

1. Jesus act?
2. What is a parable?
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Short Stories by Jesus

THE ENIGMATIC PARABLES OF
A CONTROVERSIAL RABBI

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proves the prediction wrong. If Ishmael and Isaac can reconcile, perhaps their children can do the same.

A father had two sons—Jacob and Esau—one who stole birthright and blessing and one who vowed murder in revenge. And yet, when Jacob, wounded from his wrestling at the Jabbok River, encounters Esau, the two reconcile.

A father had two sons . . . The details can be filled in, and filled, by any among us. The scriptures of Israel give us hope for the sons in Luke's parable. They should give us hope for our own reconciliations, from the personal to the international. We need to take count not only of our blessings, but also of those in our families, and in our communities. And once we count, we need to act. Finding the lost, whether they are sheep, coins, or people, takes work. It also requires our efforts, and from those efforts there is the potential for wholeness and joy.

*Smiling He had
who are strong
they might be
just a boy
the Lord was
A great man
Not about reputation
Father is a good man*

CHAPTER 2

The Good Samaritan

And look, some lawyer stood up, testing Jesus, he says, "Teacher, (by) doing what eternal life will I inherit?"

And he said to him, "In the Law, what is written? How do you read?"

And answering, he said, "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind/intention, and your neighbor as yourself."

And he said to him, "Rightly you answered. This do, and you will live."

But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Replying, Jesus said, "Some person was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who, stripping him, even placed blows, going away, leaving him half dead.

"And by coincidence, some priest was going down that road, and seeing him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, coming to the place, even seeing, passed by on the other side.

"But some Samaritan, traveling, came near him and seeing, had compassion. And coming toward (him), he bound up his wounds, pouring oil and wine (on them), and having set him upon his own animal, he brought him to an inn and cared for him.

"And upon the next day, taking out, he gave two denarii to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him, and whatever you might spend, I, upon my return, will give back to you.'

"Which of these three a neighbor—does it seem to you—was to the one who fell among the robbers?"

And he said, "The one doing mercy for him."

And said to him Jesus, "Go and you do likewise."

Luke 10:25-37

Throughout the English-speaking world the term "good Samaritan" is synonymous with charitable do-gooders. Hospitals with the name "Samaritan" appear throughout the United States, from Medstar Good Samaritan Hospital in Baltimore to Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles. The "Samaritans" is "a national charity and the co-ordinating body for the 201 Samaritans branches in the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, the Channel Islands, and the Isle of Man";¹ this organization, which also has branches in the United States, is dedicated to suicide prevention. Samaritan's Purse is "a non-denominational evangelical Christian organization providing spiritual and physical aid to hurting people around the world. Since 1970, Samaritan's Purse has helped meet needs of people who are victims of war, poverty, natural disasters, disease, and famine with the purpose of sharing God's love through His Son, Jesus Christ."² Australia has the GSDS, the Good Samaritan Donkey Sanctuary,³ which does exactly what its name suggests.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is so well known for its message of aiding the stranger that it has become a staple of political discourse. Former U.S. president George W. Bush invoked the parable in his first inaugural address: "I can pledge our nation to a goal: when we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side."⁴ Bush's presumption was that the U.S. population—who, in the minds of some of our politicians, are all Christians—would immedi-

ately pick up the reference: "wounded traveler" and "road to Jericho" are images from the parable.

I checked with a Jewish friend of mine—a naturalized U.S. citizen who pays more attention to national and local politics than most people I know. She thought the reference might have been to an accident in New York, since she knew there was a Jericho on Long Island. When I noted that the reference was biblical, she wondered if the president was thinking of Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho who aided the spies sent into the land by Joshua.

For President Bush, the parable is about taking care of nations in distress. Nor is he the only politician to invoke the parable in speaking about public policy. Queen Elizabeth II remarked in her 2004 Christmas message that the parable, which tells how a mugging victim is helped by a "despised foreigner," is about "tolerance and respecting others." She summarizes: "Everyone is our neighbour, no matter what race, creed or colour. The need to look after a fellow human being is far more important than any cultural or religious differences."⁵ More recently, in the spring of 2013, one of Mrs. Thatcher's successors, Tony Blair, offered his own appropriation. At the opening of a new Baptist Center in Jordan—the Jordan in the Middle East, not on Long Island—Mr. Blair, speaking on behalf of the Faith Foundation, also took the parable again in the direction of aid. In his description, Jesus "extols the virtue of the Good Samaritan, the stranger, over those who were supposedly devout believers."⁶

In the 1970s, I heard a citizen of Sierra Leone interpret the parable as proclaiming that one should take aid from whoever would offer it, even the enemy, and thus Jesus gave warrant for his country's acceptance of aid from the Soviet Union. Although I do not think that this reading is quite the original import of the parable, it at least highlights two important points. It recognizes the role of the Samaritan as enemy and suggests the possibility of interpreter identification with the wounded man rather than the Samaritan who gives aid. The standard reading is the one in which "we" are the Samaritans; "we Samaritans" help "them," the sick, the poor, foreign nationals, and so on.

The parable of the Good Samaritan has come to mean whatever we want it to mean. In one respect, this inevitable appropriation is to be appreciated. Texts should always take on new meaning as they are encountered by new readers from new cultural contexts. However, texts also have their own original context.

The various appropriations and interpretations of the parable heard today are generally good news. What's not to like about helping the stranger and being charitable toward others? But those are not the messages a first-century Jewish audience would have heard. They didn't need a parable to tell them to care for others; they were already commanded to love both the neighbor and the stranger. Those Jews in antiquity would not be thinking of governmental resources or foreign aid; the Samaritan would not have reminded them of a secretary of state or a prime minister. Nor would they have thought of Samaritans as "strangers." To the contrary, they were the all too familiar neighbors and all too hated enemies.

The parable for them would not have been about looking after a fellow human being, and the parable is not, finally, an answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" It is more provocative than that. And if we readers identify with the Samaritan—as the politicians and charitable organizations do—we have missed the deeper implications of the parable as well. Worse, the standard identification we readers have today with the Samaritan leads to the standard anti-Jewish interpretations that have infected much of New Testament study. 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.

To get an initial hint of the distance between the mind-set of parable's original audience and our own twenty-first-century perspectives, we might begin by reflecting briefly on the term "good Samaritan." Today, we use the term as if it were not peculiar. Yet as far as I am aware, there are no "Good Catholic" or "Good Baptist" hospitals,

there are no social service organizations called "Good Episcopalian" or "Good Mexican" or "Good Arab." To label the Samaritan, any Samaritan, a "good Samaritan" should be, in today's climate, seen as offensive. It is tantamount to saying, "He's a good Muslim" (as opposed to all those others who, in this configuration, would be terrorists) or "She's a good immigrant" (as opposed to all those others who, in this same configuration, are here to take our jobs or scam our welfare system), or, as Heinrich Himmler put it to a gathering of SS officers, every German "has his decent Jew"—that is, knows one good Jew—and as far as Himmler was concerned, even one was too many, because that might create sympathy? The problem with the labeling is not simply a lack of sensitivity toward the Samaritan people—yes, there are still Samaritans. It is also a lack of awareness of how odd the expression "good Samaritan" would have seemed to Jesus's Jewish contemporaries.

What happens when we strip away two thousand years of usually benevolent and well-intended domestication and hear the parable as a first-century short story spoken by a Jew to other Jews?

The Malevolent Lawyer

Jesus's recounting of the parable of the Good Samaritan to a lawyer may have been an actual incident. Similarly, it is possible that Jesus told the parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Sons to a combined gathering of sinners and tax collectors, scribes and Pharisees. But given how these contexts so neatly fit Luke's agenda and how the other Gospels locate similar sayings in different contexts, it is just as likely that Luke has repackaged traditional material. Luke tells us that the parables of the lost are about repenting and forgiving; that message would not be clear from any of the three parables themselves. Luke tells us that the parable about the unjust judge and the importuning widow is about constant prayer. Again, that's unlikely to be what Jesus's original audience heard.

Nevertheless, the encounter between Jesus and the lawyer that forms the context for the parable nearly fits what we can take to be Jesus's own

agenda. Here Luke may have developed the context, but it is a context that helps bring the parable's own implications into sharper focus.

And look, some lawyer stood up, testing Jesus, he says,
 "Teacher, (by) doing what eternal life will I inherit?"
 (Luke 10.25)

Four points, all of which betray Luke's antipathy toward this lawyer and his associates, follow from this single line. The first clue concerns Luke's depiction of lawyers, for Luke's Gospel, anticipating Dick the Butcher, who in Shakespeare's *Henry VI* memorably planned, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers," holds no affection for those in the profession. According to Luke 7.30, "the Pharisees and the lawyers" reject John the Baptist and so reject "God's purposes for themselves." In Luke 11.45, after Jesus insults his Pharisaic hosts at a dinner party by calling them "unmarked graves," a lawyer in attendance protests: "Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us too." That was Jesus's intent. Jesus, who is not the most polite of dinner guests, responds by accusing him and his fellow lawyers of loading the people with impossible burdens and not lifting a finger to help, of approving of the killing of God's prophets, and of taking away from the people "the key of knowledge." Luke's readers will know that the lawyer in chapter 10 is not among the righteous.

For Jesus's Jewish audience, lawyers would likely have been positive figures and their connection to the Torah a good thing. There is no immediate Hebrew equivalent for the Greek term *nomikos*, translated "lawyer." In the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, the term for "lawyer," *nomikos*, appears just once, but not in a translation from any Hebrew text. It occurs in 4 Maccabees, a Jewish text likely contemporaneous with Luke's Gospel and today included in the canons of some Eastern Orthodox communions. The

nomikos, which has the connotation of "learned in the Law," is a priest named Eliezer, who serves as a leader for the people.

Fourth Maccabees describes the program of forced assimilation begun by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid king who took control of the Jewish homeland in the mid-second century BCE. Jews who refused to sacrifice to the Greek gods or who insisted on retaining their traditions of circumcision and dietary regulations were tortured and then killed for their fidelity. The king, showing a slythey combination of compassion and cruelty, tells Eliezer the lawyer, "Before I begin to torture you, old man, I would advise you to save yourself by eating pork" (5.6). Despite the king's argument that eschewing pork makes no philosophical sense, the lawyer responds that Torah has invaluable merit: it "teaches us self-control, so that we master all pleasures and desires, and it also trains us in courage, so that we endure any suffering willingly; it instructs us in justice, so that in all our dealings we act impartially, and it teaches us piety, so that with proper reverence we worship the only living God" (5.23-24).

This positive view of lawyers continues elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, the Letter of Titus includes the exhortation, "Make every effort to send Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way, and see that they lack nothing" (3.13). Here the role of lawyer overlaps with that of missionary.

Luke's second clue regarding the lawyer's negative characterization is his address to Jesus, "Teacher." Today, there are few more honorable callings than "teacher," and as a "teacher" myself I want to provide the term with every positive connotation. However, for Luke's narrative, calling Jesus "teacher" usually suggests that the interlocutor does not fully understand or respect who, for Luke, Jesus really is. Just a few examples. At the dinner party where Simon the host silently objects to Jesus's allowing a woman known to be a sinner to anoint Jesus's feet and then kiss them, Jesus says, "Simon, I have something to say to you." Simon replies, "Teacher, . . . speak" (7.40). When Jesus arrives at the home of a distraught father whose daughter has just died, "someone came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the teacher any longer'" (8.49). Jesus is not being "bothered" by raising the

dead child. Although the request of a "man from the crowd" who calls out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child" (9.38) sounds respectful, Jesus responds by identifying the man and his associates as a "faithless and perverse generation" (9.41). We've already noted the lawyer at the banquet who addresses Jesus as "Teacher" and then accuses him of insulting those present (11.45). The same pattern of the title coupled with misunderstanding or a lack of respect occurs in Luke 12.13; 18.18; 19.39; 20.21; 20.28; and 21.7. For Luke, the better address to Jesus is not "Teacher," but "Lord" (Gk. *Kyrios*).

The third clue to the lawyer's negative depiction is his rationale for engaging Jesus in conversation. He asks his question not to gain knowledge, but to "test." In Matthew 22, a similar scene is repeated: a *nomikos* (the only use of the term in the Gospels outside Luke) also "stands" to "test" Jesus (22.35), and his intentions are not good either.

The term "test" (Gk. *ekependzon*) is exactly what Jesus's followers pray to avoid: "Lead us not into temptation"; the line, familiar from the Lord's Prayer, is literally, "Do not bring us to the test" (Luke 11.4, just a few verses after the parable of the Good Samaritan). By testing Jesus, the lawyer takes the Devil's role, for it was Satan who had "tested" Jesus in the wilderness. Jesus shuts the Devil up by telling him, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (4.12).

The lawyer's question itself is the fourth negative. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (NRSV) is the wrong question. The verb "do" is an aorist participle (*poieas*), a tense that suggests a single, limited action. The lawyer is thinking of something to check off his to-do list: recite a prayer, offer a sacrifice, drop off a box of macaroni for a food drive, put a twenty in the collection plate. If he's efficient, he can inherit eternal life before lunch. He should be thinking of living a life of righteousness, much like the lawyer in 4 Maccabees. But he's a lawyer, and this is Luke's Gospel, so righteousness is not going to be his concern.

Indeed, the question "What must I do to inherit eternal life," when asked by someone seeking to "test," is similar to the other trick questions Jesus's opponents pose.⁸ The trick question is a generic form that cannot be answered yes or no. In the Gospels, "Is it lawful for us to pay

taxes to the emperor?" (Luke 20.22) is a trick question. To respond "yes" invites the accusation that one is a collaborator; to respond "no," that one is a revolutionary. The Sadducees ask another trick question. In the case of a woman married to seven brothers, whose wife is she in the resurrection (20.29–32)? Because the Sadducees do not believe in resurrection, the question is merely hypothetical. Here the lawyer asks a question that cannot be answered: one does not "do" anything to "inherit" eternal life.

The question presumes eternal life is a commodity to be inherited or purchased on the basis of a particular action rather than a gift freely given. As far as our sources, including the New Testament, indicate, most first-century Jews already believed in resurrection, or eternal life. The Gospels and Acts speak of a group of Jews called the Sadducees, sometimes glossed with the description, "who say there is no resurrection" (Matt. 22.23; Mark 12.18; Luke 20.27; Acts 23.8). That marker distinguishes them from other Jewish groups. (As we are wont to say in the biblical studies business, the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, and that is what made them "sad, you see.")

In the account of the raising of Lazarus, Jesus tells the dead man's distraught sister Martha, "Your brother will rise again." Martha, reflecting the predominant Jewish view, responds, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (John 11.23–24). The point is confirmed in the Mishnah. *Sanhedrin* 10.1 insists, "All Israel has a share in the world to come." Granted the Mishnah then lists the exceptions who do not receive the soteriological benefits of community membership: apostates, those who deny that resurrection is proclaimed in Torah, and Epicureans, who live a life of complete pleasure in the present.

In Luke 18.18–25, a ruler (Gk. *archon*) asks Jesus the same question that the lawyer posed, but his attitude is different. The ruler begins, "Good Teacher," whereas the lawyer simply said, "Teacher." The ruler has the more respectful address, even if it is still limited. His question, however, is just as misguided. Given that Jesus offers a number of parables that begin "There was a rich man who . . ." and then detail the unfortunate fates of the rich, and given that Jesus states, "There is no one

who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life" (18.29–30), the ruler may well have been concerned about his future. He wants assurances.

Jesus confirms what the ruler already knows. Just as the lawyer in the lead-in to our parable cites Torah in response to Jesus's question, so here Jesus cites Torah to the ruler: "You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother'" (18.20). His point is not that following the commandments "earns" the ruler a spot in heaven. Jews followed Torah not to earn eternal life; this was already part of the covenant. They followed Torah in response to the gracious gift of the covenant that God gave them, because to do so prevented sin and because to do so showed how love of God and love of neighbor were to be manifested.

The ruler replies, "I have kept all these since my youth" (18.21). It is likely he had. Not murdering, stealing, or bearing false witness along with the positive act of honoring parents are relatively easy laws to follow (avoiding greed, envy, and lust; loving the neighbor and the stranger; and caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the alien are the more difficult ones). Jesus does not give him the answer or the assurance he wants, and his desire for personal confirmation has not abated.

He wants Jesus to acknowledge that he is fully righteous, despite the fact that he is "a rich man who . . ." Jesus advises: "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the ruler hears Jesus's counsel, "he became sad; for he was very rich" (18.22–23). Like that of the lawyer in our parable, the ruler's focus on eternal life leads nowhere; a focus on caring for others might offer a better path.

How far off base is our lawyer? He thinks in terms of a single action rather than a life of righteousness. He thinks of "eternal life" as a commodity to be inherited or acquired rather than a gift freely given. He focuses on eternal life—his own salvation—when he should be,

as Judaism teaches, focused on loving God and neighbor, honoring parents, eschewing stealing, and so on. Finally, he is asking obnoxious questions to which he already knows the answers.

Jesus does not directly answer his question. Instead, he uses what is sometimes called the "Socratic method" but which, I think, Jews invented or at least perfected. In typical Jewish fashion, he answers a question with a question.

And he said to him, "In the Law, what is written?
How do you read?" (Luke 10.26)

By turning the question back on the lawyer, Jesus evades the trick. He may also be appealing to the lawyer's ego: "Surely sir, you know the answer; after all, you are the trained professional." Jesus provides the lawyer an opportunity to display his knowledge to the public.

Mention of the "Law" refers to the Torah, and specifically the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, or, as Jesus would have said, Bereshit, Shemot, Vayikra, Bamidbar, and Devarim, the Hebrew designations), or simply the Books of Moses. Actually, the Torah is not much interested in eternal life or life after death. It is much more interested in how to live in the present. Moses exhorts: "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you and length of days" (Deut. 30.19–20).

Jesus does not merely ask, "What is written in the Torah?" He glosses that question with the more specific: "How do you read?" The double focus on literacy—what is *written* and how it is *read*—is usually ignored, but to do so misses the historical point. The lawyer is literate, a quality not shared by the majority of the population in antiquity. According to Luke, John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, can read and write. Because he had been struck mute by an angel, he asks for a write-

ing tablet in order to announce his son's name (1.63). Luke also presents Jesus as literate, in that he can locate his synagogue reading in the scroll of Isaiah (4.17). These may be exceptional cases. The claim by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus that the principal care of Jews is to educate our children well⁹ cannot be used to determine that all Jewish children were literate.

Most people in antiquity did not own books; there were no lending libraries in Nazareth or Capernaum. Nor did most people have a need to read; there were scribes and lawyers who had the skill. The focus on literacy will return in a few verses. For now, we find that the lawyer's response does not, at least initially, require literacy skills.

And answering, he said, "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind/intention, and your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10.27)

The lawyer's response is a combination of two verses of the Torah known to all practicing Jews then and now. The first is Deuteronomy 6.5, which is part of Judaism's daily liturgy. The Hebrew *V'ahavta et adonai elohetcha, b'chal l'vovcha, u'chal nafshecha, u'chal mededecha* means, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul [your *nefesh*, your very being] and with all your might (or strength)." Luke's text includes a fourth element, "all your mind." The point of both versions is the same: love of God is the ground of one's being and the guide for one's life.

The second verse the lawyer cites is inextricably connected to the first: love of God has to be manifested; to love means to act. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" is Leviticus 19.18. This too was a well-known verse in early Judaism. According to the great Rabbi Akiva, who was martyred by the Romans about a century after Jesus, "You

shall love your neighbor as yourself" is the greatest teaching of the Torah.¹⁰

The lawyer was right to combine Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19, but he was not original; the two had already been combined in Jewish thought. The ancient text known as the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* pairs the verses in the *Testaments* of both *Isachar* (5.2) and *Dan* (5.3). The same combination of love of God and love of neighbor appears in different contexts in Matthew 22.37 and Mark 12.29–31, where Jesus summarizes the two verses as the "Great Commandment" and insists: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets [the Torah and the Prophets]." Although the combined verses command love of God and love of neighbor, they do not mean, "Just do some good loving, but forget about dietary regulations, circumcision, Sabbath observance, or Temple sacrifice." They mean that the love commandments become the touchstone by which all other actions are assessed.

The importance of extending these two verses into the rest of Torah is signaled by their contexts. In antiquity, as today, single verses come with contexts. When scripture was read in the synagogue—in the *parashah ha-shavuah*, the "portion of the week" (comparable to the Revised Common Lectionary)—whole chapters were read. Deuteronomy 6.5, which insists on loving God, is preceded by Israel's essential theological proclamation, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone." Following the love command are mandates to teach Torah to one's children, to inscribe God's words upon the doorpost of the house (the *mezuzah*, which can be found on the doors of Jewish homes to this day), and to speak of them at all times.

To cite Leviticus 19.18 also invoked the rest of the chapter. Leviticus 19 begins with God telling Moses, "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.'" It continues with statutes ranging from those commanding reverence for parents and keeping the Sabbath to those forbidding idolatry, stealing, swearing falsely or lying, profaning the divine name, and engaging in improper sexual relations (a list that resembles the Ten Commandments). It also mandates care for the poor, the blind, and the deaf. Thus love must manifest itself in action.

The lawyer knew the commandments, and he would have known the context. Whether he fully understood them is another question.

And he said to him, "Rightly you answered. This do, and you will live" (Luke 10.28)

The lawyer got the right answer; good for him. However, he did not quite get the right question, so Jesus changes it for him. Whereas the lawyer asked about "eternal life," Jesus reframes what is at stake by exhorting, "Do this, and you will live." The imperative "do" focuses not on a single action, but on an ongoing relationship. Leviticus 18.5, like Deuteronomy 30, makes the same point: "Do this and live." The point is to "live now" and not be focused on "eternal life."

Were the lawyer wise, he would have thanked Jesus and gone off to show his love. But he's a lawyer in Luke's Gospel, so we know that a humble, compassionate response is unlikely. Instead, he proves his malevolent intent toward Jesus by posing another, even more inappropriate question.

But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10.29)

"Wanting to justify himself"—that is, wanting to make himself look "right" (as in "justified margins") in the eyes of anyone listening in—the lawyer asks another question. His concern for self-justification is something Luke's Jesus despises. Later in this Gospel, Jesus condemns the Pharisees, whom Luke portrays, contrary to all other sources,⁴⁵

"lovers of money," with the accusation: "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God" (16.15). The lawyer, like the Pharisees according to Luke, is interested in self-aggrandizement, when he should be interested in love of God and neighbor.

His question, "Who is my neighbor?" is on the technical level not a bad one. The Hebrew term usually translated "neighbor" (*rea'*), the term that appears in Leviticus 19.18, has several connotations. In Genesis 11.3, it means "fellow" or "the other guy"; the NRSV renders this verse, which concerns the building of the tower of Babel, "And they said to one another," rather than, literally, "And said a man to his neighbor." Exodus 33.11 uses "neighbor" to describe an intimate friendship between God and Moses. Again, the NRSV misses the technical term by translating, "The LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend"; the term translated "friend" is *rea'*, "neighbor." Deuteronomy 19.14 (also 27.17) defines *rea'* as a person with whom one shares a common border: "You must not move your neighbor's boundary marker." Jeremiah 9.4–5 warns against trusting "neighbors" as well as trusting relatives; here the connotation is others in the community.

The term *rea'* can also mean "lover." Hosea 3.1 reads, "Go love a woman who has a lover"; the Hebrew says, literally, "Go love a woman, the lover of a neighbor." Song of Songs 5.16 is, "This is my beloved and this is my friend"; the term translated "friend" is, of course, *rea'*. The *rea'* in Proverbs 3.29 is someone who "lives trustingly beside you" and therefore against whom no harm should be planned.

The context of Leviticus 19.18 suggests that the "neighbor" is to be distinguished from the "stranger" (KJV) or the "resident alien" (NRSV). The chapter goes on to state, "When an alien (Heb. *ger*) resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (19.33–34). The point is developed by Ezekiel, who puts the resident alien on

the same footing, and on the same land, as the fellow Israelite. The prophet states that, in the allotment of the land following the return from exile, the inheritance shall not only be for the people Israel, but also "for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord GOD" (47.22-23). Thus the alien is necessarily a neighbor, a fellow.¹¹

On the home front, I wonder if those folks who want to impose "biblical values" on America today have considered Leviticus 19 in debates over immigration reform. On the international scene, I wonder why those people ranging from some right-wing Jews to some Christian Zionists do not consider Ezekiel 47 in discussions on the Middle East. But those questions require another book.

In the Septuagint, the Hebrew *ger* ("alien") in Leviticus 19 becomes *proselytos*, "proselyte." But the term does not have today's meaning of "convert" in the context of Leviticus. It could not, because the Israelites were not "proselytes" in the land of Egypt; they did not worship Egypt's gods. The "proselyte" is the one who "comes forward" (the literal meaning of the term) by choosing to live among a different people and so to share their lives, their joys and concerns.

Thus, the general meaning of "neighbor," at least for Hebrew speakers, is a person in intimate or legal relationship. Not everyone fits into this category. Leviticus is designed as Israel's Law code; it is not for universal application. Relations with people inside the community will be different from those with people outside the community, just as throughout the world today citizens of a nation or state have certain rights and responsibilities that noncitizens do not.

The lawyer's question has legal merit. One needs to know who are neighbors, and so under the same legal system, and who are not. But in the context of love, his question is not relevant. According to Leviticus, love has to extend beyond the people in one's group. Leviticus 19 insists on loving the stranger as well. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, agrees. In his *Against Apion*, a text likely contemporaneous

with Luke's Gospel, he asserts, "For I think it will become clear that we possess laws that are extremely well designed, with a view toward piety, fellowship with one another (Gk. *koinonia*), and universal benevolence (*philanthropia*) as well as justice (*dikaionne*), endurance in labors, and contempt for death."¹²

For our parable, the lawyer's question is again misguided. To ask "Who is my neighbor" is a polite way of asking, "Who is *not* my neighbor?" or "Who does not deserve my love?" or "Whose lack of food or shelter can I ignore?" or "Whom I can hate?" The answer Jesus gives is, "No one." Everyone deserves that love—local or alien, Jews or gentile, terrorist or rapist, everyone.

The lawyer had not been attending to Jesus's other teachings. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus states, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy'" (Matt. 5.43). The Torah includes no commandment to hate one's enemy; perhaps Jesus is reflecting a saying known from the sectarian group responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls. The *Rule of the Community* does state: "You shall love all the sons of light . . . and hate all the sons of darkness" (1QS 19-11). Enemies are, conventionally, people we hate. If we did not hate them, they would not be enemies, at least from our perspective. And that may be the point. Jesus continues, "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt. 5.44-45). Love cannot be restricted. Luke made the same point: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them" (6.32). The lawyer had not been listening.

According to Jewish law, the lawyer is responsible for loving those like him, and those who are not like him but who live in proximity to him although they are not part of his people, the "children of Israel" as he defined the term. Leviticus does not explicitly require him to love his "enemy" who lives across the border, outside the boundaries of the community. In Jewish thought, one could not mistreat the enemy, but love was not mandated. Proverbs 25.21 insists, "If your enemies are

hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink" (Paul cites Prov. 25.21–22 in Rom. 12.20). Only Jesus insists on loving the enemy: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." He may be the only person in antiquity to have given this instruction.

Given this concern for loving the enemy, the focus on literacy in the lead-in to our parable provokes another possible reading. In Hebrew the words "neighbor" and "evil" share the same consonants (*resh ayin*);¹³ they differ only in the vowels—but ancient Hebrew texts do not have vowels (if this sounds odd, think of text-messaging). Both words are written identically.

When Jesus asks the lawyer, "How do you *read*?" he is therefore asking, "Dear sir, are you able to see, in the very words of the Torah, the equation of enemy with neighbor and thus the command to love both?" The lawyer has read the words in the Hebrew, but he cannot see their full meaning.

Not only does our lawyer fail to interpret the Law in its fullest meaning; he is about to become the recipient of a parable. We know, from the parables told by Joham and Nathan, that if a parable is directed to a particular individual, the individual is likely to come to an unwelcome realization. The lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" In response, Jesus is about to bring him to the test.

Replying, Jesus said, "Some person was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who, stripping him, even placed blows, going away, leaving him half dead." (Luke 10.30)

The opening of the parable efficiently sets the scene. The person (*ἄνθρωπος*) lacks identification; he could be rich or poor, free or slave, priest or lay, nice or naughty. He may have been coming home from

offering sacrifice in the Temple; he may be a healer on his way to a sick person in Jericho; he may be a tourist. His profession is irrelevant. The man is "some man" or everyone. Jesus's listeners would have had no trouble identifying with the victim; they may have been victims of attack themselves.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was an eighteen-mile rocky path that descended from about 2,500 feet above sea level to Jericho's 825 feet below. The Romans paved the road in the late 60s CE so that the Tenth Legion could move its siege engines toward the doomed Jerusalem. Even those who had never traveled the road, were they biblically knowledgeable, knew about its dangers, and its possibilities. It was on this road that David fled from his rebellious son Absalom (2 Sam. 15.23–16.14); it was here that King Zedekiah escaped his Chaldean pursuers (2 Kings 25.4).

And it is here that the commentators leave the road for detours into imagination. For some of the church fathers, who were engaging in an allegorical interpretation that would have mystified a first-century Jewish audience, the fellow in the ditch is a sinner in need of salvation. Predictably then, the priest and the Levite, representing the Law and the Prophets, are those who cannot save; the good Samaritan is Jesus himself; his two coins represent baptism and the Eucharist; and so on.¹⁴

Continuing this negative image of Judaism are modern commentators, whose interpretive key is not allegory, but sociology. Increasingly popular is the view that Jesus's audience would have had little sympathy for the man in the ditch. One scholar classifies the poor fellow as a "despised tradesman."¹⁵ Why Jews would "despise" people in trades is unclear; Pharisees, for example, typically held day jobs (e.g., Paul was a leather worker). Another adds: "Traders were notoriously dishonest, and their itinerant lifestyle and constant interaction with all sorts of people make it impossible for them to observe even the most basic laws concerning food preparation and purity. For that same reason, the wounded man would not have evoked the lawyer's empathy."¹⁶ Thus we get the impression that the Jewish audience would find the eating of a ham sandwich damning, but would not care about a violent physical attack.

I heard one explanation saying that the man was of the school of Shammai, since he was attacked by bandits. How does this follow? The Mishnah, *Berakhot* 1.3, presents a discussion of whether to stand up or lie down when reciting the Shema. The school of Shammai states, "In the evening everyone should recline in order to recite and in the morning they should stand, as it says, 'When you lie down and when you rise.'" The citation is from Deuteronomy 6/7, the same section that contains the love commandment. The Mishnah then quotes Rabbi Tarfon: "I was coming along the road in the evening and reclined to recite the Shema as required by the House of Shammai. And in doing so I placed myself in danger of being attacked by bandits." Aha, say commentators, he is mugged because he was praying at the wrong time. The parable says nothing about the man's position at the time of attack. The fellow in the ditch is just a fellow, a victim of a violent crime period.

Not only do some scholars engage in blaming the victim, and not only do they add gratuitous points about purity laws; they also sympathize with the robbers. Common today is the view that the robbers are Jewish Robin Hoods (picture *Men in Tights and Tizit*) who, displaced from family lands by overtaxation and urbanization, protest their socioeconomic disenfranchisement by taking from the rich and giving to the poor. Thus the robbers are "roving terrorists staging their own form of protest against various types of official and unofficial exploitation of the poor."¹⁷

The robbers are not merry men dropping off their gains with the "Good Samaritan Society" or the United Jewish Appeal. Nor is there reason to presume that the man waylaid by robbers was wealthy; were the man wealthy, his lack of bodyguards is inexplicable.

The reasons for rejecting the Robin Hood model are numerous, but I'll just note the reason that comes from a close reading of the ancient sources. The term the parable uses for the robbers, *lestai*, is used by Josephus over forty times; it appears fifteen times in the New Testament, and nine times in the Septuagint. The basic meaning is "member of an armed gang." As early as Homer, the term referred to both highwaymen and pirates who act without mercy. In 2 Corinthians

11:26, Paul speaks of his "frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits (*lestai*), danger from my own people, . . . danger in the wilderness," and so on; the *lestai* are not his friends either.

These negative connotations continue in the Gospels. Those who make the Temple "a den of robbers (*lestai*)" are not dispossessed peasants robbing from the rich (Mark 11.15–19). According to John 10:7–8, Jesus states: "I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves (*kleptai* [whence "kleptomaniac"]) and bandits (*lestai*); but the sheep did not listen to them." In John 18:40, Barabbas, the guilty one set free when the innocent Jesus goes to his death, is a *lestes*. In Mark 15:27 and Matthew 27:38–44, but not in Luke, the men crucified on Jesus's left and right are *lestai*. Yes, we could see the crucified men as freedom fighters executed by Rome; we could also see them as murderers, thieves, or, as Luke describes them, "criminals" or "evildoers" (Gk. *kakourgoi*, from *kakos* and *ergon*; 23.33).

So the robbers are the bad guys, as we note also from their violence. The traveler is stripped, beaten, and left half dead in a ditch. He is robbed not only of his possessions, but also of his dignity, his health, and almost his life. Luke describes him as having "wounds" (Gk. *traumata*, hence "trauma"). The lawyer had asked about eternal life—he should rather be worried about those left half dead. So should commentators.

And yet half dead is still alive; the man is, despite being naked (as would be a corpse before shrouding) and prostrate, alive. Listeners, identifying with him, can only hope that rescue will come. And because they identify with him, their question—and so our question—is: "Who will help me?"

And by coincidence, some priest was going down that road, and seeing him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, coming to the place, even seeing, passed by on the other side. (Luke 10.31–32)

Just as the fellow in the ditch is revictimized by being labeled a despised merchant or a bad Jew, so too the priest and the Levite receive their share of negative interpretations that go well beyond the justified critique of their failure to act. Again, stereotypes get in the way. Here are the two most common misreadings and why they are unhelpful.

First, a number of scholars talk about the peasant dislike of the "priestly elite."¹⁸ This view comes more from contemporary distrust for religious hierarchies than it does from Luke's text or Jesus's context. There is nothing that makes a priest and even less a Levite part of the "elite." Priests and Levites may have had neither wealth nor status. In Judaism, the priesthood is not a vocation; it is an inherited position. The priestly line descends from Aaron, the brother of Moses. One is a priest if one's father was a priest. Levites, who form a lesser category of priests, also receive their role according to their paternal line; they are descended from Aaron's ancestor Levi, the third son of Jacob. All other Jews, except Jews by choice, are descended from Jacob's other children: they are Israelites.

These lines continue in Judaism to this day. The term for "priest" in Hebrew is *kohen*, and Jews with the last name Cohen or Kane may well be from the priestly line. Similarly, Jews with the last name Levi, Levine (like me), or Lewis may well have levitical ancestry. But neither the name nor the priestly role says anything about wealth or community status.

Josephus, who was himself an elite priest, mentions other priests who were poverty-stricken. According to his *Antiquities*, the high priest Ananias, who served from about 47 to 52 and who, according to the book of Acts (22–23), tried Paul in Jerusalem, sent his servants to the Temple threshing floors, where they "took away the tithes that belonged to the priests by violence, and did not refrain from beating such as would not give these tithes to them . . . so that [some of the] priests that had previously been supported with those tithes died for lack of food."¹⁹ There are "priests," and then there are "high priests," the social positions of the two groups should not be confused.

The priest in the parable enters Luke's Gospel with fine precedent: Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, is a priest, and John's mother

is from a priestly family. It is Zechariah who recalls how God had promised "that we would be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us . . . to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1.71, 79). The man in the ditch and those who identify with him have reason to hope.

As for the distinction among the priestly ranks, Luke invariably describes the priests involved in Jesus's death as "chief priests" or the "high priest." Our priest is an ordinary priest who does what is all too ordinary: he fails to act when he should.

The second, more common, and just as misguided explanation for the priest's and Levite's failure to help is that they are following Jewish law. From both classroom and pulpit comes the claim that the priest and the Levite pass by the man in the ditch, because they are afraid of contracting corpse contamination and so violating purity laws. A few examples demonstrate the pervasiveness of this view.

A 2005 book with the optimistic title *The Wide, Wide Circle of Divine Love: A Biblical Case for Religious Diversity* states: "If the traveler were already dead, or he died while they were attending him, then they would have become unclean, contaminated, because they touched a dead body. This would have made it necessary for them to seek ritual cleansing before they could resume their responsibilities."²⁰ What "ritual duties" the priest and the Levite would have had is unclear, since the parable explicitly notes that the priest is going "down" (*katabaino*) from Jerusalem, not up to the Temple. Why ritual cleansing is a problem is unstated.

The popularity of this view is confirmed by its appearance in *The HarperCollins Study Bible* for Luke 10.32. The annotator claims, "Both [Levite and the] priest may have been concerned about impurity from contact with a corpse (see Num. 5.2; 19.11–13)."²¹ Numbers 19.10b–13 states, "Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean seven days. They shall purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day . . . All who touch a corpse, the body of a human being who has died, and do not purify themselves, defile the tabernacle of the LORD; such persons shall be cut off from Israel." There is nothing impure about touching a person

who is "half dead." Nor is there any sin involved in burying a corpse, to the contrary, the Torah expects corpses to be interred.

The better background for our priest is not Numbers 19, but Leviticus 21. This chapter, addressed to "the priests, the sons of Aaron," mandates, "No one shall defile himself for a dead person among his relatives, except for his nearest kin" (vv. 1-2). Yet even here, this is only half the story. To follow Torah, the priest should have checked to see if the man was alive and, finding him alive, should have helped him. Should he have discovered a corpse, he should have covered it and then immediately gone for help.

Walter Wink, in an article entitled "The Parable of the Compassionate Samaritan," offers the possibility that, were the priest to have come within four cubits to check on the man in the ditch and if it turned out that the man was dead, the priest "would be defiled and was liable to disciplinary flogging (*b. San. 44a-44b*)."²² The very late Talmudic passage states, "A dead body affects four cubits with respect to communicating defilement." There is nothing about flogging.

Biblical scholar Richard Bauckham proposes that the priest in the parable "cannot get close enough to tell without risking defilement from the corpse if that is what it turns out to be. This is because, in first-century Jewish thought about such matters, corpse-impurity travels vertically through the air. If any part of the priest's body were to be above any part of a corpse, he would contract impurity."²³ Had the parable only been about a priest, the argument would be more compelling.

The presence of the Levite makes the priestly concern irrelevant. This distinction between priests and Levites in observance of purity laws continues to this day. *Kohanim*, "priests," will remain outside the cemetery gates unless the funeral is for an immediate relative; Levites as well as other Jews will step onto the cemetery grounds. Further, Samaritans were also bound by laws concerning corpse contamination; just as the Samaritan found the question irrelevant, so should we in our attempt to understand the parable.

Even the parable itself undercuts the possibility that the motive of priest and Levite stems from purity regulations. Had the priest been going up to Jerusalem (one always goes "up" to Jerusalem; one could

be on the moon and still go "up" to Jerusalem), where he would be engaged in Temple activities, he may well have been concerned about purity. However, the parable obviates that explanation immediately; it tells us that the priest is going "down" from Jerusalem. Thus, he need not be in a ritually pure state.

The Law, rather, required that both men attend to the fellow in the ditch, whether alive or dead, for one is to "love the neighbor" and "love the stranger" both. Regarding corpses, Jewish Law requires that a dead body be treated with utmost respect. The point is perhaps best seen in the book of Tobit; the book's titular hero, a Jewish male Antigone, risks his life by attending to unburied corpses (1.16-20). Philo writes in his *Hypothetica* that among the precepts Jews follow are those that say, "No one shall keep anyone from performing funeral honors to the dead, but shall even throw upon them so much earth as if sufficient to protect them from impiety; that no one shall violate or move, in any manner or degree whatever, the graves, or tombs, or memorials of those who are dead."²⁴ Similarly, in his *Against Apion*, Josephus writes, "There are other things which our legislator ordained for us beforehand, which of necessity we ought to do in common to all men; as to afford fire, and water, and food to such as want it; to show them the roads; and not to let anyone lie unburied. He also would have us treat those that are esteemed our enemies with moderation."²⁵ The connection of this passage to Luke's parable and frame is remarkable. Josephus sees Jews as expected to attend to a corpse on the roadside, not to pass it by.

The Mishnah, *Nazir* 7.1, reads: "A high priest or a Nazirite [a person under a vow of utmost purity] may not contract uncleanness because of their dead [relatives], but they may contract uncleanness because of an neglected corpse." The Babylonian Talmud is even stronger: "As long as there are no other people to look after the burial of a corpse, the duty is incumbent on the first Jew that passes by, without exception, to perform the burial" (*Nazir* 43b; Jerusalem Talmud, *Nazir* 56a). Judaism still takes this mandate seriously. That is why Jews stood vigil at Ground Zero until every corpse was recovered. Burying the dead is one of the highest *mitzvot*, most important commandments in Ju-

daisn, for it is one of the few acts that cannot be repaid by the person who benefits from it.

Finally—and one would hope that these numerous reasons are sufficient to put this focus to rest—Luke does not seem interested in purity concerns here, although such concerns surface elsewhere. When Luke wants to make a point about purity, Luke mentions Pharisees and scribes.²⁶ None appears in our parable.

Arguments that read the parable in terms of “uncleanness” or “purity” are made by modern Christians, not by Jesus or Luke. Neither gives the priest or Levite an excuse. Nor would any excuse be acceptable. Their responsibility was to save a life; they failed. Saving a life is so important that Jewish Law mandates that it override every other concern, including keeping the Sabbath (see, e.g., 1 Macc. 2.31–41; 2 Macc. 6.11; Mishnah, *Shabbat* 18.3). Their responsibility, should the man have died, was to bury the corpse. They failed here as well.

The best explanation I've heard for the refusal of the priest and the Levite to come to the aid of the man in the ditch comes from Martin Luther King Jr., who preached: “I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It's possible these men were afraid. . . . And so the first question that the priest [and] the Levite asked was, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' . . . But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'” King went on, “If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?”²⁷ King then went to Memphis, and it was there he was assassinated. There are bandits on the road.

Whatever the motives of the priest and the Levite, King is correct. They, like the lawyer, thought only about themselves, not about the man in the ditch.

So if the issue is not priestly purity, why did Jesus speak explicitly of a priest and Levite? The duo anticipate, in good folkloric fashion, the appearance of the third figure. We have already seen the “rule of three” in our study of the parables of the lost: the first two set up the third. For the Good Samaritan, the rule works even better, for in its usual function the first two figures fail and the third will succeed. Examples

include the decidedly nonkosher “Three Little Pigs” and the equally nonkosher suitors for Portia's hand in the *Merchant of Venice*. Name two, and the third comes automatically. For a more modern analogy, to say in a church context, “Father, Son, and . . .” evokes the third, “Holy Spirit.” Or, for a less theological albeit Jewish example, “Larry and Moe” evokes “Curley.”

For Jesus's audience, and for any synagogue congregation today, the third of the group is obvious. Mention a priest and a Levite, and anyone who knows anything about Judaism will know that the third person is an Israelite. Ezra 10.5 speaks of the “leading priest, the Levites, and all Israel”; Nehemiah 11.3 states that “in the towns of Judah all lived on their property in their towns: Israel, the priests, the Levites. . . .” Both priest and Levite should have stopped to help. The audience, surprised at this lack of compassion, would have presumed both that the third person would be an Israelite and that he would help.

However, Jesus is telling a parable, and parables never go the way one expects. Instead of the anticipated Israelite, the person who stops to help is a Samaritan. In modern terms, this would be like going from Larry and Moe to Osama bin Laden.

But some Samaritan, traveling, came near him and seeing, had compassion. And coming toward (him), he bound up his wounds, pouring oil and wine (on them), and having set him upon his own animal, he brought him to an inn and cared for him. (Luke 10.33–34)

As the parable turns to the good Samaritan, its structure changes. As spare as the earlier descriptions of priest and Levite were, the text now lavishes attention on the Samaritan's actions. The robbers steal and wound, while the Samaritan tends with his own goods. The bandits leave the man half dead, while the Samaritan returns him to life.

Whereas the priest and the Levite go out of their way to distance themselves from the victim, the Samaritan literally "goes up to him" and shows him "compassion." Luke had already used the term, which carries the connotation of a visceral reaction (i.e., he felt it in his guts), to describe Jesus's response to seeing the widow of Nain at her son's funeral procession (7.13), and it describes the reaction of the father to the return of his prodigal son (15.20). In all three cases, the reaction is a response to a presumed death or loss; it signals the drive to restore wholeness.

The Samaritan's compassion then becomes, for many of today's interpreters, the hook by which the sermon functions. In a number of settings, the parable serves as a warning against prejudice; for example, the two who walk by are a pastor and a choir director, while the Samaritan is a gay man, an "illegal immigrant," a person on parole, or any other victim of bigotry. The point in this reading is that "they" are really nice, that "we" sometimes fail in our obligations to help, and that "we" too should "have compassion" on those who are mistreated. We even have so-called Good Samaritan laws designed to protect people who aid accident victims. Had the parable been set in New York rather than Judea, our lawyer likely would volunteer to represent the man in the ditch, sue the Samaritan for improper medical treatment, and take thirty pieces of silver for the settlement.

But to understand the parable as did its original audience, we need to think of Samaritans less as oppressed but benevolent figures and more as the enemy, as those who do the oppressing. From the perspective of the man in the ditch, Jewish listeners might balk at the idea of receiving Samaritan aid. They might have thought, "I'd rather die than acknowledge that one from that group saved me"; "I do not want to acknowledge that a rapist has a human face"; or "I do not want to recognize that a murderer will be the one to rescue me."

According to the Bible, Samaria had an earlier name, Shechem. It was at Shechem that Jacob's daughter Dinah was raped (readers of the novel *The Red Tent* would do well to read the original, Genesis 34). The second reference to Shechem/Samaria is Judges 8–9, the story of

the false judge Abimelech, who murders his rivals. It is to him and his supporters that Jotham tells his parable of the Trees. Thus, to Jesus's Jewish audience as well as to Luke's readers, the idea of a "good Samaritan" would make no more sense than the idea of a "good rapist" or a "good murderer."

As the Bible recounts, the Samaritan people originated after the twelve-tribe United Monarchy ruled by David and then Solomon split into two independent states. The Southern Kingdom, Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem, retained a descendant of David on the throne; the Northern Kingdom, Israel, with its capital in Samaria, was ruled by a series of charismatic leaders (see 1 Kings 12). According to 1 Kings 16.32, Ahab, the husband of the infamous Jezebel, constructed an altar to the Canaanite god Baal in Samaria. Slightly later, the slightly more virtuous King Jehu turned Baal's shrine into a latrine (2 Kings 10.18–27).

The Northern Kingdom, called both Israel and Ephraim (after Joseph's son; see, e.g., Isa. 7.9; Jer. 31.9), was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BCE, and many of its citizens were carried off to places unknown (see 2 Kings 17.1–16, which attributes the destruction of Israel to the apostasy of its population). Assyrian records contain an inscription from Sargon II claiming that 27,290 were exiled, but political figures then, as now, are often inflated. The Assyrians then moved residents from other conquered nations into the region. According to 2 Kings 17.24: "The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities." The resulting population took its name from the capital, and so the Samaritans as a nation were born.

During the next century, Babylon conquered Assyria and then in 587 BCE conquered the Southern Kingdom, Judah, and took the remaining Davidic king as well as many of the country's leading citizens into exile in Babylon. In 538, Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon; one of his acts was to repatriate the Judahites to their homeland. Some stayed in Babylon; others returned, and they did so with plans to

rebuild not only their nation, but also their Temple. It was over the construction of the Temple that a new enmity between Jews who had returned from Babylon and Samaritans would develop.

According to Nehemiah 4.1–8 (see also Ezra 4.7–11):

When Sanballat [Samaria's governor] heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he mocked the Jews. He said in the presence of his associates and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish—and burned ones at that?" ... But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and the gaps were beginning to be closed, they were very angry, and all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.

In the early fourth century (ca. 388), the Samaritans constructed their own temple on Mt. Gerizim, and following the conquests of Alexander the Great in 333 Samaria was rebuilt as a Greek city (*polis*). Enmity with the Jews in the south continued. The Jews who rebelled in 165 BCE against the assimilationist policies of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his allies in the priestly establishment resented the Samaritans for not coming to their aid. The Jewish king John Hyrcanus attacked Samaria in 128 BCE and burned down the Samaritan Temple on Mt. Gerizim.²⁸ It was rebuilt by Herod the Great, who also rebuilt the Jerusalem Temple.

From the Persian period in the late sixth century BCE to the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans remained at odds. Each claimed the true descent from Abraham, true understanding of Torah, the correct priesthood, and the right form of worship in the proper location.

To look at the Samaritans only through the perspective of the biblical tradition is to tell only half the story. The Samaritans' own self-designation is *Shamerim*, meaning "guardians" or "observers" of the

Law. Jewish readers may know the Hebrew equivalent, *shomer*, as in *shomer shabbas*, or "Sabbath observant." An alternate, external etymology is found in 1 Kings 16.24, which states that the name came from a fellow named Shemer, who originally owned the property on which the Samaritans lived.

Samaritans traditionally view themselves as descendants of Joseph, and thus of his sons Ephraim and Manasseh, and as possessing the correct interpretation of Torah, which had been promulgated at the Northern sanctuary in Shechem. As for the Jews, according to ancient Samaritan tradition, they got off track at the time of Samuel, when the priest Eli set up a heretical sanctuary at Shiloh. Errors continued, from Solomon, who, incorrectly in their view, erected a temple in Jerusalem; to Ezra, who in their view rewrote the Pentateuch with a Judean bias; to Rabbi Hillel, who corrupted the tradition with his innovations regarding the interpretation of the Torah. They further suggest that the Jews got off track by adding to the Pentateuch additional books, those texts today called the Prophets and the Writings.

The enmity between the two groups waxed and waned depending on the time, but for the most part relations were not warm. The Jewish king Herod the Great took a Samaritan woman named Malthace as one of his wives (he had nine, according to Josephus); she was the mother of Herod Antipas (the tetrarch responsible for the death of John the Baptist) and Herod Archelaus as well as of a daughter named Olympias.²⁹

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well (4.1–42). Biblical readers know the scene, because it recapitulates the meeting of Abraham's servant and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, and Moses and Zipporah. That Jesus had earlier been identified as a "bridegroom" (3.29) solidifies the convention: Jewish man meets a woman at a well, object matrimony. Although the Samaritan woman, married many times, is not the expected Jewish virgin, a wedding of a sort ensues, as through the woman the Samaritan village comes to accept Jesus's messianic claim.

In the course of the story, John makes clear how unexpected the relationship is. Jesus says to the woman, "Give me a drink," and she

responds, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" The evangelist secures the impression of enmity by adding, "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans" (4.7, 9). In that same chapter, the Johannine Jesus, unsympathetic to religious pluralism, responds to the woman's question about the location of true worship, "You worship what you do not know, we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (4.20–22).

The Fourth Gospel is not the only text to indicate problems between Jews and Samaritans. According to Matthew, Jesus enjoins his disciples, "Enter no town of the Samaritans" (10.5). Luke even ensures that readers unfamiliar with local politics understand the enmity. In the chapter preceding our parable (9.51–56), Luke recounts that a Samaritan village refused Jesus hospitality "because his face was set toward Jerusalem." The apostles James and John, at their apostolic best and recalling the prophet Elijah in 2 Kings 1.10, then propose to call down fire from heaven to destroy the village. Jesus has to explain that dropping bombs is not the proper response to a lack of hospitality.

Josephus, no friend of the Samaritans, confirms the enmity. Not only does he claim that Samaritans would affiliate with the Jews when it was politically advantageous, but declare themselves a distinct group when it was not;³⁰ he also describes direct Samaritan attacks on Jews. According to his *Antiquities*, at the time of the Roman governor Cumanus (ca. 48–50) it was the "custom of the Galileans" to travel through Samaria on their way to the pilgrimage festivals in Jerusalem. Samaritan residents in a village called Ginea attacked the Galileans and massacred a number of them. Other Galilean Jews sought the governor's help in punishing the murderers, but, as Josephus recounts, the Samaritans bribed Cumanus to do nothing. A number of Galileans, "much displeased," ignoring the warnings of saner voices, and opting for vigilante justice, "plundered many Samaritan villages." The Samaritan leaders accused the Jews not only of plunder, but also of setting their villages on fire. The political crisis, which arose in part because of both Jewish and Samaritan reaction to Roman rule, ultimately required the emperor Claudius's intervention.³¹

Rabbinic sources debate the status of Samaritans, given the ethnic, theological, and religious connections between Samaritans and Jews. Early Tannaitic texts (e.g., Babylonian Talmud, *Qidushin* 75b; Jerusalem Talmud, *Ketubot* 3, 1, 27a; minor tractate *Kuim* 1.1) regard Samaritans as Jews. After the Bar Kokhba revolt (132–35 CE), later rabbinic sources begin to show anti-Samaritan ideas.³²

New Testament scholars tend to cite these negative statements as normative for the time of Jesus. A number of commentators note for this parable, and even more frequently for John's story of the Samaritan woman at the well, that "the Jews" considered "Samaritan women menstruants from the cradle and so perpetually unclean."³³ The reference, which is usually not given, is the Mishnah, *Niddah* 4.1: "The daughters of the Samaritans are [deemed unclean as] menstruants from their cradle." Missing from the discussion, almost invariably, is citation of the next passage: "The daughters of the Sadducees, if they follow after the ways of their fathers, are deemed like to the women of the Samaritans" (*Niddah* 4.2). Thus the Mishnah cannot possibly reflect the view of "all Jews."

Because the Mishnah goes on to describe how Samaritan women do observe the laws of family purity—the Samaritan Pentateuch replicates the menstrual injunctions in the Hebrew text—the rabbis wonder how could they be unclean (Babylonian Talmud, *Niddah* 31b). Finally, a third rabbinic text, the Tosefta (lit. "Additions," a volume that adds to Mishnaic teaching) states: "A Samaritan is like a non-Jew, according to the opinion of Rabbi [i.e., Judah ha-Nasi, the codifier of the Mishnah]. Rabbi Shimeon ben Gamliel [his father] says, 'A Samaritan is like Israel in all respects.'"³⁴ Selective citation of rabbinic literature in service of making Jesus look better than "Judaism" is not a helpful exegetical procedure.

On the American Bible Society's website dedicated to understanding this parable, one commentator notes: "Some scholars have cited a rabbinic tradition that says that Jews who accept aid from a Samaritan will delay the redemption of Israel. If, then, the wounded traveler was Jewish, the story becomes an open attack on first-century Jewish theology and piety. It seems to point out the foolishness of tying Israel's

redemption to such a bigoted idea."³⁵ No rabbinic reference is given, and the Bible Society never contests the point; for it, the idea of Jewish xenophobia was a given. I contacted the author to ask about the source. He responded, "I found the reference in E. Juengel, *Paulus and Jesus*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen, 1967), p. 174, but he never cited the rabbinic tradition and I could not find it elsewhere in the book."³⁶ Klyne Snodgrass solves the mystery of the citation. The claim is "based on the misuse of a late tradition in *b. Baba Batra* 10b and comments in Str-B 4/1, pp. 538 and 544."³⁷ Str-B is the abbreviation for Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck's 1922 *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, a compendium of connections the authors saw between the New Testament and all of rabbinic literature.

There is one more level of our investigation about how this incorrect citation made its way into New Testament studies. It apparently entered through the work of Walter Grundmann,³⁸ the director of the Nazi program entitled Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life (*Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben*).³⁹ Again, anti-Jewish material is repeated, because no one questions it.

Finally, with the rise of postcolonial and liberation-theological readings, negative stereotypes of Jewish-Samaritan relations coupled with negative stereotypes of Jewish purity laws combine. When biblical interpretation functions to enfranchise people, name systems of oppression, or inspire change for the better, this is all to the good. When, however, the means by which these concerns are facilitated include negative stereotyping, then the ends are compromised. For example, in his "Dalit Theology" and the Parable of the Good Samaritan, M. Gnanavaram maps the Dalit (untouchable) onto the Samaritan, and the priest and the Levite correspond to the "high-cast non-Dalits." The Samaritan is the "outcast," although the only person cast out in the Gospel in relation to Samaritan issues is Jesus, who was refused lodging in a Samaritan village (Luke 9:53); the Samaritan is "oppressed," although according to the parable he has freedom of travel and economic resources.⁴⁰ Readers will need to determine if the end,

the passionate call for liberation, justifies the means, if the means turn out to be a negative caricature of Jewish culture.

Finding the Better Intertext

Rather than understand the parable through negative stereotype, we do better to understand it as, in part, a resurrection of an earlier biblical incident. Along with the accounts of Dinah and Shechem in Genesis 34, Jotham and Abimelech in Judges 9, and the fate of the Northern Kingdom, there is another biblical account of Samaria, one that presents a different form of relationship. According to 2 Chronicles 28:8-15, the Samaritans—here identified as "the people of Israel"—captured two hundred thousand Judean "women, sons, and daughters; they also took much booty . . . to Samaria." A prophet named Oded then condemned the Samaritan army:

Because the LORD, the God of your ancestors, was angry with Judah, he gave them into your hand, but you have killed them in a rage that has reached up to heaven. Now you intend to subjugate the people of Judah and Jerusalem, male and female, as your slaves. But what have you except sins against the LORD your God? Now hear me, and send back the captives whom you have taken from your kindred, for the fierce wrath of the LORD is upon you.

A number of the Samaritan leaders, chastened, agreed with the prophet. Their actions anticipate the imagery found in the parable of the Good Samaritan:

Then those who were mentioned by name got up and took the captives, and with the booty they clothed all that were naked among them; they clothed them, gave them sandals, and 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, the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria.⁴¹

The cycle of violence can be broken.

For the person in the ditch or the listener who identifies with him, 2 Chronicles 28 offers a necessary lesson. Those who want to kill you may be the only ones who will save you.

And upon the next day, taking out, he gave two denarii to the innkeeper and said, "Take care of him, and whatever you might spend, I, upon my return, will give back to you." (Luke 10.35)

In 1980, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher claimed: "Nobody would remember the Good Samaritan if he had only good intentions. He had money as well."⁴² Mrs. Thatcher overstates; the parable would still convey its basic message, had it stopped at the previous verse. Thus her comment at best serves to prompt another question: What does Luke 10.35 contribute to the parable?

First, the verse makes clear, despite numerous sermons to the contrary, that the Samaritan is not a social victim. He has money, freedom of travel, the ability to find lodging (more than what Jesus found in the Samaritan village), and some leverage with the innkeeper. The parable, in its original setting, is not about the type of prejudice that creates people on the margins; it is about hatred between groups who have similar resources.

Second, a benevolent reading of the Samaritan's final actions understands him as providing not one-time aid, but long-term care. Thus the sense of loving neighbor means continual action, not something to check off the to-do list. The Samaritan's offering the innkeeper what

amounts to a blank check fits within Jesus's overall concern for generosity. Moreover, his trusting the innkeeper to care for the wounded man echoes the trust the wounded man had to have had in him. By trusting the innkeeper, he provides confirmatory evidence that we make our neighbors; that trust is essential for life.⁴³

More cynical interpreters, aware of how Jesus's Jewish audience likely felt about this Samaritan hero, might see an ominous implication in the Samaritan's final actions. The Samaritan promises to return, and should he be displeased with the innkeeper's ministrations, he will repay in kind. The Samaritan made the choice to care for the man in the ditch; the innkeeper's motives to continue the care—benevolence, financial incentive, fear of retaliation—go unspoken. In the long run, at least as far as the victim is concerned, they may not matter. Of ultimate import is not our motive, but our action.

The parable proper ends here. But Jesus is not done with the lawyer, and neither are we.

"Which of these three a neighbor—does it seem to you—was to the one who fell among the robbers?" And he said, "The one doing mercy for him." And said to him Jesus, "Go and you do likewise." (Luke 10.36-37)

The lawyer asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus reframes the question. As Martin Luther King Jr. so eloquently revealed in his sermon, asking the right question is of utmost importance. The issue for Jesus is not the "who," but the "what," not the identity but the action. The lawyer is unable even to voice the hated name "Samaritan." He can only say, "The one doing mercy for him."

The parable spoke about compassion, but the lawyer read the action as one of mercy. His rephrasing the issue is apt: compassion can be

felt in the gut; mercy needs to be enacted with the body. The tent may come from Luke, who uses it extensively, but only in the infancy materials, where mercy is an attribute of the divine: "His mercy is for those who fear him" (1.50); "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy" (1.54); "Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her" (1.58); "Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors" (1.72) and, finally, "by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us" (1.78).

For the lawyer, and for Luke's readers, the Samaritan does what God does. The divine is manifested only through our actions. Therefore, Jesus responds to the lawyer's observation not with a question and not with a parable, but with an imperative: "Go," he says, "and you do likewise." To speak of loving God and loving neighbor does not require theological precision; it does not ask for a particular location of worship (Gerizim, Jerusalem, Mecca, the Ganges, or Sogoré...); it does not speak to a particular book (the Torah, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Christian Bible, the Qur'an, or the Book of Mormon...). Loving God and loving neighbor cannot exist in the abstract; they need to be enacted.

We do not know what the lawyer did following this parable. Nor do we know if the parable was actually spoken to a lawyer, or if Luke has provided both the opening and closing frame. All we can know is what we, upon hearing this parable in its narrative frame, will do.

The Parable in Today's World

For a final sense of the profundity of the parable, we need only look from ancient texts to present contexts. The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the few that makes an almost perfect translation to today's situation.

Samaria today has various names: the West Bank, Occupied Palestine, Greater Israel. To hear the parable today, we only need to update the identity of the figures. I am an Israeli Jew on my way from

Jerusalem to Jericho, and I am attacked by thieves, beaten, stripped, robbed, and left half dead in a ditch. Two people who should have stopped to help pass me by: the first, a Jewish medic from the Israel Defense Forces; the second, a member of the Israel/Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. But the person who takes compassion on me and shows me mercy is a Palestinian Muslim whose sympathies lie with Hamas, a political party whose charter not only anticipates Israel's destruction, but also depicts Jews as subhuman demons responsible for all the world's problems.

The parable of the "Good Hamas Member" might be difficult for people in support of Israel's existence. Were Jesus a Samaritan, we'd today have the parable of the "Good Jew," told in the streets of Ramallah. If people in the Middle East could picture this, we might have a better vision for choosing life.

Can we finally agree that it is better to acknowledge the humanity and the potential to do good in the enemy, rather than to choose death? Will we be able to care for our enemies, who are also our neighbors? Will we be able to bind up their wounds rather than blow up their cities? And can we imagine that they might do the same for us? Can we put into practice that inauguration promise of not leaving the wounded traveler on the road? The biblical text—and concern for humanity's future—tell us we must.

*no ability to hear mercy
as mercy
to find mercy*