

INTRODUCTION

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most popular passages in the New Testament. Despite its attention within popular Christianity, it actually communicates a nuanced message when viewed within its historical and literary contexts. The parable of the Good Samaritan challenged Luke's gentile Christian readers to redefine their relationship between religion and ethics, and it carried a polemical undertone against the unfaithfulness of first century Judaism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical context of the Good Samaritan begins with Luke's audience, and scholars are developing a more detailed understanding of Luke's *real* and *intended* readers. Craig Blomberg says, "he [Luke] may have been deliberately trying to reach a wide audience," noting that even non-Christians often find parts of Luke's gospel appealing.¹ Luke's historical situation and experiences make it likely that he wrote his Gospel for anyone who was a Christian, not specifically for one demographic.² This makes it possible that Luke believed his audience would not only be spread across the Roman Empire but would also expand into future generations.³ Finally, John Nolland concludes that Luke relied heavily on his readers' preunderstanding of first century Judaism as well as the "Jewish polemic against the Christian movement."⁴

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus And the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd ed., (Nashville, B&H Academic, 2009), 173.

² Michael Wolter et al., *The Gospel According to Luke: Volume II (Luke 9:51-24)* (Waco, UNITED STATES: Baylor University Press, 2017), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cornerstone-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5050642>. 29-30.

³ Michael Wolter et al., *The Gospel According to Luke*, 30.

⁴ John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, vol. 35A of [Word Biblical Commentary](#), Accordance electronic ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), xxxii.

LITERARY CONTEXT

The literary context for the Good Samaritan begins, in the broad sense, with Luke's purpose for writing in 1:3-4. More specifically, the parable is set early in a literary shift spanning from 9:51-19:44 known as 'The Journey to Jerusalem'. This section of Luke places a unique emphasis on Samaritans.⁵ Some argue this emphasis indicates Luke's intention was to legitimize Samaritans as the people of God.⁶ A better reading, however, is that it sustains an undertone of condemnation against Jewish unfaithfulness.⁷

EXEGESIS

Luke 10:25 begins with an expert in the law asking Jesus "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This same question is asked in Luke 18:18 by the young ruler, but Jesus gives a different answer to each inquirer. To the lawyer, Jesus asks "what is written in the law... how do you read it?" (v.26). Jesus' response to the lawyer is no doubt influenced by two things. First, the lawyer's question is not one of genuine interest in eschatology but is instead focused on entrapping Jesus. Second, lawyers had assumed a teaching role within first century Judaism, so Jesus turned the test back on to the lawyer.⁸

⁵ Luke makes reference to Samaritans three times in the Journey to Jerusalem, 9:51-56, 10:30-35, and 17:11-19.

⁶ Jeannine K Brown and Kazuhiko Yamazaki-Ransom, "The Parable of the Good Samaritan and the Narrative Portrayal of Samaritans in Luke-Acts," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 15, no. 2 (2021): 233-46, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jtheointe.15.2.0233>.

⁷ This is for two reasons. First, the Samaritan village in Lk. 9:51-56 refused hospitality to Jesus because he was en route to Jerusalem. Second, Jesus' response to the Samaritan leper who returns has a tone of condemnation of the other nine, presumably Jewish, lepers who did not return.

⁸ Craig Blomberg, *Jesus And the Gospels*, 47-48. See also: Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 of [Tyndale New Testament Commentaries](#), IVP/Accordance electronic ed., (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 206.

The lawyer responds to Jesus by pointing to the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4–9) and Lev. 19:18 as the summary of the law (v.27). Jesus approves the lawyer’s conclusion because he says “You have answered correctly... do this and you will live” (v.28). The conversation seems to be at its natural end, but the lawyer presses further. Verse 29 says “But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus ‘And who is my neighbor?’” The importance of this verse in the entire passage cannot be overstated, for it is in response to this question that Jesus gives the parable.

The phrase *wanting to justify himself* is ambiguous,⁹ but the preferred understanding should be that the lawyer doubled down to defend first century Judaism’s religious customs as sufficient fulfillment of the law.¹⁰ It is probable that the lawyer’s motivation can be explained by Luke’s parenthetical insertion in 7:29-30.¹¹ These circumstances undergird the conflict within the exchange between Jesus and the lawyer, as well as Luke’s emphasis of that conflict. This is the strong contrast Luke intends to make between Christian faithfulness and Judaism’s concept of faithfulness.

Jesus’ choice of characters within his parable (vv.30-33) further condemns the lawyer’s self-justification. The man who fell victim to the robbers is given a generic description

⁹ John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, 592.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *Luke*, 207. See also: Joseph H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Accordance electronic ed., version 1.8. Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004, s.v. “δικαίωω,” paragraph 2888.

¹¹ In 7:29-30, Luke indicates the Pharisees and experts in the law (νομικοὶ) rejected God’s plan for themselves, setting up the expectation for obvious conflict with Jesus moving forward. The lawyer (νομικός) in 10:25, therefore, likely shared this hostility towards Jesus’ message, which explains his initial testing of Jesus and his followup question. See also: Michael Wolter, et al., *The Gospel According to Luke*, 73-74.

(ἄνθρωπος τις).¹² Three specific characters are then introduced: a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. All three figures were specific to Judaism. The priest and Levite were religious leaders, and the Samaritan was controversial within the Jewish milieu.¹³

Jesus describes the Samaritan's careful attention to the beaten man (vv.33-35), and it must be understood that his actions were born out of his compassion for the man. The lawyer comprehends the centrality of compassion to being neighborly (vv.35-37). As such, his previous attempt to justify himself now seems foolish, and the whole exchange renders him, and, by extension his colleagues, as unfaithful to the heart behind the *Shema* and Lev. 19:18.

The Samaritan clearly sets the example that God's people are to follow (cf. "go and do likewise" in v.37). Such a command would have required an integration of personal ethics and religious beliefs for gentile Christians from greco-roman religions.¹⁴ It also would have expanded Luke's Jewish Christian readers' understanding of the *Shema* and Lev. 19:18.

CONCLUSION

The parable of the Good Samaritan had great influence on Luke's readers. Greco-roman religions did not emphasize an overlap between religious beliefs and personal ethics. All of the specific characters within the passage are significant to Judaism. The significance of the contrast between the Jewish priest and Levite and the Samaritan is meant to be understood without explanation. The passage contains an interpretation of the Mosaic Law as well as tension

¹² ἄνθρωπος on its own can carry indefinite force. Coupled with the indefinite τις, Luke leaves no doubt to the indefinite nature of the phrase. See Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 81.

¹³ Leon Morris, *Luke*, 208.

¹⁴ Greco-Roman religion did not bind individuals to an ethical code of conduct. Thus, individuals could still be seen as pious while breaking ethical and moral standards modern society deems as 'good'. See Craig Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 55.

surrounding that interpretation and its expectations. These Jewish details, and the meaning contained therein, are far too significant to be coincidence or unintended. Rather than ignore these nuances or overemphasize one at the expense of the other, it is best to understand that the parable of the Good Samaritan challenged Luke's gentile Christian readers to redefine their relationship between religion and ethics, and it carried a polemical undertone against the unfaithfulness of first-century Judaism.

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