

Exegesis Paper #1
The Parable of the Good Samaritan: Exegesis of Luke 10:25-37

Michelle Murrain
Interpreting Sacred Texts
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Text: Luke 10:25-37 (Parable of the Good Samaritan)

“Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is a popular text, and has been subject to many different kinds of critiques, with a wide variety of conclusions drawn from the passage. **This parable contains an important lesson about the commandment “love your neighbor as yourself.” Using source and social-scientific criticism I will attempt to shed light on the question of what does this pericope have to say about who is the neighbor.** Specifically, I will look into the issue of the parable and its context, the Torah commandments referred to in this passage, the controversies surrounding who the Jewish community thought the commandment included, issues of ritual purity, as well as the role of Samaritans at that time in Palestine. What is clear is that this pericope encourages the most broad interpretation of the commandment to love your neighbor, suggesting strongly that everyone is our neighbor, and this text commands us to show compassion to all, no matter who they may be.

The Gospel of Luke

Luke's Gospel is considered unique in its views on inclusiveness.¹ Luke takes the genealogy of Jesus back to Adam, not just back to Abraham. For Luke, salvation is extended to everyone: sinners, women, Samaritans, Gentiles, etc. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a very good example of this universality. There are three references to Samaritans in the combined work of Luke-Acts: the parable of the Good Samaritan, the healing of the lepers, where the Samaritan leper is the only one to return², and the spread of the gospel to Samaritans in Acts.³ As we will see later, in terms of the ways Samaritans were considered at this time – these portrayals of Samaritans are radical in the fact that they are so positive.

The Context of the Parable

Luke is the only Gospel in which the Parable of the Good Samaritan appears, suggesting that it comes from the source, Special L. Mark (12:28-34) has a scribe come up to Jesus, and ask Jesus what the first commandment is. Like Mark, Matthew (22:34-40) has a lawyer (not a scribe) ask Jesus about the greatest commandment. Luke's version of this is quite different – his lawyer asks Jesus about how to inherit eternal life. Luke then has the lawyer ask “who is my neighbor?” and then follows with the parable. Luke's version then finishes up with Jesus asking the lawyer “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer answers “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus admonishes the lawyer to do likewise.

Most scholars have come to the conclusion that the context that Luke puts around the parable (specifically, verses 25-29 and 36-37) is a Lukan creation, reflecting Luke's desire to

¹ Dennis Duling, *The New Testament: History, Literature and Social Context* (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2003) 368

² Luke 17:16

³ Duling, *The New Testament*, 369

appeal to a gentile audience.⁴ Some scholars, most notably the Jesus Seminar⁵, feel that the context is a definite Lukan addition, because it doesn't fit for a number of reasons. The first of which is that the meaning of the word “neighbor” (πλησιον) changes between 10:25-29 and 10:30-37. Another reason that they think the context doesn't fit is because the Lukan form of the question 'eternal life' is different than that of Matthew or Mark, in which the question is about the first or greatest commandment. They do see the parable itself as authentically a saying from Jesus.

A few scholars go against the grain of this scholarship, suggesting that the entire pericope is a unit, either authentic to Jesus or a Lukan creation⁶. Bock suggests that the idea that the context doesn't fit misses the “pedagogical beauty of Jesus' reply. Jesus answers the question by turning the onus back on the lawyer, saying, in effect, 'Do not worry about the other guy, but be a neighbor yourself.’”⁷ Young finds it difficult to believe that Luke would have taken words out of the mouth of Jesus, and put them in the mouth of a Torah scholar.⁸

I do think that this issue of the context is an important one, because what one gleans about the meaning of the parable depends heavily on the context around it. The way that the context and the parable fit together is very important to the interpretation of the pericope, including the parable and commandments. A detailed examination of the authenticity of the context of the parable is beyond the scope of this paper, and I will choose the minority position,

⁴ Duling, *The New Testament*, 387

⁵ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What did Jesus Really Say?* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993) 324

⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 1996) 1019, Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998) 104, Philip Esler, “Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict: The Parable of the Good Samaritan in the Light of Social Identity Theory.” *Biblical Interpretation* 8(4):325-357, Filip Noël, “The Double Commandment of Love in Luke 10:27: A Deuteronomistic Pillar of Lukan Redaction of Mark 12:29-33”, in C.M. Tuckett, ed. *The Scriptures in the Gospels* (Leuven: University Press, 1997)

⁷ Bock, *Baker Commentary*, 1019

⁸ Young, *The Parables*, 104

and look at context and parable as a unified passage, because I am persuaded by the those scholars that the context and the parable go together.

The Word 'Neighbor' and the Commandment

The lawyer, who, in that setting, is an expert Torah scholar, when asked by Jesus, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” gives the answer in the form of the two commandments of loving God and neighbor. The dual commandment, as quoted by the lawyer in Luke 10:27 is not found anywhere in the Hebrew Bible, exactly. The first of those commandments is from Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” The second is from Leviticus 19:18, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” This form in Luke has been called the “double commandment of love”⁹ The text found in Luke differs significantly from the LXX text that we have.¹⁰ Scholars have suggested that even though it differs from the form found in Torah, its expression in this way was completely consistent with the first-century Palestinian Jewish context.¹¹

The lawyer then asks Jesus “And who is my neighbor?” This is a specific question of law. As Esler says the question is “whom are we Judeans obligated to treat as neighbors and whom not?”¹² The Hebrew word for neighbor is *rea* (רֵעַ) and it has had a variety of meanings over time, from friend to colleague or coworker.¹³ The question of to whom this commandment

⁹ Filip Noël, *The Double Commandment of Love in Luke 10:27: A Deuteronomistic Pillar of Lukan Redaction of Mark 12:29-33*, in C.M. Tuckett, ed. *The Scriptures in the Gospels* (Leuven:University Press, 1997)

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ John Nolland, *World Biblical Commentary: Luke 9:21-10:34* (Dallas, TX:Word Books, 1982) 582

¹² Philip Esler, “Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict: The Parable of the Good Samaritan in the Light of Social Identity Theory.” *Biblical Interpretation* 8(4):325-357

¹³ Young, *The Parables*, 102

extended was an ongoing issue. In Leviticus 19, this was clearly meant to mean only fellow Israelites. It is extended to others in verse 34, “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...” In the Qumran community, however, the division was quite clear – hate for all others besides Israelites was absolute.¹⁴ However, there was quite a bit of discussion of this issue among Pharisees,¹⁵ and there were texts that discussed the issue, some with generous sentiments.¹⁶ One scholar suggests that because of the situation in Palestine at that time “the non-Jewish populace appeared not as 'innocent' resident aliens, but for the most part as an expression of the hated state of foreign domination.”¹⁷ Thus, in the context of the time, there are quite a number of interpretations of this commandment, in terms of the meaning of the word “neighbor.”

When answering the question put to Jesus by the lawyer, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus then responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan. There are a number of important issues to raise in the content of this parable. They include issues of ritual purity, the oral Torah, hierarchies in the Palestinian Jewish community, and the position of Samaritans in Palestine at the time of Jesus.

Ritual Purity and Oral Torah

The parable of the Good Samaritan starts off with the story of the man in the ditch, left for dead. Who is this man? Most scholars seem to assume him to be a Jew,¹⁸ although that is not

¹⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacrina Pagina Serices: Volume 3 The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991) p172-3

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ Nolland, *World Biblical Commentary*, 584

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, SJ, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) p196

necessarily the case – there were many types of people who traveled from Jerusalem to Jericho.¹⁹ In addition, this journey was known to be a dangerous one.²⁰ According to Esler, it is of real concern to the lawyer/Torah scholar whether or not this man is an Israelite.²¹ Of course, the man is stripped, and both Esler and Knowles talk about the fact that clothing was a very important signifier.²² Knowles, suggests that clothing would have only signified status, not ethnicity. Esler suggests that the lawyer might have thought that it would be possible, given the man's nakedness, to assess his ethnicity by determining circumcision.²³ I would argue that given the interpretation of this parable, it is important to suggest that the lawyer assumed the man was a Jew.

The second two characters introduced are the priest and the Levite, who both pass by the victim on the other side of the road. These two characters, besides being religious functionaries, are the elite of Jewish society at the time.²⁴ According to Gourges, the tripartite division of “priest, Levite and the people” is present in the post-exilic Hebrew Bible, and, as well, was a formulation of the hierarchy of first-century Palestine. It is an important detail that both of the men that chose to pass the victim by were elite, especially given the identity of the one who finally helped the victim: the Samaritan.

One of the most common interpretations of this parable has to do with the fact that both the priest and the Levite could not touch the victim, or else they might lose their ritual purity, if the victim was assumed by them to be dead. One thing that all three characters (priest, Levite

¹⁹ Esler “Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict”, Nolland, *World Biblical Commentary*, 593

²⁰ Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary*, 1029

²¹ Esler “Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict”

²² Esler “Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict”, Michael P. Knowles, “What was the Victim Wearing? Literary, Economic and Social Contexts for the Parable of the Good Samaritan” *Biblical Interpretation* 12(2):145-174

²³ Esler “Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict”

²⁴ Michel Gourges, “The Priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan Revisited: A Critical Note on Luke 10:31-35” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117(4):709-713, Fitzmyer, *Anchor Bible*, 883

and Samaritan) have in common is the rejection of oral Torah.²⁵ All three might take the written Torah law about not being in contact with a corpse quite literally. The oral Torah (from the Mishnah) would require them to provide aid, if the man were still alive, or to bury the man if he were dead.²⁶ All three would reject the authority of that law.

Part of the question, of course, is what does “half-dead” mean? Young and Gouges suggests that it is not really reasonable to say that in the parable, the victim should be assumed by the priest, Levite and Samaritan to be a corpse.²⁷ Thus, on one hand, if the priest and Levite assume that the man is a corpse, then their behavior is consonant with their strict observance to written Torah. Which then is contrasted to the Samaritan, who chooses to show mercy on the victim, even though he also would be one to interpret the written Torah strictly. Thus, it is a critique based on the idea that compassion should trump strict interpretation of law. On the other hand, if the victim were obviously just in dire condition, but obviously not a corpse, then the contrast is even starker – the behavior of the priest and Levite is basically inexcusable. Either way, the behavior of the priest and Levite are being sharply criticized in this parable.

The Samaritan

Knowles suggests that the hearers of this parable would know the Samaritan in question as a wealthy oil and wine merchant – thus his access to oil and wine, his access to funds, and his traveling on that road.²⁸ This further characterization of the Samaritan is interesting, given the other things that the Lukan Jesus has to say about wealth.²⁹

The conflict between Samaritans and Jews in Palestine at the time of Jesus is well

²⁵ Young, *The Parables*, 111

²⁶ Young, *The Parables*, 112

²⁷ Young, *The Parables* 111, Gouges “The Priest, the Levite and the Samaritan Revisited”

²⁸ Knowles, “What was the Victim Wearing?”

²⁹ Such as 6:13 and 18:22-25

known.³⁰ The Mishnah has a very negative admonishment concerning Samaritans. It says, “He that eats the bread of Samaritans is like to one who eats the flesh of swine.”³¹ John, in stating the relationship between Jews and Samaritans, says in 4:9 “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.” There is a long history of political and religious conflicts between Jews and Samaritans, some of which led to warfare.³² There can be no question that Jesus (if you take this parable to be authentic) is meaning to be provocative in his use of Samaritans in this parable, especially on contrast to the behavior of the priest and Levite.

The Parable as Radical Teaching

As I mentioned above, if we take the verses before and after the parable to be one with the parable, this parable has an interesting way of addressing the question of “who is my neighbor?” When Jesus asks the lawyer which person had been the neighbor, the lawyer answered “the one who showed mercy.” So it was the compassion shown, and the actions taken that define who was being neighborly. I do agree with Bock, who sees pedagogical beauty in the way that Jesus answers the lawyer's question in regard to the parable.

Earlier in Luke, in chapter 6:27, Jesus has already commanded his followers to love their enemies. “But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.” Although the form of the double commandment is found in rabbinic teaching in Jesus' day,³³ there was some conversation about the extent to which this commandment extended to others, and the most popular view, although not necessarily outside of the realm of interpretation of the law, was that the commandment to love one's neighbor only extended to fellow Palestinian Jews.

³⁰ Young, *The Parables*, 115

³¹ Freedman, David Noel and Herio, Gary H. eds, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5, “Samaritan” New York:Doubleday, 1992

³² Esler, “Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict”

³³ Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible*, 879

It is clear, that not only is this double commandment meant to be a norm of conduct for followers of Jesus,³⁴ but that neighbor was to have a much more extensive meaning than had been standard at the time Jesus lived.

There is the fairly obvious: the victim is ignored by the elite, and aided by someone who is considered an enemy. Further, it is also someone who will potentially violate Torah in order to help someone in need. Gouges goes even further. He suggests that “it is totally unexpected to see a Samaritan – a representative of one of the groups that all agreed to exclude from the category of neighbor – come on the scene and provide the answer to the question 'Who is my neighbor?'”³⁵ I think that it is definitely arguable as to whether or not “all” would exclude Samaritans from the category of neighbor. I imagine, given the conflict between Samaritans and Jews in Palestine at the time, that might have been a popular view.

In the end, it is a passage that is challenging to the status quo. It criticizes the elite and those who elevate strict interpretation of the written law over compassion. It suggests that one should show compassion, to all, no matter what the circumstance, and uses someone considered an enemy as an example of the way that one should be a neighbor toward all others.

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³⁴ Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible*, 878

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