Recall that the terms “patron” and “benefactor” were both prevalent in the first century, and often appear to have been used interchangeably, but that there were important differences between them. The Roman version of patron-client relationships, where the benefactor had a duty to create long-term clients who were subservient to the patron, was dominant. However, the older Greek understanding of benefaction as giving resources for the good of the larger community without expecting anything in return had not been forgotten (e.g., Seneca).

There are many references to benefaction and/or patron-client dynamics evident in Luke. For example, Danker (1982) cites 241 verses that allude to benefaction, including many of the healings and banquets. The following example, which we have already looked at earlier, is illustrative of an ongoing emphasis of upturning conventional views regarding patron-client relationships:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (Luke 14:12b–14)

Jesus here urges a break with the system of reciprocities in which a gift is always repaid by the recipient . . . This statement represents an important transformation of the very basis for patronage . . . “Giving” shall no longer be used to create clients, and thus the very basis for patronage is taken away . . . [T]he dawn of God’s new age, a time associated with setting slaves free, cancelling debts, of returning land to its original oikos under Moses.

Another signpost passage that has a lot to say about patron-client relationships is found in the very first words Jesus speaks at the beginning of his public ministry: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19).

It is instructive to note that the final phrase of this passage, “the year of the Lord’s favor,” refers to the Old Testament idea of Jubilee living (see Isa. 61, Lev. 25), which listeners would have recognized as general reference to doing away with patron-client relationships: “[T]he dawn of God’s new age,” a time associated with setting slaves free, cancelling debts, of returning land to its original oikos under Moses.
In other words, from the start Jesus has a clear focus on overcoming political and socioeconomic structures and systems that oppress people.6

This is consistent with Luke’s passages on indebtedness, which lies at the core of the patron-client relationship. In each case where Luke talks about indebtedness and being obligated (opheilo) to another party, the emphasis is on forgiving or removing those debts (Luke 7:41; 11:4; 16:5; 7; 17:10). The most well-known example of this is the Lord’s Prayer, which says: “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone [financially] indebted to us” (Luke 11:4). This is consistent with the parable of the shrewd manager we examined in chapter five, where the manager is praised for forgiving some of the debts others owed to his master (Luke 16:1ff).

Among the dozens of passages that could be examined in this chapter, we will focus on three that stand out for having particularly plentiful evidence of patron-client relations7: (1) the story of the centurion who wanted Jesus to heal his slave (Luke 7:1–10); (2) Jesus sends his followers on a peace mission (Luke 10:1–20); and (3) Jesus’ description of how to be great (Luke 17:11–19). Other well-known passages where benevolence is clearly evident include the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37; whom Danker [1982: 339] calls “The Beneficent Samaritan”) and the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10).

**Jesus Heals a Centurion’s Slave (Luke 7:1–10)**

The passage where Jesus heals the slave of a centurion displays classic evidence of patron-client relations: A “patron” (i.e., the centurion) who has built a Jewish synagogue asks his “clients” (i.e., the religious leaders) to act as brokers to have his slave healed by Jesus. The passage is particularly striking for how the story takes several twists and turns that undermine traditional first-century patron-client relations. As shown in table 9.1, the first time this happens is when the patron seems to become a client of Jesus (i.e., when the patron calls Jesus “Lord”).8 The second happens when Jesus declines the opportunity to become a patron, but proceeds to heal the slave without any sense of future indebtedness on behalf of the centurion.

In other words, the centurion could have asked to be treated as a patron thanks to his building of the synagogue, but he chose not to. Similarly, Jesus could have accepted the opportunity to be treated as a patron for healing the centurion’s slave, but he also chose not to. Instead the passage reframes patron-client relations. In the passage the centurion’s benefaction is disconnected from the healing of his slave, just as Jesus’ benefaction is disconnected from any subsequent obligations from the centurion (or his slave). “Thus ends the story of not one but two benefactors,”9 and of no indebted clients per se.


Although it might not be self-evident to contemporary readers, scholars agree that the passage where Jesus sends 70 (or 72) followers on a mission (Luke 10:1–20) has a lot to say about patron-client relations. This passage is particularly interesting for our present study because it parallels the parable of the ten pounds, which is its chiastic “twin” based on the way the narrative structure of Luke has been organized (this chiastic relationship will be described in much greater depth in chapter thirteen). Using a linguistic formula that would have been easily recognized in the first