

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

The unidentified man who fell among robbers on the Jericho road

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THE PARABLE of the ‘Good Samaritan’ is one of the best known of the numerous parables of Jesus contained in the Christian Gospels. Most commentators see it as a ‘call for merciful behaviour which is not limited by any boundaries’.¹ Some, like Geraint Vaughan Jones deplore the sentimentalising of what he perceives to be ‘the devastating and drastically challenging character of the tale in its original context’.²

As I will attempt to show, there is more to the Samaritan than meets the scholarly eye. I am encouraged to offer the following reflections because I can find little evidence of New Testament scholars drawing on the remarkable progress made in the field of *Samaritana* over the past fifty years; or much evidence (apart from ground-breaking studies on Samaritans and the Fourth Gospel by Purvis and others, and general reliance on certain Patristic sources) of interest in New Testament allusions to the Samaritans shown by those of us who work in the field of Samaritan studies.

Parables in general

The Parable *genre* has exercised a fascination for modern New Testament scholars—liberal and so-called neo-conservative alike—that is akin to the fascination exercised on some by the Book of the Apocalypse, and apocalyptic literature in general.

They have argued endlessly, back and forth, about basic questions like how many parables there are³ what a parable really is,⁴ and the relative merits of Alexandrian allegory

and the subtleties of modern scriptural exegesis. We have been regaled with the differences between legends, myths, proverbs, riddles, parables and similitudes; between *historisch* and *geschichtlich*,⁵ between *Mashal* and *parabole*, between Form Criticism and textual Revisionism.

I barely touch the fringes of this minefield of genuine insights, fragile suppositions, old prejudices and religious politics. My concern is with the Greek text of St Luke’s Gospel 10:25-37 as it stands. Certain ideas suggest themselves to someone who has spent a great deal of his academic life grappling with doctrine, text and metaphor central to Samaritan culture.

The Status Quaestionis

Because what I am going to present will implicitly call into question assumptions dear to the hearts of Form Critics and others it is only right that I preface my remarks with some comments on the *status quaestionis* regarding the parable of the ‘certain man’ who was half-alive [*semivivo relicto*] according to St Jerome, and half-dead [*emithane*] according to the Greek text, and of the Samaritan who came to his aid.

All commentators—ancient and modern—agree that a parable is *figurative speech*. This is stating the obvious. What is not immediately obvious is the reason for modern scholars wanting to deny apodictically that as well as similes (the kingdom of God *is like a net*⁶), and metaphors (*you are the salt of the earth*,⁷ *the eye is the lamp of the body*⁸), the term

‘figurative’ covers *allegories*. This despite the fact that the denial flies in the face of allegory found *passim* in Hebrew literature, and even in the parables of Jesus: *e.g.* the wicked *vine-dressers*: Mark 12:1-9.

See also Mark 4:13 where the narrator, Jesus explains in allegorical terms the meaning of the parable of the Sower. The ‘seed,’ Jesus explains to the disciples, is the word, and the ‘birds of the air’ are Satan who carries away the word that was sown in them.

Allegory forces itself upon the reader of the New Testament. Granted the context, isn’t the ‘*fortis armatus*’—the ‘strong man’ described in Luke 11:21—meant to be understood as Satan? Isn’t the ‘*fortior*’—the stronger man—isn’t he to be understood as God? What is the parable of the servants being encouraged to have their ‘loins girt,’ and their ‘lamps burning’ in Luke 12:35-40 if not an allegory of the Church awaiting its Lord’s return?

Broadminded Allegorists

The favoured method of interpreting the parables in the early centuries of Christianity was allegorical. And while the allegorical method didn’t please everyone [Theodore of Mopsuestia wrote against it] none of those who interpreted the parables allegorically seems to have excluded simile or metaphor, or denied that some parables might be straightforward narrative stories.

Origen’s allegorical interpretation of our parable is well-known: the man who was robbed was Adam; the robbers were the devil and his aids; the priest stands for the Law, the levite for the Prophets and the Good Samaritan is Jesus, and the inn is the Church.

St Augustine [354-430] saw the victim as the human race [*genus humanum*] half-alive through knowledge of God, and half-dead through sin. The Samaritan is Jesus himself, and the inn keeper is St Paul.

Clement of Alexandria [c.150-c.215], St Ambrose of Milan [c.339-397], St Irenaeus of Lyons [c.130-c.200]—all, like Augustine, of-



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ferred allegorical interpretations without excluding other possibilities.

St John Chrysostom [c.347-407] and what is called the Antiochean ‘school’, on the other hand, favoured a less allegorical interpretation, and took what some moderns who reject allegory regard as a hard-headed, practical view that was less concerned with detail than with the overall purpose of the story.

An end to allegory

Claims that allegorical interpretation runs contrary to the nature of the parable were first made by Luther [1483-1546] and Calvin [1509-1564]. The former dismissed fifteen centuries of Christian allegories as ‘monkey tricks,’⁹ and valued Origen’s interpretation of the scripture as ‘worth less than dirt’.¹⁰ The latter, thought the allegorising of the Fathers of the Church to be ‘idle fooleries’.¹¹

The nineteenth and early twentieth century Marburg writer Adolf J licher [1857-1938] set the tone for much of modern writing on the parables. Following the Protestant Reformers, J licher dismissed allegory and the concept of riddles out of hand, declaring that parables ‘were designed for immediate effect, products of the moment, and deeply rooted in the particularity of the moment’.¹²

Well and good. But, *pace* J licher, the very *sitz-im-leben* of the parable of the Good Samaritan leads us to quite a different opinion: and to favour a less narrow assessment of the nature of parables in general, as we will at-

tempt to show.

What follows in this brief paper is offered in the conviction that allegory was as much embraced by the word *Mashal* in Hebrew literary usage, as was straight parable, or fable, or the analogy and comparison that some authors call, vaguely, ‘similitude’.¹³

In the opinion of the writer, modern scholarship has been impoverished by the rigidity of the views of those who in rejecting their Christian past, felt obliged to reject allegory along with it. The Reformers were not alone in this. Even the Spanish Jesuit Juan Maldonado [1533-1583] seems to have been swayed too easily into rejecting allegory from the New Testament and particularly from the parables.

Unwelcoming Samaritans

The context of the story of ‘The Good Samaritan’ begins a few §§ before our parable commences. Luke recounts that Jesus sent messengers into a Samaritan village to make preparations for him [presumably to spend the evening there] ‘but the people would not receive him because he was making for Jerusalem’.¹⁴

This seems an unpromising preamble to what is to follow, for James and John took offence at this rebuff and wanted Jesus ‘to call down fire from heaven to burn them up’—an allusion to the well-known story of Elijah who called down fire from heaven on the two captains and their fifties who were sent by Ahaziah the king of Israel to fetch him.¹⁵

Jesus—contrary to their expectations—rebuked them and said, ‘You don’t know what spirit you are made of. The Son of Man did not come to destroy souls, but to save them’.¹⁶

After going with his companions to another, presumably nearby, village, Jesus then sent the seventy-two disciples to all the other villages he was going to visit, instructing them how to comport themselves, and telling his disciples on their return, ‘Happy the eyes that see what you see, for I tell you that many

prophets and kings wanted to see what you see and never saw it; to hear what you hear and never heard it’.¹⁷

The Law and Eternal Life

Luke then describes how a ‘certain lawyer’ [*nomikos tis*] i.e. a man skilled in Jewish law,’ in order to test [*ekpeirazon*] Jesus asked him how he could inherit eternal life. Jesus asked him, ‘What is written in the Law [*en to nomo*]?’ The lawyer replied by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, too well known to need repeating here.

To this Jesus said, as if it had been he who set the test, ‘You have answered correctly [*orthos*]: act thus, and you will live’. But the ‘lawyer’ wanting to prove himself ‘law-abiding’ [*thelon dikaiosai*] asked, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ As he was a person versed in points of Law, and as he had already used the term ‘neighbour’ in quoting from Leviticus, it is difficult not to see this as yet another ‘test’ for Jesus. It was debated amongst the Scribes whether a gentile or Samaritan was a ‘neighbour’ [*Ger: plesion*] in the sense that Leviticus 19:18 intended. That this was how Jesus took the question will become clear from the remarkable tale that follows.

What befell four travellers

Unlike Jesus and his disciples who were going from Samaria up to Jerusalem, the parable of the ‘Good Samaritan’ describes a ‘man of some importance’ [*anthropos tis*—I take the latter word to mean ‘important,’ not just the usual ‘certain,’ or *quidam*] who was travelling, apparently alone, down the dangerous and lonely road from Jerusalem *towards* Jericho.

Despite the fact that neither ἀπό nor the latin ‘in’ necessarily mean ‘to,’ the phrase ‘*ab Ierusalem in Jericho*’ is invariably translated ‘from Jerusalem to Jericho’. The text in no way implies that Jericho was his final destination. He may even have been going via Jericho into or through some other region: possibly

Samaria.

I assume that the Samaritan who stopped to help was not coming from Jerusalem, though the implication is that like the priest and the levite, he was coming down the same road, behind the unfortunate traveller whom the robbers attacked. Joachim Jeremias assumes, curiously, that the levite was *ascending* the mountain road, ‘on his way to perform Temple service’.¹⁸

The listeners are told nothing of the profession or nationality of the mugged man. Most commentators assume that he was a Jew. He could also have been a Gentile or even a Samaritan who had some reason for being in the region of Jerusalem.¹⁹ If the parable is about charity, mercy, kindness to foreigners [the leper who was a Samaritan in Luke 17:11-19 is called by Jesus ‘a foreigner’—*allogenes*] then these details are not inconsequential: they could help explain the reasons for what transpired.

Robbers waylaid this unwary traveller and left him stripped and bleeding and half-dead [according to the Greek] and ‘half-alive’ [according to St Jerome’s *Vulgate*]. As the Greek text is silent about *where* he was left, we assume that he was left on the side of the road that he was walking down, so that passers could hardly avoid seeing him, and would have to walk around him if they didn’t want to help him. In a moment, the priest and levite are going to be described as passing by on the *other* side [*antiparelthen*—from *anti-parerkomai*: ‘to pass by on the opposite side’].

The lawyer must have been wondering where the story was leading. But then Jesus introduces the next two characters in the drama: two travellers. These are officials with whom the lawyer was very familiar—a priest and a levite.

Was he expecting to hear that the priest and levite came to the aid of the traveller? Probably; but instead, in this parable which is being narrated in response to the lawyer’s question, the priest notices the stricken man and walks around him, taking the opposite side

of the road. The levite does likewise.

At this stage in the narrative the listeners could have been forgiven for expecting to hear that an *Israelite* was the next to come by, for the Mishnah lists the precedence amongst the Jewish people as follows:

A priest precedes a levite, a levite an Israelite, an Israelite²⁰ a bastard, a bastard a *Nathin*,²¹ a *Nathin* a proselyte and a proselyte a freed-slave. This applies when all are (otherwise) equal; but if a bastard is learned in the Law and a High priest is ignorant of the Law the bastard that is learned in the Law precedes the High Priest that is ignorant of the Law.²²

Why the priest and levite went the other way

Commentators are ingenious in their efforts to explain the reluctance of the priest and levite to come to the aid of the distressed man. A common reason is their alleged fear of becoming unclean through contact with a dead body. But ritual uncleanness came about from contact, or from being under the same roof as a corpse. And a man conveys uncleanness only after his soul has left his body.²³

A corpse lying on the road would not cast a wide shadow, and could hardly overshadow a passer-by. An injured person did not convey uncleanness *per se*. Unless the priest and levite took their prudent evasive action quite some distance from the fallen victim, they would have been able to see that he wasn’t dead, and would have been free to render aid without fear of uncleanness; even if he were a gentile, or Samaritan.

Whatever their reasons for not rendering aid, the priest and levite passed by another way, avoiding confronting the needy man. We know from the text that they were also coming from Jerusalem, so their taking ‘the other side’ of the road was a deliberate if reflex action to avoid contact.

The listeners would have been debating amongst themselves by now ‘what will happen next?’ None could have predicted the se-

quel: ‘A certain Samaritan who was travelling, came upon him, was moved with compassion for him...carried him to the inn and looked after him’.

A chill would have fallen on the lawyer at this point. Even sharing the bread of a Samaritan, according to R. Eliezer, was equated to eating the flesh of swine.²⁴ And ‘whoever receives a Samaritan hospitably in his house deserves that his children go into exile’.²⁵ Jewish Samaritan relations had been at a low ebb since the incident described by Josephus²⁶ that occurred when Jesus was a child and Coponius was procurator in Judaea. At the Passover, some Samaritans entered the temple precincts and strewed dead men’s bones around.

To Jesus’ question, ‘which of these three proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ the lawyer could not bring himself even to utter the name ‘Samaritan’. Instead he said, ‘the one who took pity on him’. Jesus replied, ‘Go and do likewise yourself’.

The Samaritan Enigma

The appearance of a Samaritan at this stage in the wake of the unhelpful priest and levite, and the grave risk to himself that Jesus took by introducing a Samaritan into the tale—he had, after all, been accused of being himself a Samaritan²⁷—calls for some explanation.

Had the intention of Jesus been merely to highlight the need for charity or philanthropy,²⁸ then any passing Jew could have shown the mercy the situation of the stricken traveller called for, and served as an example for the lawyer.

If the story were merely ‘a damning indictment of social, racial and religious superiority’²⁹ then would not a gentile, and specifically a Roman citizen or official have been sufficient to show up the lack of compassion on the part of the temple officials?

Jeremias suggests that a Samaritan is used by Jesus ‘to teach [the lawyer] that no human being was beyond the range of his

charity’.³⁰ Bernard Scott thinks that the Samaritan is introduced to challenge the listener to identify with a member of a despised minority within the community. Or with the victim, and suffer the compassion of the despised Samaritan.³¹ I have a third option to put before the interested reader.

An alternative view of the parable

I agree with St John Chrysostom and the Antiochean school that the details should not blind us to the main message. And I see the clue to the point behind the parable, and to the identity of the stricken man, and the reason for the inclusion of the Samaritan, in the sequence followed by the parable of Jesus as recorded by Luke:

Lawyer [10:25];
Law [10:26];
Law-abiding [10:29];
Priest [10:31];
Levite [10:32];
Samaritan [10:33].

The lawyer had asked a question of Jesus to ‘test’ him. Jesus countered with a question of his own, and in reply the lawyer quoted the Torah [Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18] and was told by Jesus: ‘Do this [*touto poiei*] and live’. But then the lawyer persisted in asking another question. The parable follows.

In the spirit of the Alexandrian school, I suggest that the ‘certain important man’ who fell among robbers was the *Torah* itself which went down from Jerusalem through Jericho to Samaria and Galilee and beyond. As Isaiah put it almost eight centuries before, the Law had fallen into the hands of robbers, *i.e.* those who, by omission or commission, ‘despise the word of the Holy One of Israel’.³²

The priest whose principal responsibility it was to rectify this neglect, passed by on the ‘opposite’ side—not just on the ‘other’ side—*i.e.* ignored the parlous state observance of the Torah was in, and by implication followed a different path; levites who were the servants of the priests in their ritual role, did no better.

A Samaritan however, was ‘moved by pity’ and ‘cared for it,’ *i.e.* ‘observed’ the Torah; and told others to ‘look after it,’ *i.e.* to observe it.

Following on the comment above about the ‘opposite’ rather than the ‘other’ side, it may not be out of place to recall here that the word ‘Torah’ [from *yarah* ‘to cast lots,’ or more specifically, to throw little arrows of varying lengths to learn the will of God] means the ‘Way’ divined by casting lots. The *Moreh* is the teacher of the ‘Way’. Is it fanciful to see the priest and levite taking ‘another way’ as they turn away from the Torah? Curiously, the Arabic word for the totality of Islamic law—Shari‘a—also means ‘a Way’.

Considered purely as drama, the Samaritan’s appearance in the parable effects the ‘catastrophe’—the *kata-strophe*—the ‘*coup de théâtre*’—the reversal of fortune that the ancients and the not so ancients admired and still admire in theatre.

What word for ‘Samaritan’ did Jesus use when he said, ‘But a Samaritan traveller came up...’. If he used *shomer* then the lawyer would have had a hint of the direction the story was taking. A hint that unfortunately we are denied through our having to rely on a Greek translation of the original tradition, however well it may be written by Luke whose mother tongue it was.

The Hebrew/Aramaic text that lies behind the Synoptics, and that Papias, Origen, St Irenaeus, St Cyril of Jerusalem, St Epiphanius and St Jerome all refer to, would be a boon for those of us wishing to have a window on the meaning of this and other ancient texts.

I suggest that the ‘catastrophe’ in this parable, is introduced by the very name ‘Samaritan’. In my view, Jesus is alluding to the name the Samaritans gave themselves, the ‘observant ones’—*shemarim*—in contradistinction to the name given to them in 2Kings 17:29 and commonly thereafter by their Judaeans rivals—‘*Shomronim*’. From the context of the parable, I suggest that this is the earliest allusion to *shomer* as an epithet for a Samaritan.

Moreover, the Samaritans regard them-

selves as the Israelites. Purvis has shown that the Fourth Gospel relates the Galilean Jews to the Samaritans more closely than to the Judean Jews to whom one would expect them to be connected. ‘This may account,’ Purvis writes, ‘for the use of the word ‘Israelite’ rather than ‘Jew,’ in Jesus’s statement concerning the Galilean Nathaniel’ in John 1:47: ‘An Israelite in whom there is no guile’. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus is not rejected by Judaeans to be accepted by Gentiles, but accepted by Galileans and Samaritans to be rejected by his fellow Judaeans.³³

In the light of this, instead of the lawyer’s—and, I should add, most commentators’—wondering why Jesus had not introduced an Israelite instead of a Samaritan after the priest and the levite had passed by, he and they would have been struck by his including a *Samaritan/Israelite*. Could this be the earliest allusion to Samaritans as Israelites?

If allegory is to be excluded from the interpretation of this parable, we are left with the question that no one seems to have asked: assuming the stricken man to be a Jew, why did he submit to the ministrations of the Samaritan? Shouldn’t he have observed A. Zar. 2:2 which laid down that [a Jew] ‘may accept healing from [Gentiles] for his goods [*i.e.* his possessions] but not for his person.’ Would not this stricture have applied to Samaritans as well as to Gentiles?

The meaning of the parable

Put simply, the message of the parable, intended for the lawyer and the bystanders, would run something like this: ‘You ask questions about the meaning of the Torah. Then, when they are answered you ask yet another question. Instead of talking about the Torah, dissecting it and weakening its effects on people’s lives, observe it, as the Samaritan does. Be like the *shomer*. Do this and you shall live.’

One recalls the equally radical and politically incorrect statement by Jesus addressed to Capharnaum: ‘It will be more bearable for

Sodom on the Day of Judgement than for you,' where Sodom was [and still is, at the time of writing] synonymous in genteel circles with dockside vice and corruption, and Capharnaum, a real-estate agent's dream of an irreproachably respectable lake-side city.

Is it any wonder that Luke, himself a 'foreigner,' and the only gentile evangelist, the friend and 'beloved physician' of Paul the Pharisee, should alone among the evangelists have preserved this gem of a tale that radically calls into doubt the presuppositions of much contemporary religious and social practice in Judaea?

Jesus does this by casting a despised Samaritan, a 'foreigner' in an heroic role, and upturning contemporary judgements about who was observant of the Law and who wasn't.

The Greek-educated doctor from Syria would have empathised with the Samaritan hero, and would have relished the dramatic effect of the story elicited from the young rabbi from Galilee by the lawyer from Jerusalem. Charity and mercy are at the heart of the parable; but they are not its kernel. Jesus has thrown down the gauntlet to those who would dispute the Samaritans' right to be called 'observers of the Law,' and true Israelites.

NOTES

1 Claus Westermann, *The Parables of Jesus*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1990 p.189.

2 *The Art and Truth of the Parables*, SPCK London 1964, p.115.

3 The number varies between 30 [Trench] 33 [Bruce] 53 [Julicher], 60 [A M Hunter] and 62 [Smith]. See A M Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, SCM London, 1977, p.11.

4 John R Donahue, SJ, *The Gospel in Parable*, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1988, pp.1-27

5 Geraint Vaughan Jones, *op. cit.* p.220.

6 Mt 13:47.

7 Mt 5:13.

8 Mt 6:22.

9 *Affenspiel*.

10 *Sermons* by Martin Luther, [James Kerr translation] pp.207-223.

11 *Harmony* on Matthew, Mark and Luke, III, p.63.

12 Geraint Jones, *op. cit.* p.17.

13 L E Browne's *Parables of the Gospels in the light of Modern Criticism*. Quoted in Geraint Jones, *op.cit.* p.17.

14 Luke 9:51-53.

15 2Kings 1:10ff.

16 Luke 9:55-56.

17 Luke 10:23,24.

18 *The Parables of Jesus*, SCM London 1955

p.141.

19 See *Ned.3:10* where a Samaritan is, by definition, one that does not 'go up to Jerusalem,' *i.e.* for the festivals.

20 For 'Israelite' understand 'lay-man'.

21 A descendant of the Gibeonites. See Joshua 9:27 and 3 Macc.1. Also Yeb.78b regarding the exclusion of the Gibeonites and bastards from the Israelite community where intermarriage was concerned.

22 Mishnah, Hor.3.8 [Danby, 466].

23 See Mishnah, Ohol. *passim* esp.i,1,3,6.

24 Sheb. 8:10.

25 Synh. 114:1.

26 *Antiquities*, 18:2,2 [Whiston's translation, Edinburgh, William P. Nimmo and Co. undated].

27 Jn 8:48.

28 John Drury, *The Parables of Jesus*, SPCK London, 1985, p.133.

29 Jones, *op. cit.* p.115.

30 *op.cit.* p.142.

31 *Hear Then the Parable*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1989, pp.198,199.

32 Isaiah 5:24.

33 'The Fourth Gospel and the Samaritans', James D Purvis, *Novum Testamentum* xvii [1975/3] pp.171,172.

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