and I was unable to find this piece of research, which appears to be the only work of scholarly literature directly quoted by Graeber on the historical background of the parable in Matthew 18.

¹⁸ ULRICH LUZ, *Matthew 8-20*, p. 472, n. 38. Moreover, as KLYNE R. SNODGRASS, *Stories*, p. 66 rightly notes, « the evidence is not so clear »: *m. Soṭah* 3,8 forbids selling a woman to make restitution for *theft*, and *t. Soṭah* 2,9, although more explicit, is brief (« A man is sold as a Hebrew slave, but a woman is not sold as a Hebrew slave »). Snodgrass concludes that « Certainly the first-century Palestinian world was well aware of families being sold or imprisoned for their debts ».

¹⁹ Thus ULRICH LUZ and KLYNE R. SNODGRASS (see previous footnote).

²⁰ MARTIN LEUTZSCH, « Verschuldung ».

²¹ ULRICH LUZ, *Matthew 8-20*, p. 473, n. 49.

²² See GIOVANNI B. BAZZANA, « *Basileia* and Debt Relief: The Forgiveness of Debts in the Lord's Prayer in the Light of Documentary Papyri », *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73.3 (2011), pp. 511-525, here p. 517; and JOHN S. KLOPPENBORG, « The Lord's Prayer and Debt Recovery: Insights from Graeco-Egyptian Papyri », in DANIEL A. SMITH, CHRISTOPH HEIL eds., *Prayer in the Sayings Gospel Q*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2019, pp. 201-18.

²³ Quotations are from DAVID GRAEBER, *Debt*, pp. 83-84.

individual traits. The parable narrative is configuration [*Gestaltung*], not illustration of reality »²⁴. It is not surprising that some details might be hyperbolic, and there is no doubt that some terms are intended to also communicate a religious message. The essential question is whether the thought of the historical Jesus, as it is possible to reconstruct it, necessarily coincides with Graeber's above-mentioned twofold interpretative conclusion on the parable (as well as with his understanding of the Lord's Prayer petition about debt)²⁵.

An answer can be given when considering that at the center of the parable there is not « the endless bounty of God's grace and how little He demands of us in comparison » (Graeber's words quoted above). This is certainly the way in which many theologians have interpreted this parable over centuries, but hardly is the original *intentio Jesu*. With this parable, Jesus does express the idea of God's mercy, but also – and first of all – calls people to assume a certain behavior, with very concrete social consequences. Graeber himself gets the point when he identifies a « condition » that the king poses to cancel the servant's debt, that is, to act in a similar way. Yet Graeber concludes that the parable's implicit message is that such moral behavior is impossible *in this world* and then people should hope in the eschatological (or, at least, *post mortem*) remission of sins.

Different conclusions, however, can be drawn. Some scholars have investigated the figure of Jesus (and his movement), specifically focusing on the concrete background represented by the *crisis* of the society of first-century Palestine under Roman rule – an endemic crisis with political, social, and economic factors. From this perspective, Jesus emerges as one religious leader (another example is John the Baptist) who proposes certain solutions to such crisis and aims for a transformation of the society of his time²⁶. The beginning of such transformation, in Jesus's view, can be experimented in the present, through a collective change of moral behavior.

In a recent monograph, anthropologist Adriana Destro and historian Mauro Pesce provide stimulating interpretative hypotheses on Jesus's references to the debt crisis of his time and on the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Destro and Pesce's approach to Jesus's parables aims at highlighting their social-cultural background, since Jesus frames such stories in concrete, common, and paradigmatic situations of his time. In this sense, it is not surprising that he addresses the question of debt several times (in addition to Matthew 18,23-35; see, for example, Matthew 6,12; Luke 7,41-50; Luke 16,1-8). He is aware that the society where he lives is damaged by an endemic crisis with widespread poverty and relationships of indebtedness. He knows that a debtor can be deprived of his freedom and can lose his social ties. Destro and Pesce point out that, according to the sources, Jesus perceives the « social fact » of the common impossibility to solve debts as so relevant that he adopts it as the « symbolic scheme of the relationship between human beings and God as well as among humans themselves »²⁷; in fact, it is included in the Lord's Prayer: « Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors ». As Destro and Pesce clarify, « It is true that debt as a metaphor for sin was common in Jewish culture, but it is the *unpayability* [*insolvibilità*] of debt, and not debt itself, which [for

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²⁴ MARTIN LEUTZSCH, « Verschuldung », p. 123, my translation.

²⁵ Although the parable in Matthew 18,23-34 does include some redactional traits to be attributed to the author of this Gospel, exegetes have few doubts that its original kernel goes back to Jesus. The same goes for the Lord's Prayer (I do not touch here upon the issue of which version could be the « more original » one, that in Matthew or that in Luke).

²⁶ See esp. ADRIANA DESTRO, MAURO PESCE, *Il Battista e Gesù. Due movimenti giudaici nel tempo della crisi*, Rome, Carocci, 2021; GERD THEISSEN, *Die Jesusbewegung. Sozialgeschichte einer Revolution der Werte*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2004.

²⁷ ADRIANA DESTRO, MAURO PESCE, *Il Battista e Gesù*, p. 127; my translation, here and below.

Jesus] becomes the metaphor for the relationship between man and God, and between man and man »²⁸. This demonstrates that, for Jesus, paying attention to the situation of poverty and social crisis was instrumental.

Such interpretation of the «unpayability motif» deserves some further comments. The metaphor for the relationship between humans and God is not simply that the former have debts, but that they have debts which cannot be paid. Even more important, the unpayability of debt also becomes the metaphor for relationships among humans. Thus, Destro and Pesce propose a different interpretation of Jesus's thought from that of Graeber. According to Graeber, the unpayability of debt should be primarily seen in a vertical scheme: the relationship of humans to God(s). But according to Destro and Pesce, it also involves a horizontal level (man–man).

Not less important are the consequences of Jesus's (thus reconstructed) view, namely the « solution » that Jesus advances. The only possible solution to the universal status of indebtedness that involves each human being (« each person has some kind of debt with any other people »²⁹) is a collective, universal remission of all debts; a « chain reaction » in which each one forgives the other's debt. This is, for Jesus, the only means to restore people's freedom, equality, and justice. According to Destro and Pesce, Jesus elaborates this idea under the influence of the Jewish concept of a periodic Jubilee (see Leviticus 25) when all debts would be forgiven. A text from the Dead Sea Scrolls, *11QMelchizedek* (dated between the end of the IInd century and the first half of the Ist century BCE), connects the eschatological topic of the end of this world with the idea of the concrete social renovation established by the Jubilee (which includes the remission of debts)³⁰. Jesus elaborates on some elements of this myth and « models the process of remission of sins on that of remission of debts », in the sense that « for Jesus, God forgives sins inasmuch as human beings forgive each other, just as during the Jubilee each one forgives the other's debt »³¹. For Jesus, the eschatological judgment and the establishment of God's kingdom are imminent, and before these events, each person is called to forgive the other's debt, since this is the *condition* to obtain forgiveness of sins from God. This is the meaning of Jesus's ideas transmitted in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant and in the Lord's Prayer³². In the parable of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, italics mine.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

³⁰ This text quotes and interprets Leviticus 25,13 and Deuteronomy 15,2 by referring to « the last days » (see esp. 11QMelch 2,2-6). See text and translation in FLORENTINO GARCIA MARTINEZ, EIBERT J. C. TIGCHELAAR, ADAM S. VAN DER WOUDE eds., *Manuscripts from Qumran Cave 11. II: 11Q2–18, 11Q20–30*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998, pp. 221-241.

³¹ ADRIANA DESTRO, MAURO PESCE, *Il Battista e Gesù*, p. 195. On Jesus's concept of the remission of sins and on its relationship with Leviticus 25 and some Qumran texts, see also MAURO PESCE, *Da Gesù al cristianesimo*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2011, pp. 55-84; and ADRIANA DESTRO, MAURO PESCE, *From Jesus to His First Followers*, pp. 50-67, esp. pp. 64-65. The possibility that the Jubilee imagery influenced the historical Jesus is suggested also by other scholars. See, for example, NICHOLAS T. WRIGHT, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 1996, p. 295. This view was popularized already by JOHN H. YODER, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd edn., Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1994 (orig. 1972), esp. pp. 60-75, drawing from ANDRÉ TROCMÉ, *Jésus-Christ et la révolution non violente*, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 1961. Cf. JAMES A. SANDERS, « Sins, Debts, and Jubilee Release », in CRAIG A. EVANS, JAMES A. SANDERS eds., *Luke and Scripture: The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 1993, pp. 84-92, here p. 90, on Jesus's identity in the Gospel of Luke as « the herald of the arrival of God's Jubilee » (but the focus here is not on the historical Jesus). On the history of interpretation of the Jubilee institution see JOHN S. BERGSMAN, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation*, Leiden, Brill, 2007.

³² BERNARD BRANDON SCOTT also links this parable to the Jewish Jubilee imagery (Leviticus 25): The king who forgives an immense debt signals the beginning of the « jubilee of debt forgiveness », but the servant's lack of forgiveness « brings this jubilee hope to an end », and thus the parable is a criticism of popular notions of messianic kingship; the hierarchical imperial model (the system of patron–client) cannot bring the Jubilee and cannot function as a model for organizing the world (*Re-Imagine the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, Santa Rosa, CA, Polebridge, 2001, pp. 105-107, 133).

Matthew 18, the first debtor obtains the remission of his debt under the condition that he also begins to forgive the debts that others have with him. We may comment that, if Jesus sets an equivalence (and a causal connection) between the human act of forgiving and the divine act of forgiving humans, he overturns the « traditional » doctrine of an infinite debt of humans towards God (on which Graeber's *Debt* contains brilliant pages). The chain reaction involves humans as well as God³³. And human behavior becomes the model for God's forgiveness³⁴.

Jesus's theory of debt remission, then, has a concrete social and cultural background, rooted not only in some Jewish notions of the Jubilee as a moment of social restoration, but also in one certain notion about the role of the sovereign in some ancient Near Eastern cultures. Jesus could have taken inspiration from the general debt cancelation promulgated by some ancient Near Eastern kings at the beginning of their reigns to restore justice and equality. But Jesus re-elaborates this common sociocultural scheme, since he links the amnesty granted by the « God-king » to a process of mutual forgiveness among people ; « This is an element totally absent in the mechanism of the oriental amnesty ». Amnesty, in Jesus's view, « is accompanied by the need for an expanded *forgiveness* system, a sort of *chain-reaction* (cf. Matthew 6, 12, 14 ; 18, 25-35) that goes back to the Jubilee notion of *afesis*. (...) Jesus seems to rely on a model of social reconstitution or return to an original state of parity or equality, to the utopia of the Leviticus Jubilee »³⁵.

As I mentioned before, such practice of the Hellenistic sovereigns is confirmed by evidence from documentary papyri from Egypt and Palestine. Giovanni Bazzana and John Kloppenborg have analyzed such sources to inquire about the notion of debt relief in the Lord's Prayer (especially in its version in the Q Source)³⁶. The amnesty decrees were part of the royal ideology and propaganda of the Egyptian and other Hellenistic kingdoms (but, as Kloppenborg clarifies, this occurred also in the Roman context). Bazzana notes that the Lord's Prayer petition about debt forgiveness has striking similarities to some formulas in Ptolemaic amnesty decrees – but the prayer *reverses* the categories of Hellenistic sovereignty, while employing the same terminology :

Instead of applying the divine standard to human behavior, the text goes in the opposite direction by inviting the members of the community to give an example that God will follow. This formulation might have been particularly effective in unsettling Greco-Roman ideas concerning sovereignty and its ideological justifications.³⁷

33 On some of Jesus's parables as representing « the inextricable link between divine forgiveness and our behavior », see also BRUCE CHILTON, « Jesus and Sinners and Outcasts », in TOM HOLMÉN, STANLEY E. PORTER eds., *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, vol. 3, pp. 2801-2833, here p. 2822. Chilton argues that Jesus « exploited the metaphorical possibilities of the term [« debt »] in a way that is preceded in the Targum of Isaiah, but in a characteristically parabolic fashion » (p. 2823). The *Isaiah Targum* (50,1) juxtaposes the literal and the metaphoric senses of the Aramaic term for « debt » (*hōbā*). For Chilton, Jesus makes recourse to the Aramaic idiom to exploit its double meaning (debt/sin). Cf. BRUCE CHILTON, *The Isaiah Targum: Introduction, Translation, Apparatus and Notes*, Wilmington, DE, Michael Glazer, 1987, p. 99.

34 Cf. RICHARD A. HORSLEY, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine*, New York, Harper & Row, 1987, p. 254, on Matthew 6,12: « The imperative petition followed by the perfect "we have forgiven" makes it appear that the latter is the model for the former. However much it may have been in anticipation of God's liberation, the petition about "forgiveness" presupposes that the people had already forgiven one another in their local social-economic relations ». See *ibid.*, pp. 254-255 on the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. According to Horsley, Jesus's call for a mutual cancelation of debts was very concrete. For a different interpretation see ARLAND J. HULTGREN, *The Parables*, p. 29, who focuses on « the mercy of God » and concludes that « Surely the parable does not teach that forgiving others is a prerequisite or means for gaining God's forgiveness. If human forgiveness is a precondition for divine forgiveness, no one can ever be forgiven by God. Human forgiveness is never perfect » (cf. Graeber's conclusions on the parable).

35 The two quotations are from ADRIANA DESTRO, MAURO PESCE, *From Jesus to His First Followers*, p. 65.

36 See GIOVANNI B. BAZZANA, « *Basileia* and Debt Relief » ; JOHN S. KLOPPENBORG, « The Lord's Prayer ».

37 GIOVANNI B. BAZZANA, « *Basileia* and Debt Relief », p. 524.

This is another key element of the re-elaboration of a certain cultural and social background in some early Christian texts – and perhaps in Jesus's view itself, since the core of the Lord's Prayer is commonly considered to go back to the historical Jesus.

This brings us back to Jesus's notion of debt remission and his proposal for a social renovation. In ideal dialogue with Graeber's conclusions, we should ask ourselves whether Jesus's view is confined to the realm of utopia (that is, the collective mechanism of reciprocal remission of debts is impossible «in this world»), and then whether his proposal is but a way to suggest that people should only trust in God's intervention. Again, the historical and socioanthropological analysis of the early Christian sources that transmit words attributed to Jesus enables us to reach different conclusions. On the one hand, the «social project» of Jesus, which entails a universal moral renovation, does imply a certain degree of utopia. Jesus is aware of the difficulty of reaching such total social transformation, and therefore he uses a metaphor to express this project: he draws on two concepts of his Jewish cultural background, namely the eschatological Jubilee (from 11QMelch) and the kingdom of God. Jesus advances the idea that the ultimate social renovation, preceded by a process of mutual forgiveness, will be realized through a «supernatural» event, thanks to the imminent advent of God's kingdom³⁸. Yet – and this is the crucial point – Jesus also links such a utopian project of a future social renovation (expressed through the metaphor of God's kingdom) to the concrete sphere of human reality. Through the vivid images of his parables, Jesus conveys the «social project of the kingdom», and this aims to impact on people's minds by inviting them to think of themselves as part of this transformation process. The «ideal» or utopian model of this kingdom is not without links to concrete reality. As Destro and Pesce conclude:

There was a link to concrete reality. Jesus could find it in his closer followers, at least in certain moments, inasmuch as they followed him and put into practice his instructions (...). Jesus does not renounce the hope for a change even in the present from God. Thus, the ideal of the kingdom is not just utopian – it inevitably becomes a project of renovation of present society as well. (...) Jesus distinguishes humans' commitment (people must reconcile and rebuild cohesion) from God's transformative intervention. The remission [of debts] is the maximum possible human event of cooperation while waiting for the kingdom. Human beings, who mutually forgive their debts, receive a great lesson from this challenging exchange. They already enter a kind of coexistence that will allow entry into the kingdom.³⁹

Thus, the «chain reaction» process of debt remission, advocated by Jesus, has a transformative power for the present social reality. For Jesus, it had to start from the interpersonal relationships in the villages of the land of Israel⁴⁰. The mutual remission was not simply expected from God's

³⁸ Thus ADRIANA DESTRO, MAURO PESCE, *Il Battista e Gesù*, p. 227.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 229. Douglas Oakman also identifies a link between reciprocal debt remission and entering the kingdom of God, but while Destro and Pesce tend to maintain that, for Jesus, the kingdom remains a future reality, Oakman sees the practice of debt relief as anticipating and actualizing the kingdom: «The practice of forgiveness/release on earth is connected *a minori ad maius* to the radical forgiveness/release available with God's kingdom (...). Jesus advocates release from oppressive economic burdens, but perceives a moral obligation to a new social behavior of forgiveness. A similar behavioral logic, anticipat[es] and at the same time actualiz[es] God's rule» (DOUGLAS E. OAKMAN, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day*, Lewiston, NY, Edwin Mellen, 1986, p. 156).

⁴⁰ See RICHARD A. HORSLEY, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, p. 253 («Jesus insisted upon the mutual forgiveness of debts in his followers' local communities») and, more generally, pp. 209-284; ADRIANA DESTRO, MAURO PESCE, *Il Battista e Gesù*, p. 226.

mercy, but also corresponded to a « somewhat socio-political proposal »⁴¹. Texts like the parable in Matthew 18 or the Lord's Prayer express the model of human being that Jesus intends to propose. From this kind of statements about debt remission, « New Testament commentators (...) have rarely made out (...) any material social conclusion », but such a conclusion is exactly what the sources invite us to make⁴². As Douglas Oakman points out, although Jesus did not advocate armed insurrection, his activity

takes on an explicitly revolutionary aspect according to the canons of antiquity. From one side, his deeds and pronouncements can be seen to have advocated the dissolution of the material mechanisms of social stratification and power. From another side, the political authorities undoubtedly would have perceived, even in the hint of a public proclamation of the abolition of debt, a subversive, revolutionary agenda.⁴³

It is emerging, then, that the opinions of the historical Jesus on debt relief (at least, according to the historical and socioanthropological interpretative lines which I am following here) have some convergence with Graeber's, beyond what Graeber himself realized. I will clarify this point, while highlighting some fruitful insights that Graeber's *Debt* can offer to the historical study of Jesus and early Christian groups.

Graeber, as we have seen above, rightly notes that the parable of Matthew 18 requires a *condition* for debt relief to take place (that is, mutual remission). But he concludes that, from the point of view of the parable, this means that « in this world » forgiveness is impossible. Moreover, Jesus would remain trapped in the ambivalence of all world religions, that is, criticizing the market while at the same time expressing objections in commercial terms. But that *condition* is exactly what should give start, in Jesus's intention, to a mutual process of debt relief that can be seen as potentially transformative of the social conditions *in this world* – and it is not related only to the « otherworldly » salvation. Graeber appears here to flatten the differences and to underestimate the discontinuity between the historical Jesus and later Christian doctrines and practices, for instance, when he speaks of « calculation of sin, penance, and absolution, the Devil and St. Peter with their rival ledger books »⁴⁴. In the historical Jesus's teaching, one can find some similarities with Graeber's ideas and proposals. A paradigmatic example is that of the Jewish notion of a periodic Jubilee, which Graeber himself first briefly analyzes, then even advocates :

In this book I have largely avoided making concrete proposals, but let me end with one. It seems to me that we are long overdue for some kind of Biblical-style Jubilee : one that would affect both international debt and consumer debt. It would be salutary (...) also because it would be our way of reminding ourselves that money is not ineffable, that paying

41 ADRIANA DESTRO, MAURO PESCE, *Il Battista e Gesù*, p. 127.

42 Quotation is from DOUGLAS E. OAKMAN, *Jesus, Debt, and the Lord's Prayer: First-Century Debt and Jesus' Intentions*, Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock, 2014, p. 40.

43 *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41. For other examples of social-scientific readings of Jesus's notion of the kingdom of God and its socio-economic implications, see BRUCE J. MALINA, *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 2001 ; GERD THEISSEN, *Die Jesusbewegung* (esp. Part 4).

44 DAVID GRAEBER, *Debt*, p. 84.

one's debts is not the essence of morality, that all these things are human arrangements and that if democracy is to mean anything, it is the ability to all agree to arrange things in a different way.⁴⁵

As shown by the research of several scholars I have mentioned here, the cultural model of the biblical Jubilee (in a revised form) was at the core of Jesus's thoughts and proposals facing the social crisis of his time. Here we encounter what is probably the most striking of the similarities between Jesus's and Graeber's ideas (not recognized by Graeber). This does not mean that I am proposing some comparison between Jesus of Nazareth and David Graeber (neither assuming the former as the term of comparison for the latter, nor the latter for the former). It means that we can take some tools and insights from Graeber's analyses of debt to look at the historical Jesus and Christian origins with new perspectives, but – at the same time – that Graeber's interpretation of Jesus's message and of some early Christian texts should be problematized (this article is a first attempt to go in this twofold direction). Jesus's position about debt relief, and his parables on this topic, are more complex than Graeber presents them. Nevertheless, Graeber's insights can suggest to us some new questions to ask to our sources. The meaning of Graeber's *Debt*, ultimately, is to appeal for a global social renovation, while arguing that it is possible to rethink relations among human beings. One could interrogate the early Christian texts, then, from this point of view, that is, studying them from an interdisciplinary perspective (anthropological, sociohistorical, exegetical) which is attentive to that topic. As we have seen, this can lead to some interesting conclusions. Graeber's hypotheses and research questions can be heuristically applied to some of Jesus's parables.

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To make just a brief example: pivotal in Graeber's investigation on debt is the hypothesis that at the basis of the cultural and historical processes that led moral obligations to be reduced to debts, there is the idea that debts can be quantified – debts are simple, impersonal, and transferable. In particular, it is money that has the capacity «to turn morality into a matter of impersonal arithmetic»⁴⁶. Violence is the next piece of the puzzle. Violence and quantification are linked. «Violence, or the threat of violence, turns human relations into mathematics»⁴⁷. For Graeber, historical processes led people to be dislodged from their «webs of mutual commitment» to make them exchangeable, that is, subject to the logic of debt⁴⁸. Slavery is the most extreme form of this. Slavery eradicates people from all their social relationships and then turns humans into abstractions. Now, turning back to Jesus and his historical and social context, we have seen how he was concerned with issues such as debt crisis, debt slavery, and the breaking down of social relationships. We could then investigate the early Christian sources by adopting some of Graeber's heuristic hypotheses – even though this can lead to different conclusions from Graeber's on Jesus. In Jesus's teaching, there is evidence of a *critique* of the reduction of humans to impersonal figures and abstractions, and of the reduction of morality and social relationships to impersonal arithmetic. The very Parable of the Unforgiving Servant provides evidence for that. The huge debt first mentioned is canceled, just as the little debt

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 390; cf. p. 2. See p. 82 for his brief analysis. On Graeber's use of the concept of «Biblical Jubilee», which to some extent is problematic if compared to the Jewish biblical sources, see MARGHERITA MANTOVANI, «Release from Slavery and Social Justice: Historical and Semantic Implications in David Graeber's Employment of the Concepts of "Debt" and "Biblical-Style Jubilee" », forthcoming.

⁴⁶ DAVID GRAEBER, *Debt*, p. 14.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

mentioned later. The reciprocity involves the very act of remitting debts, not the amount of them. It is irrelevant whether people forgive a debt of 10 000 talents or of 100 denarii. In the chain reaction that Jesus invites to start, « debts » are not calculated. The logic of arithmetic equivalence implodes.

This is evident also in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20,1-16), where a landowner, in the morning, hires day-laborers for one denarius. Later, he hires other laborers, until the afternoon. When evening comes, the landowner gives laborers their pay, which is one denarius, both for those who have worked one hour and for those who have worked three hours or all day. Jesus introduces this parable as a metaphor for the kingdom of God. From the socioeconomic point of view, this parable can be interpreted as « criticism on the prevailing economic system » centered on profit and self-interest, a reversal of the worldly economic values of « general reciprocity and redistribution » ; in this sense, the parable aims to demonstrate « the possibility of a different kind of social "obligation", one centred not on debt or expectation of a return, but rather on a type of reciprocal solidarity », since the landowner performs an act of « balanced reciprocity, normally reserved for friends or neighbours », that is, more status-symmetrical relationships⁴⁹.

These conclusions by Erin Vearncombe are in line with what we have seen, although her use of the terminology of « general(ized) reciprocity » and « balanced reciprocity » needs some clarification. Several scholars who investigate the Jesus movement use social-scientific models, including a typology of reciprocity, but they often use the same terms in different ways. Basically, all their typologies are built on the well-known one by Marshall Sahlins (generalized, balanced, and negative reciprocity)⁵⁰, but some versions are so revised that the meaning of the categories shifts. Vearncombe adopts the model of exchange provided by Ekkehard and Wolfgang Stegemann, a revised version of Sahlins's typology which (unlike Sahlins's) focuses on status distance rather than social distance, and on the nature of what is exchanged rather than the level of interest of the giver. The Stegemanns' model, then, posits four different types of exchange, that is, Familial, Balanced, General, and Negative Reciprocity⁵¹. While « balanced reciprocity » usually involves a *status-symmetrical* relationship, « general reciprocity » involves a *status-asymmetrical* relationship; then, in this typology, the patron–client relation – which is often employed in social-scientific studies to explain texts such as our parables – belongs to general reciprocity. Yet, other scholars tend to adopt a typology of reciprocity that is more similar to Sahlins's, basically along the lines of Bruce Malina's version⁵². Here, the interest of the giver is retained as a main criterion, and general reciprocity is interpreted as « giving without expecting anything back » ; patronage, in this view, belongs to balanced reciprocity. Ernest van Eck, the author of several thorough studies of Jesus's parables in the light of social-scientific criticism, summarizes these two types of reciprocity as follows:

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49 Quotations are from ERIN K. VEARNCOMBE, « Redistribution and Reciprocity: A Socio-Economic Interpretation of the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20.1-15) », *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 8.3 (2010), pp. 199-236, respectively pp. 235, 234, 203, 232.

50 MARSHALL SAHLINS, *Stone Age Economics*, Chicago, IL, Aldine, 1972, esp. pp. 191-196.

51 EKKEHARD W. STEGEMANN, WOLFGANG STEGEMANN, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 1999 (*Urchristliche Sozialgeschichte: Die Anfänge im Judentum und die Christusgemeinden in der mediterranen Welt*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1995), pp. 34-36.

52 See BRUCE J. MALINA, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation*, Atlanta, GA, John Knox, 1986, pp. 98-106.

Generalised reciprocity (to give without the expectation for return) took place within the sphere of the family or household (family, kin, or clan), in the form of child rearing, hospitality, gifts, and brotherly love. It was altruistic and showed extreme solidarity to one's kin-group. Balanced reciprocity (the idea of *quid pro quo*) either took place between persons with the same (equal) status, or between persons of unequal status. In the case of the former (neighbours, fellow villagers, friends) it served mutual interests and took the form of, for example, bartering, assistance and hospitality. The latter was typical of patron–client relationships in first-century Palestine – socially fixed relations between social unequals.⁵³

This explains why van Eck can conclude that «Jesus did *not* advocate balanced reciprocity, but generalised reciprocity»⁵⁴, and why van Eck can interpret the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard and the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in this sense, sometimes even linking patronage to a sort of «altruistic» intention (more in line, then, with *general* reciprocity according to his model)⁵⁵. This may sound a bit confusing for the reader. Zeba Crook has provided some clarification on the use of models of reciprocity in studies on Jesus and Christian origins, also highlighting how Sahlins's model may lose precision when imported to a different (nonprimitive) context such as the Greco-Roman world and the related characteristics of patronage⁵⁶. To conclude this terminological excursus, I add that – for the sake of my argument – the key point is not whether it is possible to strictly attribute to Jesus's parables a proposal of either general or balanced reciprocity, or a certain view of patronage. Rather, it is fruitful to focus on a pivotal idea that the above-mentioned studies share (notwithstanding their differences in terminology), that is, that Jesus's «social» view was centered on a type of reciprocal solidarity, on debt relief, and on a redefinition of «kinship» whose result was a «kinship economy» where Jesus's followers «had to give without expecting something in return»⁵⁷. This praxis could make the

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⁵³ ERNEST VAN ECK, «When Neighbours Are Not Neighbours: A Social-Scientific Reading of the Parable of the Friend at Midnight (Lk 11:5–8)», *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 67.1 (2011), pp. 1-14, here p. 6 [https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i1.788]. Van Eck mentions Malina as the main source of this typology, but his description seems to introduce some conceptual shifts.

⁵⁴ «Jesus did *not* advocate balanced reciprocity, but generalised reciprocity, an aspect of Jesus' teaching that has been illuminated convincingly by Oakman (...). Q 6:27–28 (Lk 6:27–28; Mt 5:43–44), Q 6:29 (Lk 6:29; Mt 5:39–40), Q 6:30 (Lk 6:30; Mt 5:42a), Q 6:31 (Lk 6:31; Mt 7:12), Gospel of Thomas 6:3 and Q 6:34–35 (Lk 6:34–35; Mt 5:42b; Gospel of Thomas 95:1–2 (see also Lk 14:12–14; Mt 18:23–34) all attest to the fact that Jesus advocated general reciprocity» (*ibid.*, p. 12). Cf., e.g., DOUGLAS E. OAKMAN, *Jesus and the Economic Questions*, p. 215; and *Id.*, *Jesus and the Peasants*, Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock, 2008.

⁵⁵ According to van Eck and Kloppenborg's interpretation of the Parable of the Labourers, the landowner represents a «patron, offering benefits beyond the strict norms of economic exchange», and his characterization as δίκαιος is in line with prophetic texts and with other Jesus' sayings, where δίκαιος has the meaning of «looking out for (...) the most vulnerable in society» (ERNEST VAN ECK, JOHN S. KLOPPENBORG, «An Unexpected Patron: A Social-Scientific and Realistic Reading of the Parable of Vineyard Labourers (Mt 20:1–15)», *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 71.1 (2015), pp. 1-11, here p. 9 [http://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i1.2883]). On the Unforgiving Servant, see ERNEST VAN ECK, «Honour and Debt Release», esp. p. 8 («the parable suggests that in the *basileia* of God, debt should be released in terms of general reciprocity»); and p. 10: «Jesus uses the parable to question 1st-century Mediterranean social relations based on balanced reciprocity and on the pivotal value of honour. A world based on the value of honour (...) ensures the preservation of privileged positions and power, and (...) leads to exploitation and debt. This world is not the *basileia*. On the contrary, the *basileia* of God is present where debt release, in the act itself, is the honourable thing to do».

⁵⁶ See ZEB A. CROOK, «Reflections on Culture and Social-Scientific Models», *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124.3 (2005), pp. 515-520; and *Id.*, *Reconceptualising Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 2004, esp. pp. 54-59.

⁵⁷ VAN ECK, «When Neighbours», p. 12.

kingdom visible. We can agree with these conclusions without necessarily adopting the model of patronage as a heuristic tool, since the application of that model to the context of first-century Palestine has been questioned, and since the social model of Jubilee, ultimately, is alternative to that of patronage. The model of patronage might be present in the parables' cultural background, but, in any case, it is not the social model that Jesus advanced, which was a model oriented towards the ideal of symmetrical and non-exploitative social relations⁵⁸.

A last example of the topics that might be investigated by bringing insights from Graeber into dialogue with sociohistorical analysis of the Jesus movement can be made. In proposing alternatives to the morality inspired by debt and to a debt-based economy, Graeber focuses on local communities and their networks of social solidarity, searching for examples of so-called «human economies»⁵⁹ – opposed to commercial (that is, capitalist) economies – in diverse historical and geographical contexts. His original interpretation of the concept of «communism» is key in this sense: some form of «baseline communism» is – or, for Graeber, should be – at the basis of sociality itself. Graeber's «communism» is not a matter of property ownership, but «a principle of morality»⁶⁰, an ethics that revolves around solidarity, sharing, cooperation. Particularly telling are those sections where Graeber deals with European rural communities of the XVIth and XVIIth centuries. His analysis of such communities in England starts by arguing that

the peasants' vision of communistic brotherhood [the reference is to the 1525 uprising of German peasants mentioned a few pages earlier] did not come out of nowhere. They were rooted in real daily experience: of the maintenance of common fields and forests, of everyday cooperation and neighborly solidarity. It is out of such homely experience of everyday communism that grand mythic visions are always built.⁶¹

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Then Graeber focuses on English rural communities; they were based on mutual aid, solidarity, «everyday communism», systems of credit. Around 1650, Thomas Hobbes proposed a different theory of the basis of social relations and a different moral perspective, a theory which is connected to the development of market economy and modern capitalism. But it is not necessary to follow Graeber's analysis on this last point. I just want to highlight the fact that such a moral and socio-economic model of local cooperation and mutual aid, which Graeber calls attention to, has also been identified by some scholars as the model that Jesus advanced, in opposing

⁵⁸ See ADRIANA DESTRO, MAURO PESCE, *Encounters with Jesus: The Man in His Place and Time*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 2012 (*L'uomo Gesù: Giorni, luoghi, incontri di una vita*, Milan, Mondadori, 2008), pp. 126-127: «Jesus worked in a situation in which the poorer social strata were not able to utilize the mechanisms of patronage. It is irrelevant whether or not he was familiar with the social system of patronage. (...) Jesus' requirement that the itinerant disciples give away their possessions without asking for any recompense and that the others offer a hospitality that falls outside the mechanism of reciprocal exchange undermines the very basis of the patronal relationship and makes it useless. (...) We believe that Jesus was inspired by the Jubilee in the book of Leviticus to envisage another social model, that of the restoration of equality». See also *ibid.*, pp. 104-106; and HALVOR MOXNES, «Patron-Client Relations and the New Community in Luke-Acts», in JEROME H. NEYREY ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, Peabody, MA, Hendrickson, 1991, pp. 241-268, on how Luke radically transforms the social model of patronage: commenting on Luke 14,12-14, Moxnes affirms that «Jesus here urges a break with the system of reciprocities in which a gift is always repaid by the recipient (...). [O]ne shall not expect any return from them [i.e., the poor ones], not even in terms of gratitude or glorification. "Giving" shall no longer be used to create clients, and thus the very basis for patronage is taken away» (p. 264).

⁵⁹ See, e.g., DAVID GRAEBER, *Debt*, p. 130.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

the imperial(istic) hierarchical, divisive, and exploitative model of society that was dominant in his context⁶². Richard Horsley has particularly stressed this point, affirming that Jesus called for the renewal of the village as the main social-political form of traditional peasant life and for new egalitarian relations within the local communities⁶³, where people were also « to enter a new spirit of cooperation and mutual assistance » which included cancelation of debts⁶⁴.

Such topics recall a number of related methodological and interpretative issues, including how to understand Jesus's eschatology and his concept of the « kingdom of God »: Was this conceived as a future reality or as something which was (at least in part) beginning to be active in the present time? Did it pertain to individuals only, or also to society? Was it to have some impact on the present social, political, and economic situation, that is, was it to invite people to promote some social transformations? I have addressed these issues inasmuch as they were related to the main topic of this article and within the length limits of it⁶⁵. The primary aim of this article was to explore the possibility of reconsidering David Graeber's *Debt* in the light of scholarly research on the historical Jesus and on the early groups of Jesus's followers, and vice versa. According to the interpretative trends which I have sided with here, Jesus employed the symbol of the kingdom of God, taken from his cultural background (but also revisited in a creative way), to also promote a transformation of the society of his time in the land of Israel,

⁶² One can arrive at other conclusions, given that radical movements in premodern agrarian societies did not always theorize the elimination of hierarchies, for they could envisage an idealized social structure in which « unjust » hierarchies would be reversed. Thus, JAMES G. CROSSLEY has questioned the « egalitarian » interpretation of the early Jesus movement, arguing that the teachings on the kingdom of God implied that hierarchies and « imperialist » roles should stay in place even in the renewed reality: see *Jesus and the Chaos of History: Redirecting the Life of the Historical Jesus*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, esp. pp. 64-95; cf. JAMES G. CROSSLEY, ROBERT J. MYLES, *Jesus: A Life in Class Conflict*, Aylesford, UK, John Hunt Publishing, 2023. One of the earliest documents produced by the Jesus followers, the Sayings Gospel Q, has been interpreted as « the product of a group that pictures its members as holding key positions of power in the governmental structure of the renewed world » (GIOVANNI BAZZANA, « Q 22:28–30. Judgment or Governance in the Sayings Gospel Q? », in MARKUS TIWALD ed., *Q in Context I: The Separation between the Just and the Unjust in Early Judaism and in the Sayings Source*, Göttingen, V&R unipress, 2015, pp. 169-183, here p. 182). I clarify, however, that I am not building my argument around the concept of « egalitarianism » (see also the following footnote and the conclusions of the present article), nor do I believe the Jesus movement to be related exclusively to peasantry, nor do I want to propose a « romanticizing » view of peasant societies (for an assessment of the use of the « peasantry » category in studies on Christian origins, see SARAH E. ROLLENS, *Framing Social Criticism in the Jesus Movement: The Ideological Project in the Sayings Gospel Q*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2014, pp. 9-43). I also restate that we always have to inquire whether a certain ideological position contained in an early Christian writing is in continuity or in discontinuity with the historical Jesus (as far as it is possible to discern it). Jesus's social project may have been not identical with the (diverse) projects of his first followers.

⁶³ Obviously, such concepts as « egalitarianism » should be used with caution, avoiding reading them through modern lenses. As is known, this concept is also at the core of Crossan's reconstruction of the historical Jesus as a radical social reformer. See, e.g., JOHN D. CROSSAN, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, New York, HarperCollins, 1991. For a balanced discussion of Crossan's ideas on Jesus, with an evaluation of criticisms, see WILLIAM E. ARNAL, « The Synoptic Problem and the Historical Jesus », in PAUL FOSTER et al. eds., *New Studies in the Synoptic Problem: Essays in Honour of Christopher M. Tuckett*, Leuven, Peeters, 2011, pp. 371-432, esp. 407-424.

⁶⁴ See RICHARD A. HORSLEY, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, pp. 209-284 (esp. pp. 251-255 on debt-cancelation); quotation is from p. 325. On Jesus's views on rural society and urban society, see also ADRIANA DESTRO, MAURO PESCE, *Il Battista e Gesù*, pp. 135-139; and I.D., *Encounters with Jesus*, pp. 3-24, 102-127; on the tension between urban centers and rural environments, see also SEAN FREYNE, *Galilee and Gospel: Collected Essays*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2000.

⁶⁵ For a lucid synthesis of such interpretative and methodological issues, see JOHN S. KLOPPENBORG, « Sources, Methods, and Discursive Locations in the Quest of the Historical Jesus », in TOM HOLMÉN, STANLEY E. PORTER eds., *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1, pp. 241-290, esp. pp. 278-286. See also the following footnote.

thus addressing the need for more equity and justice⁶⁶. The imagery of the kingdom of God, then, addressed very concrete social, political, and economic issues (in addition to religious ones) and had very concrete social and political implications. As we have seen, probably Jesus thought that humans were involved in the general (possibly present) transformation related to the establishment of such a «kingdom» (even though its decisive and future fulfilment was to be ascribed to God). In Jesus's teaching, it is God who will implement his kingdom, yet this kingdom is also intended as a new model of society (or community), a social organization that, in principle, can be realized, and which involves a transformation of the current social structures in favor of a «(more) socially just society [*sozial gerechte(re)n Gesellschaft*]» – a model that is more «heterotopian» than utopian⁶⁷. If the deepest intention of David Graeber's book *Debt* (as well as of his entire experience both of research and life) was to invite people to explore possibilities for transforming societies which are (or have become) unjust, and to argue that it is possible to rethink the relations among human beings, then the best way to do justice to such challenging «Great Questions» (Graeber's words) and to explore the potential for his work to contribute to the academic study of religion is to continue studying, with both traditional and new methods, those historically influential religious leaders who dealt with such fundamental questions on human beings and human society⁶⁸.

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⁶⁶ In addition to the above-mentioned bibliography, see ERNEST VAN ECK, *The Parables of Jesus the Galilean: Stories of a Social Prophet*, Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock, 2016, pp. 40-41: Jesus's ethics «advocated the sharing of resources, the practice of general reciprocity, and the release of debt. (...) In his parables Jesus imagined a different world (...). The kingdom, for Jesus, was this-worldly: it was about the here and now, about his world, about *his* present». It might be too categorical to argue that, for Jesus, the kingdom was *exclusively* «this-worldly», just as it would be to argue that it was *exclusively* otherworldly, future, or «spiritual». The enormous debate on Jesus's eschatology cannot be addressed here. I just refer to GERD THEISSEN, ANNETTE MERZ, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 1998 (*Der historische Jesus: Ein Lehrbuch*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1996), pp. 240-280; JOHN P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, New York, Doubleday, 1994, pp. 289-506; DALE C. ALLISON, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History*, Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2010, pp. 31-220; CRISPIN FLETCHER-LOUIS, «Jesus and Apocalypticism», in TOM HOLMÉN, STANLEY E. PORTER eds., *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, vol. 3, pp. 2877-2909; and ANDREA ANNESE, «Gesù e l'apocalittica. Le tendenze della ricerca e due casi di studio (Lc 10,18; *logion* Freer)», *Filosofia e Teologia* 35.1 (2021), pp. 87-100 (with further bibliography). Supporting the view of a Jesus holding an apocalyptic eschatology does not mean to deny that he had social concerns and vice versa; cf. DALE C. ALLISON, *Constructing Jesus*, p. 97. I clarify that I do not agree with scholars holding a «non-apocalyptic» or a «non-eschatological» Jesus.

⁶⁷ Thus WOLFGANG STEGEMANN, *Jesus und seine Zeit*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2010, esp. pp. 322-325 (see therein also the use of the concept of *präpolitisch*, borrowed from Hannah Arendt, applied to the notion of the kingdom of God in the Jesus movement); pp. 325-353 (section «Das Reich Gottes als heterotoper Gesellschaftsentwurf»); pp. 345-348 (par. «Das Reich Gottes als soziale Heterotopie»; the quotation above about the «just society» is from p. 346). The concept of «heterotopia» is borrowed from Michel Foucault.

⁶⁸ Quotation is from DAVID GRAEBER, *Debt*, p. 19 (capital letters in the original); see also p. 18: «This book is a history of debt, then, but it also uses that history as a way to ask fundamental questions about what human beings and human society are or could be like».