THE 'NEIGHBOUR' IN THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN (LUKE 10 :25-37)

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Abstract: *The commandment to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) plays central role in both Jewish and Christian ethics, yet it has been the subject of Christian criticism against Jews. Christians criticise Jews for having an exclusive ethics: Jews tend to love only themselves and no one else. On the other hand, they pride themselves of having an inclusive ethics, having been influenced by the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and Jesus' exhortation to love one's enemies (Matthew 5:44). But the paper argues that the parable of the Good Samaritan is not about a distinction between a Jew and a Gentile or a Samaritan; or a redefinition of neighbour. Rather, it is about showing mercy and love to anyone one meets who is in need because s/he is a human being. In other words, it is about loving one's neighbour because in that resides love for oneself.*

Key Words: Jewish-Christians Relationship; Inclusivist-Exclusivist Ethics; Luke 10:25-37; Neighbour.

Introduction

The commandment to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) plays a central role in both Jewish and Christian ethics, yet it has also been the subject of Christians' criticism against Jews. Christian readers influenced by the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and Jesus' exhortation to 'love your enemies' (Matt. 5:44) accuse Jews of having an exclusive ethic (Jews or Judaism only love fellow Jews), while they, on their part, think of themselves as having a universal ethics since they expand the definition of neighbour in the story, and love everyone, Jew or Gentile, friend or enemy, they argue.[1]

This paper is a close reading of the Lukan story to see how compelling the criticism is. In other words, it explores the Lukan story to see wherein lies this claim of distinction between Jews and Gentiles or Samaritans or the redefinition of neighbour as the story is thought to

[1] See Michael Fagenblat, "The Concept of Neighbour in Jewish and Christian Ethics," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine and M. Z. Brettler (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 540-543.

demonstrate. In short, the paper is about looking at what 'neighbour' in the story of the Good Samaritan could mean.

The Story

In its current setting, the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-35 is linked to Jesus' exchange with the lawyer in Luke 10:25-29. In that account (Luke 10:25-29), Jesus has just praised his disciples for the outcome of their missionary journey — "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! (Luke 10:23)- then, a lawyer stands up to ask him about what he must do to inherit 'eternal life' (v. 25), which is life in God's kingdom or in the Age to come. The syntagm is frequently found in Rom 2:7; 5:21; 6:22-23; Gal 6:8; Jude 21, and especially John 3:15-16.

The lawyer's question is considered a test; he asks it in order to test Jesus (v. 25). Jesus' response is to refer him to Scripture, to the Torah, to what is written in it. "What do you read?" Jesus asks him. For the 'lawyer,' *nomikos* as Luke identifies him, being a specialist in Jewish law will know not only the civil law but also the Written Torah as well as the Oral Torah.[2] In the Jewish society there is no distinction between civil and religious law.

The lawyer, in response to Jesus' question, quotes from the book of Deuteronomy: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your being[3] and with all your might[4] …" This quotation is part of what is called the *Shema*ˉ(Deut 6:4-9). The *Shema* occupies a prominent place in Jewish life and is repeated twice daily. Its name

[2] 'Oral Torah' is a synonym for the Mishnah and Talmud. The first, Mishnah, a Hebrew word meaning 'oral instruction' (from *shanah*, 'repeat') is the compilation of oral law, edited ca. 200 CE. It is the basis of the Talmud. The second, Talmud (Heb 'teaching') is the title of the two collections of rabbinic teaching, the Jerusalem Talmud or Yerushalmi and the Babylonian Talmud or Bavli. It consists of comments on, and extensions of the Mishnah as well as information on a wide range of topics. According to rabbinic belief (b. Shabb. 31a), the Oral Torah was given to Moses on Sinai along with the Written Torah.

[3] The Hebrew *nefesh* means: 'life' or 'life-breath,' 'essential self.' The traditional translation which is preserved in many recent English versions is 'soul' but that is misleading because it suggests a body-soul split which is alien to biblical thinking or the Hebrew Bible. See also Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (London: The Harvill Press, 1995), 881.

[4] The Hebrew word used here is *me'od*, which elsewhere is an adverb ('very') not a noun ('might/strength') as it is usually translated here. It is not clear whether this distinctive Deuteronomic usage in converting one part of speech to another reflects a stylistic inventiveness or that it is an idiomatic use that is simply not found elsewhere in the biblical corpus. See also Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 912.

Shema is a translation of the first word in the beginning sentence, 'Hear'! The lawyer then adds a second: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself,' which is also a commandment in Lev. 19:18. It is a prominent commandment, a rule that is the summation of a whole section of a chapter on holiness expressing itself in neighbourliness.[5]

In the Lukan story, the two commandments – "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart ..." (Deut. 6:5) and "You shall love your neighbour" as yourself (Lev 19:18) – are collapsed into one. However, in the gospel of Mark (12:28-31; also Matt. 22:34-40), where Jesus quotes them in response to a scribe's question about the greatest of the commandments. Jesus identifies the commandment in Deuteronomy as the first and the commandment in Leviticus as the second.

Jesus acknowledges that the lawyer has quoted the Torah correctly. But reading is not enough. In fact, eternal life is found not just in knowing the commandments but in living them out or doing them. And so Jesus tells him: "Do this and you shall live" (*touto poiei kai dzēsēi*). The command to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) then prompts the lawyer to ask Jesus further: "And who is my neighbour (*kai tis estin mou plēsion*)?"

In the book of Leviticus, the literary context in which this love of neighbour command is found is a set of laws aimed at regulating judicial impartiality and cultivating fraternity within Israel. The chapter that harbours this law (Leviticus 19), opens with an imperative: 'Speak' (*dabber!*) and the address is to "all the congregation of the sons of Israel' (*kol-'adat b^{e}nê-yisra'ēl*), enjoining them to be 'holy for I Yhwh your God I am holy."

In this context then — especially in the use of *'ēdāh* ('congregation/assembly') — 'neighbour,' which in Hebrew is *re'a* — it refers to a person encountered within the framework of covenantal relationship, that is, to an Israelite; and this is reinforced by the four different words that the text uses for 'your neighbour': *'aḥikha* ('your brother'), *'amitekha* ('your people'), *bnei-'ammekha* ('your fellow citizen'), and *re'akha* ('your neighbour;' see Lev. 19:17-18), although, further in the same chapter (Lev. 19:33-34), the neighbour whom one is to

[5] See Walter C. Kaiser Jr, "The Book of Leviticus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 985-1191.

love "…as yourself" is the *gēr* ('stranger'),[6] thus making it possible also to read Lev. 19:18 in the context of Lev. 19:33-34.

Jesus' reply to the lawyer's question ("Who is my neighbour?") is to tell him a story in which three men — a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan — find a man lying along the Jerusalem to Jericho road. The man has been beaten by thieves and left 'half-dead' (*hēmithanē*). Of the three, only the Samaritan stops to help him. The two others walk away, going by the opposite side. When Jesus asks the lawyer about which of them is a neighbour to the beaten man, he answers, circuitously, "the one who showed him mercy." Jesus then asks him to "go and do likewise" (*Poreuou kai su poiei homoiōs*, v. 37). The question then is, who is 'neighbour' in this story? Is there a redefinition of the term by Jesus? Does the story make a distinction between a Jew and a Gentile?

Interpretation of Text

The first thing one observes in the story is the central character, the beaten man. He is unidentified or not characterised neither by race, religion, region nor trade. He is simply *anthrōpos tis* ('a certain man' [v 30]), just as we earlier had *nomikos tis* ('a certain lawyer,' v. 25) and we shall later have *kōmēn tina* ('a certain village,' v. 38).

Also, one can observe that the thieves the man encounters do not just beat him. They also "strip him" (*ekduein auton*) off his clothes, thus leaving him naked with nothing to identify his status except his desperate need for help. With the story told from his point of view, and the reference to him as only a 'certain man' (*anthropos tis*), the beaten man thus becomes 'anybody,' 'any man.'

In the-Tanakh, *rēʿa,* which the Septuagint translates as *plēsios*, has a remarkable wide range of meanings. It is used to designate any human being (Gen 11:3), or to denote an adversary in court (Exod 18:16), or an enemy in combat (2 Sam 2:16) or a lover (Hos 3:1; Song 5:16), or a close friend (Job 2:11). It is also used in reference to a person one encounters in everyday life. Thus Prov 3:29 explains that your *rēʿa* is someone who 'lives trustingly beside you.' In the book of

[6] In Lev 25:47 the *gēr* is also *tôshāv*, the 'sojourner,' the resident alien. The Septuagint translates *gēr* as *proselutos*, 'one who has come,' that is, 'stranger.'

Deuteronomy (see 19:14 and 27:17) *rēʿa* also refers to a landowner with whom one shares a boundary.

It thus seems that *rēʿa,* by its wide ranging meaning, is well-suited for the context. For Jesus' Jewish audience, it could be anyone in the gathering listening to him, that is, a Jew, and for Luke's Gentile audience, it could refer to any of them, a Gentile.

While the beaten man lies hoping for help, fortunately[7] 'a certain priest' (*hiereus tis*) arrives on the scene. It is said that he is 'coming down' (*katabainein*) from Jerusalem to Jericho (v. 31), which means, if he is from the Temple, he has completed his liturgical/priestly duties. When he 'sees' (*idōn*) the beaten and injured man, he passes by on the other side.[8]

A popular view is that the priest bypasses the beaten man because of ritual purity concerns, but this view needs further evaluation/reflection. Priests (in Hebrew *kohanim*) were Levites, but were more specifically descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses and the first priest of Israel (Exod. 28:1-3). Priests were entrusted with the religious oversight of the nation, including teaching the law (Lev. 10:11; Deut 17:18), administering the temple, sacrificial system and inspecting uncleanness, especially leprosy, in the people (Leviticus 13—14). Touching a dead body rendered priests ceremonially unclean and unable to fulfil temple commitments (Leviticus 21—22) with the exception of a close relative: father, mother, son, daughter, brother and unmarried sister (also Ezek. 44:25).

But this man lying in the road is not yet a corpse; he is only gravely injured and needs someone to save his life. And if even he would be dead, Num. 19:10b-13 prescribes seven-day ritual ablutions for those who entered into contact with a corpse. Thus, even if the priest had defiled himself by touching the wounded man if he were dead, he would have been clean after seven days to be able to participate again in the Temple service. Indeed, it would have been a pious duty, for in Tobit (1:16-20) and Josephus[9] a strong Jewish concern for the

[7] The Greek phrase used in the context is *kata sunkurian* and usually translated as 'by chance' can also have this connotation.
[8] The aorist participle conjugation *idōn* translated 'having seen,' from *horaō*, means that the priest sees the man before passing the other side.
[9] See *Ag. Ap*. 2.30.211.

respectful treatment of the dead is well attested. And Jacob in Gen. 47:29 make his proper burial a sign of Joseph's charity and fidelity toward him.

In any case, the man lying in the road is not dead; he is wounded. Neither is the priest 'going up' to Jerusalem for the argument to be made that if he went to touch the man and the man were dead he would be impure and that would make it impossible for him to participate in the Temple service. Rather, the text says the priest is 'coming down' (*katabainein)* from the city. If the issue is about the priest being able to perform his duties in the Temple, the information that he is 'coming down' (*katabainein)* from the city allows for the conclusion or presumption that he has fulfilled his duties and is returning home. To import a question of impurity into the parable would, therefore, be to misread the text.

After the priest comes a Levite. Levites were descendants of Levi, one of the twelve sons of Jacob (by Leah). Unlike the other tribes of Israel, they were not given a tribal allotment in the land (Num. 35:2-3; Deut. 18:1; Josh. 14:3-4), but were rather consecrated as Yhwh's special tribe in place of the first born of all the Israelites (Num. 3:41, 45; 8:18) with their role being to assist the priests (i.e., the descendants of Aaron) in the service of the tabernacle (Num. 18:4).

This Levite is also travelling down the same road. He 'comes on the scene' – if *genomenos* (from *ginomai* to 'come into being' or 'to come on' [v. 32b]) is accepted.[10] Having gone and 'taken a look' (*idōn,* the same word used in describing the priest's action), he also "passes by on the other side" (*anti-parēlthen*) – just as the priest had done (see v. 31). Unfortunately, the narrator gives no reason for the Levite's behaviour/action just as he provides no reason for the priest But there is no reason to give to justify either the Levite's attitude or that of the priest. Indeed, if love for neighbour means anything, it means to care for the "sons of your own people" (Lev. 19:18). And these are two people who are esteemed for their place among the people and are dedicated to holiness before Yhwh. But, as Johnson argues, "[the two] cannot be bothered."[10]

[10] Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegevile, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 173.

Finally, a third traveller, 'a Samaritan, appears. For Jesus' audience, this will be unexpected. After mentioning the priest and Levite who, symbolically represent the leadership of the people,[11] the audience would expect an ordinary Israelite or perhaps a local rabbi. But a Samaritan?

Samaritans had their origins to the intermarriage of Israelites left behind during the Assyrian exile of the northern kingdom with Gentiles (2 Kings 17:24). They, however, claim descent from Joseph by way of the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim,[12] but some Jews preferred to trace their ancestry back to Shechem, the rapist of Dinah, the sister of Jacob's twelve sons (Gen. 34). From the gospels (eg., Luke 9:52; John 4:9) and Josephus,[13] one know there was a long-standing bitter hostility or enmity between Jews and Samaritans. The two nations claimed different locations for the Temple, the Jews on Mount Zion in Jerusalem and the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim in Shechem. The two also had different versions of Torah and an alternative line of priests (2 Kings 17:24-41; *Ant* 9.277-91). Moreover, the Jews also regarded Samaritans as irredeemably impure.

Despite all these, Jews did not regard Samaritans as Gentiles. In fact, early 'Tannaitic' rabbis[14] considered them as Israelites (cf. *b. Qiddushim* 75b; *y. Ketubbot* 3,1, 27a). Only later 'Amoraic' rabbis[15], rabbinic teachers of the Talmudic periodregarded them as Gentiles. The mentioning of the third character as a Samaritan is, therefore, as Culpepper points out, to challenge the audience to examine the stereotype regarding Samaritans and thereby all other stereotypes.[16]

The Samaritan arrives, and it is said that he 'comes to him' (*ēlthen kat' auton,* v. 33), that is, to the man beaten and left lying along the road. He comes just as the Levite before him had done (v. 32). He 'sees' (*idōn*) like the priest and the Levite also saw. But whereas the two men before him "see and pass on the other side" (*idōn antiparēlthen,* vv. 31, 32), the Samaritan "sees and feels compassion"

[11] See, for example, 1QS 1.8ff; 5.1-4.
[12] See, Josephus, *Ant*. 9.14.3; 11.8.6
[13] See, *Ant*. 18.2.6-7; 20.6.1-3.
[14] The term denotes rabbis who contributed to and compiled the Mishnah from ca 70 to 200 CE ('tannaitic' is from Aramaic/Hebrew *tanna*/*shana*, 'repeat').
[15] From third century CE onwards: the term 'amoraic' comes from Aramaic, meaning 'speaker.'
[16] R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," *The New Interpreter's Bible* IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 3-490.

(*idōn esplanchnisthē*). *Esplanchnisthē* literally means "to be moved to pity in one's 'inward parts'" [*splanchna*]. Interestingly, *esplanchnisthē* is how the narrator describes the emotions of Jesus when he 'sees' the widow of Nain weep as her only son was being taken away for burial (Luke 7:13). "Seeing her [*idōn autēn*] the Lord felt compassion [*ho kurios esplanchnisthē*] for her," the Lukan test says (7:13).

It is interesting to note that this is the first occurrence where the narrator defines Jesus as 'Lord'(*Kurios*), which translates the tetragrammaton (YHWH), the name used in Jewish liturgy (or Bible) for the Israelite God. In Exod. 22:21-24, for example, we learn that YHWH hears the cry of the widow, the orphan and the stranger and warns the Israelite against mistreating them. The widow, the orphan and the stranger have one element in common: their relative helplessness in society. The stranger (that is, resident alien) lacks the usual entrenched network of clans and families that the ordinary Israelite has; and the widow and also the orphan lack the usual protection of husband and father, respectively, that are otherwise assumed for every Israelite.[17]

Using the same words employed to describe the Lord's (or YHWH's) action to describe the action of the Samaritan – 'seeing … he felt compassion' (*idōn … esplanchnisthē*) - the narrator intends to link the attitude and emotional feeling of the Samaritan for the wounded naked 'stranger,' with the Lord (or YHWH's) attitude and emotional feeling for the poor widow of Nain. It is to say that the Samaritan's feeling for the stranger is the way the God of Israel feels for the widow.

After disclosing the Samaritan's compassion for the beaten and wounded man, the narrator offers the reader a detailed account of his care for him, which stands in sharp contrast to the sparsity of detail in the first part of the story. In a short verse of twenty-four words, there are as many as six verbs of action (i.e., 'approach,' 'bandage,' 'pour,' 'put,' 'bring,' 'take care') describing the activities the Samaritan engages in his bid to save the wounded man's life. The Samaritan *approaches* the man, *bandages* his wounds, *pours* oil and wine in it (the

[17] See, for example, James L. Kugel, *The God of Old* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 109-110.

oil and wine is thought to have a medicinal effect, see Isa 1:6), *puts* him on his own beast, *brings* him into an inn, and *takes care* of him (v. 34).

This presentation of the characters makes it difficult to conclude that the story contrasts the attitude of a Jew from that of a Samaritan to the advantage of the latter (i.e., a Samaritan), as some often affirm. Rather, the narrator contrasts those who are established and are recognised as part of the people (priests and Levites) and those who are not (Samaritans). It is to emphasise that community can no longer be defined by class – priests, Levites, Samaritans – but by a common humanity. For, the man lying there in the ditch, beaten and left to die and from whose perspective the story is told, will not discriminate among potential helpers. Anyone who has compassion and stops to help him, whether Jew or Samaritan, Gentile, will be to him a neighbour.[18]

The next day, the Samaritan leaves to continue his journey. But before leaving, he entrusts the beaten man to the care of the inn-keeper. Interestingly, the verb he uses in instructing the inn-keeper 'take care (*epimelēthēti*) of him' (v. 35b) is the same verb the narrator uses in describing his own care (that is, the Samaritan's) of the man (see v. 34). As if to have the Samaritan say to the inn-keeper 'take care of him *the way I have done.*' And the Samaritan is also said to have promised to pay 'whatever' (*ho ti an*) additional expenses the inn-keeper makes on the man when he returns. In the interim he hands him two denarii, a sum equivalent to two days wages which, probably, would not be sufficient, demonstrates his faithfulness and trustworthiness.

Jesus then asks the lawyer: "which of these three 'do you think' [*dokei soi*, lit. 'does it seem to you'] was a neighbour to the man who fell among the thieves?" The lawyer's answer is a circuitous one: "the one who did [*ho poiēsas*] mercy with him." Jesus then tells him "Go and 'do' [*poiei*] likewise."

Conclusion

Jesus' question, "which of these three was a neighbour to the man who fell among thieves?", is a reversal of the lawyer's initial question. The lawyer's question had been one of legal obligation - "who is the

[18] Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," 229.

neighbour who deserves my love?". But Jesus, with his question, has turned it into one of gift-giving ("to whom can I show myself neighbour?").[19]

This shift, coming at the end of the story, thus confirms that Jesus' point is not to redefine the category of 'neighbour' to include what is often thought to be Gentiles (for there is no mention of or reference to Gentiles in the story). Instead, it is to emphasise that neighbours are those who show love. This is what the lawyer's answer albeit circuitous expresses; probably, he intended to avoid mentioning 'the Samaritan' because he (and his fellow Jews who make up Jesus' audience) despised them. It is this answer ("the one who does mercy with him" or "the one who shows him mercy" [v. 37]) that defines the concept of neighbourliness.

The point of Jesus' parable is thus a demand to become a person who treats everyone encountered – alien, naked or defenceless – with compassion. In this the Samaritan is the moral exemplar. His presence in the story can, therefore, be seen to challenge the (Jewish) hearers to examine the stereotype regarding Samaritans. In the first round of their encounter, Jesus had asked the lawyer to follow the commandments, and he will be rewarded: "Do this and you will live!" (v. 28). But in this second round, in the story of the good Samaritan, there is no reward; the lawyer is to do as the Samaritan has done – "You go and do likewise" (*Poreuou kai su poiei homoiōs*, v. 37).

Neighbourliness is thus not about what one does for a reward. Instead, it is about what one does freely. Showing mercy to gain a reward would not be truly doing "likewise" (*homoiōs*).[20]

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[19] See also Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 173.
[20] Cf. Culpepper, "The Story of Luke," 230.