



Revisiting the Parable of the Good Samaritan

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Introduction

The Gospel story of a Samaritan who assists the victim of a vicious assault has entered popular consciousness. The parable and its central imagery have lived an extended life in the general community beyond the bible. Good Samaritan Laws in various constituencies provide immunity from lawsuits for any ordinary negligence occurring while rendering aid in emergency situations.^[1] An *Inn of the Good Samaritan* was constructed on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho—initially to sell paraphernalia to tourists—which has been upgraded to a museum dedicated to pre-senting Jewish, Samaritan and Christian cultural life in Israel.^[2] This museum is an example of how “sacred spaces become intertwined with the history of textual interpretation,”^[3] which potentially confounds the meaning of the original story. The biblical story has propelled numerous hospitals and organizations such as The Good Samaritan Society^[4] and Samaritan’s Purse.^[5] Artworks—most notably by Rembrandt^[6] and Van Gogh^[7]—present the story visually. The Gospel story has introduced to common speech a term for a kind and compassionate person—a good Samaritan. Politicians have appropriated the image of the Good Samaritan to further their agendas, especially in debates about social welfare programs and policies on asylum-seekers.^[8] Commentators have even used the image to explain the popular appeal of reality TV makeover programs.^[9] This constellation of popular cultural references provides “an interesting instance of a confluence between Scripture, proclamation, and cultural appropriation of Christian symbols and influence.”^[10] Given its multiple appearances, this parable “has a fair claim to be one of the most culturally pervasive stories found in the New Testament.”^[11] It may also have a fair claim to be one of the most misinterpreted stories found in the New Testament. The meshing of biblical and popular culture has provided potential confusion in the way Gospel readers understand this parable.

This parable appears only in Luke 10:25-37 and is set within a discussion between Jesus and a lawyer concerning an answer to a question about what is required to inherit eternal life. The conversation moves to a contentious point of Jewish Law: who is to be considered a neighbor? In response, Jesus tells the story of a helpful Samaritan who renders compassionate care to a severely injured victim of a violent criminal gang. At the conclusion of Luke’s fictional account, Jesus asks the lawyer which person proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the thieves. The lawyer gives the correct response: “the one who showed him mercy.”

The following discussion revisits this story of the merciful stranger. It offers a survey of contemporary scholarly literature published for English-speaking audiences which can be employed in evaluating the meaning and significance of this parable. It considers the necessity of a careful and close reading of Luke’s parable to avoid adverse interpretations of Jews and Judaism that have been a feature of traditional Christian presentations of the story.

Traditional Christian Presentations of the Parable of the Good Samaritan

The actions of the Samaritan in assisting the wounded victim are described in precise detail in Luke 10:34-35. Christian leaders in the early Church consistently understood the parable to be an allegory: “Jerusalem stood for paradise and Jericho for the world into which man had fallen by the

agency of the demons, whereas the Samaritan represented Christ.”^[12] Augustine of Hippo (354-430), for example, taught that the oil and wine represented the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, the inn represented the Church, the robbers were Satan and his minions, and the Samaritan signified Christ.^[13] While modern readers can be excused for thinking such interpretations are somewhat far-fetched, their legacy endures. Popular piety continues to observe that “the real good Samaritan is Jesus Christ himself, who has come into the world to bind the wounds of a broken humanity in the hospital of the Church...In the end, we must become like the good Samaritan, like Jesus Christ.”^[14] Despite the persistence of modern popular allegorical interpretations, a consensus has emerged among critical “scholars of all theological stripes...that the Samaritan is not Jesus.”^[15]

Unusually for the Gospel parables, this narrative provides a specific geographical location: somewhere along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho (the only other instance of a geographical reference for a parable is the Pharisee and the tax collector in the Jerusalem Temple in Luke 18:10). This geographical reference may have historical plausibility. Jericho was known as a place with a high population of priests and officials dedicated to serving the Jerusalem Temple. These officials were apparently attracted by “the fertility of the Jericho region as well as its administrative importance.”^[16] There existed a “close connection between the Temple in Jerusalem and the priestly city of Jericho.”^[17] Priests and Levites were a regular feature on the Jerusalem-Jericho road as a consequence of their regular rotations to undertake service in the Temple.

When Christians have read, studied and preached this parable, the tendency has been to focus on the avoidance of the injured man by the priest and the Levite because they are fearful of corpse contamination: if they touch a corpse, they will be rendered ritually impure and will not be able to participate in the rituals associated with the Jerusalem Temple. The priest and the Levite have traditionally been viewed as representatives of Judaism true to Torah observance and therefore “appearing as self-righteous...lacking compassion because cultic purity is more important to them than a person in need.”^[18] For many Christian teachers, preachers, and Gospel readers, the parable speaks of how Jesus’ teaching about God’s kingdom favors (Christian) compassion over slavish and outdated notions of (Jewish) rules of ritual purity.

An example of this kind of influential scholarly commentary is provided by Joseph Fitzmyer who described the “heartless, perhaps Law-inspired insouciance of two representatives of the official Jewish cult, who otherwise would have been expected by their roles and heritage to deal with the ‘purification’ of physically afflicted persons.”^[19] Fitzmyer’s supposition of the “Law-inspired insouciance” of the priest and Levite neatly encapsulates predominant traditional Christian interpretations of the parable. It makes the focus of the parable an evaluation of deficient Jewish Law over and against Christian compassion.

Richard Bauckham offers a less pejorative perspective on Jewish religion while maintaining the focus of the parable on ritual purity. He distills the dilemma traditionally accepted to be at the heart of the parable: the contest between Jewish Law and human compassion: “when it confronts a priest with a dead or dying man, it sets up an unusual, halakhically debatable situation, since the commandment that a priest avoid contracting corpse-impurity conflicts with the commandment to love the neighbor. One commandment must take precedence.”^[20] In a similar way, Amy-Jill Levine observes how “in many Christian contexts, the Samaritan comes to represent the Christian who has learned to care for others or to break free of prejudice, whereas the priest and the Levite represent Judaism, understood to be xenophobic, promoting ritual purity over compassion, proclaiming self-interest over love of neighbor and otherwise being something that needs to be rejected.”^[21] While clearly not a Christian, the Samaritan has been used as a cipher employed to assert Christian superiority over Jewish inadequacy. The compassionate Samaritan has been read as a proxy character to justify the replacement of Jews and Jewish religion by Christians and Christianity in God’s plan of salvation.

Looking Closely at Key Story Elements

These prevailing Christian interpretations are challenged by a closer reading of the story. First, the man in the ditch is not dead; no issues of corpse contamination can apply in this fictional account. As John Meier observes: ‘if the wounded person in Luke’s parable is ‘half-dead’ ... he therefore posed no immediate danger of corpse impurity to a Jewish priest.’^[22] No Torah proscriptions exist concerning priestly care for a person who is “half-dead.” In addition, if Luke was alluding to Leviticus 21:1 (“no one shall defile himself for a dead person”) for guidance on contact with a corpse, the law applied only to priests, not to Levites. This fact, alone, quashes any concerns about corpse contamination that might apply in this parable, since both avoid the injured man, not just the priest. The presence of the Levite in the story is an indication that the meaning of the parable is not best located in a consideration of Jewish purity laws.

In fact, Luke does not draw attention to issues of ritual purity in his story at all. Unlike a cascade of later Christian readers who have focused on this aspect, Luke does not mention it. If Luke wished to make this a story about ritual purity, we could reasonably expect some narrative clues. Luke typically used other literary devices when he intended to highlight issues of ritual purity: “when Luke wants to depict a strict and rigorous observation of the law, it is not priests he puts on stage but rather scribes and Pharisees.”^[23] Neither scribe nor Pharisee is mentioned in this account. Luke says nothing in this story to draw a reader’s attention to issues of ritual purity.

In any case, the priest is not on his way to the Temple—he was “going down that road” (Greek, *katabaino*) (Luke 10:31) towards Jericho and away from Jerusalem, and “so likewise a Levite” (Luke 10:32). Any concern about limiting participation in Temple worship due to ritual impurity does not apply in this story since neither man is going to the Temple. This story detail has long been noticed by scholars^[24] but has been generally overlooked in popular readings of the parable.

Samaritans and Jews

Jews and Samaritans were neighbors. According to 2 Kings 17, the Assyrian conquerors of the Northern Kingdom of Israel settled the Samaritans on the conquered land in the late eighth century BCE. Samaritans established their own Torah, their own Temple on Mt Gerizim and their own priesthood. While crucial differences existed, and each group pursued different paths, they did so “in remarkably similar fashion.”^[25] By the first century CE, relationships between Jews and Samaritans were strained, but not broken. Bohm says, for centuries, tensions “smouldered beneath the surface, and with regard to cultic matters, had grown since Hasmonean times.”^[26] The extent of the conflict between Jews and Samaritans will be discussed further below.

Several scholars have paid attention to the way Samaritans are featured in Luke-Acts. A foundational scholarly interest focuses on the way echoes of 2 Chronicles 28:8-15 may have resounded in Luke’s parable of the compassionate Samaritan. The Chronicler related the tale of how the prophet Oded convinced people from Samaria to take pity on prisoners who had been carried off from Judah and Jerusalem by the Samaritan army—identified in Chronicles as “the people of Israel” (2 Chronicles 28:8): “they clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them; and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kindred at Jericho” (2 Chronicles 28:15). A consensus among scholars on the specific influence of Chronicles on Luke’s parable is lacking. The connection of 2 Chronicles to the parable was proposed by Crossan^[27] with an extensive development of this idea by Spencer.^[28] Others have joined the fray. Scheffler^[29] found nine points of direct similarity between Luke’s parable and 2 Chronicles 28. Kalimi believes “it is reasonable to assume that the story in Chronicles was used by the Evangelist as a paradigm for his story.”^[30]

While the existence of a connection between Luke and the Chronicler has failed to convince

everyone, we can say at least that the story in Chronicles is consistent with Luke's interest in Samaritans. Luke's Gospel includes three stories involving Samaritans. Among the synoptic Gospels, Luke exhibits an almost exclusive interest in Samaritans and Samaria. (Matthew mentions Samaritans only once briefly at Matthew 10:5; Mark makes no mention.) Samaria and Samaritans are mentioned numerous times in Acts. Luke locates this parable in his Gospel after a story of Jesus being rejected in a Samaritan village in Luke 9:51-56. Interestingly, and against the advice of his trusted disciples, Luke's Jesus urges no retaliation when the Samaritans do not receive him (Luke 9:51-55). And, according to Luke, a Samaritan is the only one who thanks Jesus among the ten healed of leprosy (Luke 17:11-19). It should be noted that the Samaritan seems to have no difficulty keeping company with nine (presumably) Jewish others. Nor is there any indication that all ten lepers did not consult the same (presumably) Jewish priest. Luke includes Samaritans in his narrative as natural participants in each setting he describes. The compassionate Samaritan is no exception to his literary practice.

According to Dowling,^[31] Luke inserts stories into his Gospel and Acts about the restoration of Samaritans as a key step in the process that preceded the Gentile mission. Luke does not actually present the Samaritan in his parable or Samaritans in general as despised by Jews nor as their enemies. He is aware of strains in the relationship between Jews and Samaritans, but he does not denigrate Samaritans. As Reinhard Pummer points out, the evidence of contact between Jews and Samaritans suggests that "hostilities occurred only at certain times and only by some groups" and cannot be generalized to all Jews and Samaritans at all times.^[32] Indeed, Jesus travels through Samaritan territory on his way to Jerusalem (Luke 9:56). And the Samaritan in the parable is traveling through Jewish territory, without remark from Luke about the plausibility of this story detail. If antagonism between the two groups was deep and general, such travels could be considered unlikely. Such travel arrangements point to a "community of convenience" for neighbors who co-existed in the same vicinity.^[33]

Traditional accepted characterisations of Samaritans have been challenged by scholars who question the evidence of Samaritan "otherness" in the New Testament period. Bauckham insists "it is crucial not to read the Samaritan as though he was a Gentile...because a Samaritan acknowledges and claims to obey the Mosaic law."^[34] Keddie identifies the Samaritan in the parable as an example of the "proximate other"^[35]—a term borrowed from religious studies scholar Jonathan Smith who used it to identify those who are "too-much-like-us."^[36] Chalmers thinks that interpretation of "absolute difference" between Jews and Samaritans is a product of scholarly habits of "both racialized and polemicized readings of the text." He thinks "the Samaritan is better read, along with priests and Levites, as a limit concept to regulate the proper behavior of those included within a programmatic restored 'Israel.'"^[37] Meier argues the addition of a compassionate Samaritan fits Luke's theological agenda of presenting the Samaritans as a significant step in the process of salvation.^[38] Meier describes the Samaritans as "in between or liminal people, neither fully Jewish nor fully Gentile—though the historical Samaritans considered themselves 'Israel.'"^[39] Kalimi thinks Luke is echoing the belief that despite all that has happened between them, "Samaritans have a brotherhood relationship with Judeans...and there is hope that in future days they will be united to Judea."^[40] The presentation of Samaritans in antiquity as despised enemies of Jews is strongly challenged by an increasing roll-call of scholars.

The idea that the parable conveys a state of mutual enmity between Jews and Samaritans is further confounded by a focus on the injured victim. His identity is not disclosed in the parable. The story does not say the victim is a Jew, though this is the guess many interpreters make about his identity. The parable describes him only as "a certain man"—*anthropos tis* in Luke's original Greek (Luke 10:30). So, an interpretation of the story as an example of loving one's enemies is doubtful. As Luise Schottroff observes, for this to be the case "the text would have to make it clear that the man who was attacked was a Jew."^[41] The story does not, therefore, offer a view whether the compassionate response of the Samaritan constitutes overcoming a cultural barrier. The story does not advocate love of enemies, since the text does not establish that the Samaritan and the

injured man are, in fact, enemies. We would need some indication from the narrative that the injured man was a member of another cultural group who were identified as enemies of Samaritans, for this interpretation to be valid.

What is clear from the text is that the Samaritan represents a cultural group that shares a commitment to Torah, albeit a rival text and interpretation from their Jewish neighbors. Jews and Samaritans worshipped the same God, even if their religious expressions exhibited discernible differences. Evidence of the relationship between Jews and Samaritans from Late Second Temple and Early Rabbinic literature is inconsistent and contested. No single, definitive image is presented. Gary Knoppers, after surveying the evidence concerning Jewish-Samaritan exclusion and conflict, concluded that the “anti-Samaritan theory has been dealt a series of serious blows.”[\[42\]](#)

The Addition of “Good” to Describe the Samaritan

An evaluation of the adjective, good, in the identification of the helpful traveler reveals some of the inherited bias in the way the story is told and received by Christians. The first thing to note in this discussion is that the word, *good*, does not appear in the biblical text. Robbins explains how the use of “good” draws focus away from the meaning and significance of the Samaritan’s actions:

Careful attention to Lukan discourse reveals that no adjective for “good” (*agathos* or *kalos*) occurs either in the parable or in the interchange between Jesus and the lawyer. Rather, the focus is on the response of all of one’s body to the needs of others, no matter what the circumstances or who the people might be.[\[43\]](#)

The traveler is identified by Luke as a Samaritan but no further adjective is included to indicate the content of his character. The use of *good* to describe the Samaritan comes from readers and editors of the biblical text, not from Luke’s account of the story. This adjective, if used in a modern story, would be viewed by an audience as offensive, even inflammatory. As Amy-Jill Levine points out, there is no such thing as a “Good Catholic Hospital” or a “Good Episcopalian social service organisation.”[\[44\]](#) Good—used in this way—seeks to divide and contrast: the identification of a “Good Catholic” or a “Good Anglican” distinguishes the admirable subject of the story from most Catholics or Anglicans who would not implicitly be considered “good.”

The use of “good” to describe the Samaritan can be characterized as a back-handed compliment. These attempts to flatter and grant elevated status contribute to achieving the opposite. Backhanded compliments have mixed effectiveness, as people who deliver them “erroneously believe that they will both convey high status and elicit liking but recipients and third-party evaluators grant them neither.”[\[45\]](#) Researchers refer to backhanded compliments as cryptosemes. A cryptosemic compliment is:

a message in communication that is routinely exchanged on the virtue of its good intentions, while closer, mindful scrutiny reveals other obscured dimensions of meaning that subvert the implied praise but go unperceived or ignored by all parties involved. Cryptosemic compliments are rooted in deeply internalized, reified notions of what is normal, natural and true and serve as a window into cultural stereotypes and double-standards operating under the veneer of praise.[\[46\]](#)

The problem with cryptosemic compliments lies not in the verbalized content, but in “the unspoken, ‘mythologized,’ mindlessly taken-for-granted presuppositions underlying the words.”[\[47\]](#) It is a face-saving strategy often employed in conversations involving socio-culturally

diverse participants. A telling example occurred with the attempted compliment by Senator Joseph Biden when he described prospective President Barack Obama on 31 January 2007: “I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy. I mean, that’s a storybook, man.”^[48] Not surprisingly, many pointed out that being mainstream, articulate, bright, clean and handsome did not make Barack Obama unique, rare or unusual among African Americans. In a similar fashion, the description of a *good* Samaritan, might cause an audience—upon reflection—to ponder the perceptions of cultural stereotypes and double standards that lurk beneath the veneer of praise.

The addition of “good” when describing a leading character distracts the reader from attending to the author’s intentions for conveying the meaning of this parable. An evaluation of the appropriateness of the adjective “good” can encourage Gospel readers to explore and evaluate more expressive titles for this parable beyond its traditional descriptor, and to consider what difference these alternatives might hold for understanding its meaning. Among suggestions are: *The Compassionate Samaritan*; *From Jerusalem to Jericho*; and *The Merciful Neighbor*.

The attribution of the word, “good,” to the Samaritan functions to promote Christian identification with the Samaritan and solidify the contrast with the putatively “bad” Jews who are bound by a corrupted religion from rendering assistance to a neighbor in need. Such interpretations provide yet another example of an occasion when “Christians, and especially New Testament scholars needed to prove that Christianity was superior to Judaism....In the age of liberal humanism, in which humanity is the measure of all things, Judaism must be proved to produce bad human beings.”^[49] A common theme in Christian New Testament scholarship from the nineteenth century was the attempt to “elevate Jesus above the world of first-century Palestine” and to separate Jesus from his own religious and cultural context and to present him “in absolute opposition to his shallow, hypocritical, unspiritual, literal, Jewish opponents.”^[50] The identification of the “Good” Samaritan requires revision to avoid contributing to this historical misstep.

The “Good” Innkeeper

One character in the story often given only cursory treatment is the “good” innkeeper. “For many, the inn and the figure of the innkeeper simply do not play any role in the meaning of the parable.”^[51] However, the role of the innkeeper is a key to unlocking the puzzles of the parable. Inns had become a feature of life in Judea since the start of the Roman occupation in 63 BCE and had become “one of the most familiar features of the Roman imperial road system.”^[52] Members of the upper classes were known to look down on innkeepers. They tended to rely on their own networks of private contacts for accommodation while traveling and were less liable to stay at roadside inns which were the preserve of government employees and merchants required to travel for business. Josephus, a member of a priestly family, claimed that female innkeepers could not marry priests under Jewish Law—an interpretation of Leviticus 21:7—“they shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled”—that seems unique to him among ancient authors: “he forbade them to wed such women as gain their living by cheating trades and by keeping inns.”^[53]

In antiquity, innkeepers were not highly regarded members of the community. The original audience for the parable might have registered surprise at the ready acceptance by the innkeeper of responsibility to care for the injured man. The ambience of an inn was not conducive to rest or recuperation. The atmosphere of an inn was “coarse, at times even violent. Outbreaks of drunkenness were common, as were quarrels, robberies, prostitution and even murders.”^[54] An account of leaving an injured man in the care of an innkeeper presents a credibility challenge to the parable’s original audience.

The innkeeper might not have been expected to act with such selfless commitment towards the

injured man. While the innkeeper's expenses were guaranteed by the Samaritan—two denarii down-payment plus an assurance of the balance on his return (Luke 10:35)—the innkeeper was required to attend to the man in addition to his regular employment. And, he needed to exhibit trust that the Samaritan would honor his word and return to make good any subsequent expenses. The connection between Samaritan and innkeeper points to an often-ignored dimension of the parable: the innkeeper also acts in reverse to expectations of the original audience: "the Samaritan story works predominantly in relation to the axis of mutual trust between the two characters in 10:35. That axis of trust is part of the shock of the unexpected within the story."[\[55\]](#)

If we read the innkeeper as acting contrary to the way the original hearers of the parable expected—then, this may illuminate the roles of the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan: *all* characters in the story act contrary to audience expectations, not just the Samaritan. The behavior of all three is surprising and contrary to expectations Luke's audience might have held for them. The priest and the Levite might have been expected to observe the basic commandment to act compassionately towards the injured man. They did not. The Samaritan might not have been expected by an audience to act with compassion. He did not ignore the injured man. Luke focuses on this reversal of expectations to energize the story; he does not establish a false opposition between Jewish Law and Christian compassion.

The Motives of the Priest and Levite

A consideration of the reversal of expectations from all actors in this drama leads us to consider what motivated the actions of the priest and Levite in their decisions to avoid the injured man. Significantly, the story itself provides little indication of the motives for their actions. This has left Gospel readers to fill the blanks, commonly to the detriment of Christian attitudes towards Jews and Jewish religion.

Gospel readers have access to other plausible explanations besides considerations of ritual purity and lack of compassion to account for the actions of the priest and Levite. Martin Luther King, Jr. once preached a sermon where he offered an alternative perspective to the majority view to account for the actions of both. He identified fear as the motivating characteristic in their decision making:

So it is possible that the Priest and the Levite were afraid that if they stopped they too would have been beaten; for couldn't the robbers still be around? Or maybe the man on the ground was just a faker, using a pretended wounded condition to draw passing travelers to his side for quick and easy seizure. So I can imagine that the first question which the Priest and the Levite asked was: "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" Then the good Samaritan came by, and by the very nature of his concern reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"[\[56\]](#)

King continued his sermon to relate the teachings of the parable to the personal costs involved for a person who assisted African Americans in their struggles for justice. King's insight encourages Gospel readers to consider this and other plausible reasons to account for the actions of priest and Levite.

Ruben Zimmerman (2008) has summarized the results of socio-psychological researchers who have identified seven reasons why people do not help others in need in emergency situations: 1) diffusion of responsibilities, where others are present and more competent; 2) the bystander effect, where an emergency situation is judged incorrectly; 3) fear of valuation, where helpers believe they are not competent; 4) helper syndrome, to avoid helper burn-out; 5) avoidance of dependence on the helper who possesses superior power to the person in need; 6) socio-biological objections,

where helping could interrupt natural systems of competition and adaptation; and, 7) economic objections, where helping is determined to expend scarce resources which could be deployed more efficiently.^[57]

These disparate reasons for looking the other way suggest that an individual finding themselves confronting an emergency could decide to act—or not act—for a variety of reasons. And, they further open the possibility that two people encountering the same situation could have chosen the same action for different reasons. Judgments about the motivations of the priest and Levite are ultimately inconclusive. Scarce, if any, narrative clues are provided by the author to account for their actions. But, we can say there are a number of credible reasons for a person not to render assistance to another in need. While none is mentioned or even hinted at in the story, we can say that observance of Jewish purity regulations is among the least likely.

Luke does not offer any clues to account for the actions of the two Jewish officials. This is somewhat surprising since Luke's parables are brimming with characters who reveal their inner thoughts at moments of moral crisis. Consider the numerous occasions in Luke's parables where the storyteller recounts an interior monologue (the foolish farmer, Luke 12:16-20; the unfaithful servant, 12:45; the younger son, 15:17-19; the dishonest manager, 16:3-4; the unjust judge, 18:4-5) or a rhetorical self-address when the character speaks out loud with no one else present, such as the farmer in Luke 20:13 who wonders aloud what he should do next. By this literary means, Luke invites his readers into the private world of his characters by "frequent use of soliloquy where we are made privy to the inner musings of the characters. Luke expresses realistic sympathy for the dilemmas of ordinary human existence."^[58] Surprisingly then, Luke does not include a characteristic soliloquy from either priest or Levite: "the characters in the parable of the Good Samaritan make their thoughts and feelings known only through their actions...we get no glimpse of any of their motivations."^[59]

The actions of the priest and the Levite are paradoxical: "the priest and Levite are not blind. They see—and they do not see. In our culture of looking the other way, we have precisely this paradoxical correlation. We see and we do not see. Seeing is more than just an objective sensory process."^[60] This observation points to the universal application of Luke's story. The narrated event can fit comfortably into any human context: "one does not have to be a Jewish priest or Levite to 'pass by on the other side of the road'."^[61] Luise Schottroff offers an insight into the struggle between religious aspiration and human decision-making. She attributes the actions of the priest and Levite to "the structural power of sin, which prevents people from really looking, even when they see, and from acting and loving even when they know it is God's will."^[62] Gospel readers are free to offer their own conjectures about the motivations of the priest and the Levite which do not require them to include pejorative commentary on Jews and Jewish religion.

This parable, like many which Luke recounts, reveals life in concrete, complex and realistic focus. Sellwold thinks the characters in most of Luke's parables are "not heroic by any measure, but they are ultimately plausible and thus successful as characters, because the portrayal of their inner debate brings them to life in such a sudden and unforgettable way. We see ourselves reflected in his little people caught in awkward places. The frantic thoughts and calculations, the desperate attempts to claw out of trouble, these defining moments...could just as well be our own."^[63] The priest and Levite are literary characters caught in one of those defining moments. These fictional characters come to life because they behave realistically—with notable flaws. Sanders says that hypocrisy is a real problem, and "we see these failings around us and in ourselves. But these are human failings, and they are not peculiar to some particular religious system or culture."^[64] The priest and the Levite in this story are better characterized as flawed humans, rather than as representatives of a flawed religion. They invite the reader—then and now—to identify with them in their situation, as examples of realistic humans caught in an awkward place. They represent any religious person who knows the right and proper thing to do according to their religion's precepts but, in a given situation for whatever reason, does not do it. Their likely motivations are cloaked in

ambiguity and complexity.

Conclusion

A refreshed reading of the parable of the Samaritan challenges received interpretations of the parable as a contest between Christian compassion and Jewish law-inspired hard-heartedness. The compelling puzzle in this parable is not about the perceived inadequacies of one religion in contrast to another. Jewish religion contains abundant wisdom on the value of compassion. Psalm 109:31 reveals God who “stands at the right hand of the needy.” The commandment to care for the stranger in their midst was mentioned more than any other in Torah: “the stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19:34). The priest and the Levite can be expected to be well-versed in the biblical edicts to care for the stranger in need.

The priest and the Levite are subjects with whom we can identify personally; they are not heroic, but they are plausible. They are not presented as role models for ideal behavior, but they do call the reader to consider their own likely response in a similar situation. On our better days, we can perform what we know is the compassionate, merciful response in awkward situations.

Unfortunately, only the rare ones among us can do this on every occasion; we see, but we do not see. We learn from Luke’s parable that even our religious commitments cannot guarantee we will act with compassionate care on every difficult occasion that presents itself to us. Religious commitments did not compel two Jewish officials on that day who were fully aware of their lawful responsibilities to aid a neighbor in need.

Luke likes to reverse his reader’s expectations. From the beginning of his Gospel, he lauds the divine action in bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly (Luke 1:52). Gospel readers could expect to be surprised by the behavior of the Samaritan. If we were better informed, we might also be surprised by the behavior of the innkeeper who would not traditionally be known as a benevolent social worker. We should also expect that Luke wants his reader to be surprised by the actions of the two Jewish officials who pass by the injured man. Regrettably, Christian readers traditionally have failed to register surprise that four characters in the story act in reverse to expectations, not just one.

Teachers, preachers, and commentators would profit from keeping in mind Kalimi’s observation that “after all, the story under review is a parable or illustrative tale...rather than a historical description.”^[65] The story should be treated on its merits, attentive to the story elements presented by the author, rather than as a news report or documentary feature. If the author, for example, wanted the victim to be deceased, then he would have indicated that in the story. If the priest was traveling to the Temple preparing to lead religious rituals, then that would have been indicated by the author. If purity was a consideration in the process of deciding whether to render assistance, then some indication would have been offered by Luke. If Jews and Samaritans were considered as mutually despised enemies, the author would have drawn the reader’s attention to this. Gospel readers who interject wished for elements into the narrative to suit a particular ideological agenda distort the meaning of the story and distract readers from a careful and close reading of the text. This does potential damage to a reader’s understanding and appreciation for a core element of Christian teaching, and to a reasonable Christian understanding of Jews and Jewish religion.

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