

# Hearing a Parable with the Early Church

BY MIKEAL C. PARSONS

**What would it mean to hear the parables in their final literary form in the ancient Greco-Roman world? Perhaps we too hastily have stripped away the allegorizing of the early and medieval church as secondary embellishments that lead us away from the “original” message of Jesus.**

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In 1910, Albert Schweitzer published the English translation of his survey of nineteenth-century liberals’ efforts to recover “the life of Jesus” under the title, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.<sup>1</sup> Since that time, historical Jesus research has flooded the religious market, and Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, John Meier, Marcus Borg, and Tom Wright, among others, are almost household names, a rather remarkable feat for religious academic scholars. This interest in the historical Jesus has also driven much of contemporary parable research from Joachim Jeremias to C. H. Dodd and, more recently, Brandon Scott, since (so the argument goes) the parables, properly recovered, constitute the “bedrock” of the historical Jesus tradition.

One of the hallmarks of parable research, understood within the larger framework of inquiry into the teachings of the historical Jesus, has been to strip away the allegorizing of the early and medieval church as secondary embellishments that lead us away from the “original” message of Jesus. Once the allegories, or symbolic or referential meaning attached to specific and various details of the parable, were removed, then what remained of the parable presumably could be traced back to Jesus. And, generally, this “streamlined” version of the parable was intended to make only one point, a “heavenly” message conveyed through an “earthly” story. This time-honored approach has served us well, but it also has some serious limitations.

My first head-on encounter with allegorical interpretation of Jesus’ par-

ables went hand-in-hand with its rejection. As a young college student in a New Testament class for Religion majors, I “read” Augustine’s famous allegory of the Good Samaritan as it was quoted (and condensed) in C. H. Dodd’s classic work, *The Parables of the Kingdom*. Dodd notes that while Augustine’s line of interpretation had “prevailed down to the time of Archbishop Trench,” “the ordinary person of intelligence” would nonetheless

find this kind of “mystification” “quite perverse”!

Dodd noted that “the parables in general do not admit of this method [of interpretation through allegory] at all.” Even when the Gospel writers betray such allegorizing tendencies (the classic case is the explanation of the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:11-20; Matthew 13:18-23; and Luke 8:11-15), their efforts “rest on a misunderstanding.”<sup>2</sup>

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One of the casualties of this intense focus on things historical has been an adequate understanding of the parables in their final canonical form and within their larger Greco-Roman context. However important inquiry into the historical Jesus is (and it is important), understanding the way the first Greco-Roman audiences would have responded to the parables of Jesus, as they were set down in their Gospels’ contexts, is no less crucial for both the academy and the Church. Furthermore, knowing something about the earliest reception of these stories in the patristic period may also provide important clues about how to read the parables of Jesus. And such reading demands knowledge of the Church’s allegorical tradition.

### **THE GRECO-ROMAN AUDIENCE**

We may test this thesis by looking at one of Jesus’ most famous parables, the so-called Parable of the Good Samaritan, from these two angles of vision: (1) the first Greco-Roman reception of the final form of the parable in its literary context and (2) the subsequent reception of the story in the early church. The story commends itself because even the most skeptical critics – the members of the Jesus Seminar – accept it as authentically representing the *ipsissima vox* (the voice itself) of Jesus and because even those committed to reading Luke in its final literary form find the lure of the parable’s setting in the ministry of Jesus too tempting to resist.

For example, some have argued that only a Jewish audience could have understood the enmity between Jew and Samaritan presupposed in the par-

able. However, the attentive audience will have deduced that animosity from the disciples' question in the aftermath of the Samaritans' rejection of Jesus found in the chapter immediately preceding the Good Samaritan story: "And he [Jesus] sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him, but the people would not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to bid fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But he turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village" (Luke 9:52-55).<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, it was commonplace in ancient thinking to assess persons' moral character in relationship to their places of origin. Hippocrates, for example, wrote: "Inhabitants of a region which is mountainous, rugged, high and (not) watered, where the changes of season exhibit sharp contrasts are likely to be of big physique, with a nature well adapted for endurance and courage, and such possess not a little wildness and ferocity" ("Air, Water, and Places," 24). Other common examples from the ancient world would include the stereotypes of "All Cretans are liars" and "All Corinthians are promiscuous." Thus, a Greco-Roman audience, even one that had never laid eyes on a Jew or a Samaritan, could easily understand the tension between those two groups, based both on Luke's text and the social conventions of their larger context.

So what would it mean to hear the Parable of the Good Samaritan in its final form in the ancient Greco-Roman world?<sup>4</sup> First, we note that the actions of the Good Samaritan dominate the narrative. Fifty of the total 106 words in the parable are used to describe the Samaritan's actions. Unfortunately, scholars have too readily described those actions with rather vacuous terminology like "goodness" or "neighborliness." The Greco-Roman auditor, however, would have understood the Samaritan's actions as an example of the social practice of "philanthropy" (*philanthropia*; cf. Acts 28:2). In addition to offering greetings or hosting dinners, philanthropy also was expressed through offering benefactions, especially in times of trouble (see *Diogenes Laertius* 3.68). Dio Chrysostom, an ancient philosopher, records the story of the philanthropic benefactions offered by a hunter and his wife to victims of a shipwreck:

This hunter came out and took us inside and lit a fire.... He himself rubbed one of us, his wife the other, with animal fat, since they had no olive oil. Next, they poured warm water over us until they revived us since we had been shivering with cold. Then, they made us recline, wrapped us in what they had, and set before us wheat bread to eat, while they themselves ate boiled millet. They gave us wine to drink (while they drank water) as well as roasted and boiled venison. On the next day when we wished to leave they held us back for three days. Then they escorted us to the plain, and when we left

them they gave to each of us meat and a very nice animal skin.  
(*Discourses* 7.56-58)

Understanding the Samaritan's actions as an example of ancient philanthropy is strengthened by the fact that some of the words found in the parable—e.g., “half-dead,” “take care of,” “neighbor,” and “showing mercy”

—are characteristic of ancient texts on philanthropy. In fact, “showing mercy” (both in its verbal and noun forms) is virtually synonymous with philanthropy.<sup>5</sup> Thus, an ancient audience would know that the parable was not about the “man in the ditch” or the “brigands” (as some scholars have argued), but rather was about the Samaritan and his benevolent assistance of one who had suffered a misfortune.

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### **THE GOOD SAMARITAN AS A CHRIST FIGURE**

The phrase “showing mercy” is also the key to untangling the emphasis of nearly two millennia of Christian exegetical tradition that has typically, if not uniformly, identified the Good Samaritan as a Christ figure.<sup>6</sup> Origen is the earliest writer whose comments on the Parable of the Good Samaritan have survived. At the beginning of his treatment of the parable he claims “the Samaritan is Christ” and then spends several pages developing this Christological interpretation (*Homilies on Luke*, 404, 408).

In Luke’s Gospel, only God or God’s agent, Jesus, shows mercy. In the infancy narrative, God is repeatedly described as “showing” or “doing” mercy. In the Magnificat, Mary sings, “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior ...for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his *mercy* is on those who fear him from generation to generation.... He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his *mercy*” (Luke 1:47, 49-50, 54). Zechariah strikes a similar theme: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David...and thus he has shown the *mercy* promised to our fathers, and remembered his holy covenant” (1:68, 72). Later, in Luke’s Gospel, as Jesus is passing between Samaria and Galilee he is met by ten lepers who cry out, “Jesus, Master, *have mercy* on us!” (17:13). In response to their plea, Jesus does show them mercy and sends them to the priest, “and as they went they were cleansed” (17:14).

Likewise, in response to the blind beggar from Jericho's repeated request, "Jesus, Son of David, *have mercy* on me!" (18:38, 39), Jesus complies and grants the man his sight (18:42).

The only exception is in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, where the rich man, suffering in the torments of Hades, pleads with Father Abraham to "show him mercy" (Luke 16:24). Abraham refuses, and the exception again proves the point: in Luke's Gospel only God or God's agent, Jesus, shows mercy.

As with "mercy," every instance of "compassion" is associated with acts of God or God's agent, Jesus. The phrase "he had compassion" is the dynamic equivalent to "have mercy," and it occurs three times in all of Luke/Acts; in the other two instances, only God's agent, Jesus (Luke 7:13), and a figure for God, the father of the prodigal (Luke 15:20), show compassion. In other words, "showing compassion" in the Lukan narrative is a divine prerogative and a divine action. Hence, this is our first clue in the text of Luke itself that the Good Samaritan, when he shows compassion on the man in the ditch, is functioning figuratively as God's agent. Within the immediate context of Luke's Gospel, the Good Samaritan, who "shows compassion" and "does mercy," functions as a Christ figure who ultimately acts as God's agent in engaging in benevolent acts of philanthropy.

The larger context of Luke supports this Christological reading as well. The question posed and answer given in Luke 10:25-28 govern the final form of Luke 10:29-11:13, and the Parable of the Good Samaritan must be read within that context. To gain eternal life, one must love the Lord and one must love the neighbor. The parables and stories that immediately follow in chapters 10 and 11 illustrate these points. Notice the pattern:

- A. *On loving neighbors* (Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:29-37) – example: Samaritan as Christ figure
- B. *On loving the Lord* (Mary and Martha, Luke 10:38-42) – example: Mary
- B. *On loving the Lord* (the Lord's Prayer, Luke 11:1-4) – example: Jesus
- A. *On loving neighbors/friends* (Parable of the Friend at Midnight, Luke 11:5-13) – example: the friend seeking bread

Far from a loosely connected collection of sayings and stories (as some have argued), this section is intricately woven together. The lawyer's question and answer is followed by a section that sandwiches two parables around two scenes, which themselves present a narrative scene and a brief discourse. Furthermore, the stories provide examples of loving the Lord and loving the neighbor. Finally, and this is crucial for understanding the Parable of the Good Samaritan in its final form in Luke, the stories alternate between having Jesus (or a Christ figure) as the prime example of loving the Lord and loving neighbor and having another character make the same

points. So we have four examples, two in which Christ, actually or figuratively, shows how properly to love neighbor and the Lord, and two in which other characters, one in the narrative proper and the other in a parable, do likewise.

Thus, to label the Parable of the Good Samaritan an “example story,” as though the story were itself devoid of a Christological or theological referent, is to miss the point of the parable – or at least one of the points – and to miss it badly. The parable, in its literary context, does *not* primarily focus on the perspective of the man in the ditch. Rather, Jesus’ admonition to the lawyer, “Go and do likewise” (10:37), demands that the primary perspective be that of the Good Samaritan, whose example the lawyer is admonished to follow. And the example is that of bestowing philanthropic acts of mercy on those who have experienced misfortune. But the example is here enlivened by the fact that the Good Samaritan’s compassion and mercy is, as the text of Luke affirms, the example of none other than God and God’s agent, Jesus. Thus, we have in its canonical context a call by Jesus to imitate the philanthropic Samaritan and in so doing to imitate the compassion of Christ himself. Ethical admonition is grounded in a Christological basis.

Origen understood this long ago when he wrote:

The Samaritan, “who took pity on the man who had fallen among thieves,” is truly a “guardian,” and a closer neighbor than the Law and the Prophets. He showed that he was the man’s neighbor more by deed than by word. According to the passage that says, “Be imitators of me, as I too am of Christ,” it is possible for us to imitate Christ and to pity those who “have fallen among thieves.” We can go to them, bind their wounds, pour in oil and wine, put them on our own animals, and bear their burdens. The Son of God encourages us to do things like this. He is speaking not so much to the teacher of the law as to us and to everyone when he says, “Go and do likewise.” (*Homilies on the Gospel of Luke*, 34.9)

Rather than a “perverse” or “far-fetched” interpretation of the Good Samaritan, Origen’s basic Christological reading is more sensitive to the Lukan canonical context than most, if not all, modern interpretations of the parable!

Why then do modern commentators resist such a reading? Presumably this hesitation is because of the presence of the Samaritan. It is precisely in the use of the figure of the Samaritan as representative of Christ that the parable maintains its “edginess.” Whatever the historical reality of the Samaritans, Luke, in his Gospel, clearly understands them as “outsiders.” In the story of the ten men with leprosy (17:11-19), when only one, a Samaritan (v. 16), returns to thank Jesus for his healing, Jesus asks, “Was no one found to return and praise God except this foreigner?” (v. 18). Although this term is unique in the New Testament, it has a rich background in the Greek Old Testament, where it consistently refers to those who are “foreigners,”

“pagans,” or “non-Jewish outsiders,” often in negative contexts.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, for the Lukan Jesus to depict himself as a “compassionate Samaritan” has profound implications. And such scandalous identification is not unknown outside Luke’s Gospel. Consider John 8:48 where Jesus’ opponents say, “Aren’t we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?” In Luke, the identification fits with the generally acknowledged pattern of reversal in Luke’s Gospel, where the world is turned topsy-turvy: the rich and mighty are brought down and the lowly raised (1:51-52), and the kingdom disciples are called to love enemies, do good to those who hate them, and bless those who curse them (6:27-28). In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus himself defies convention. Jesus is the Messiah who must suffer (24:46), an affront to traditional messianic expectation. He is a friend of tax collectors and sinners (7:34).

Furthermore, the radical claims of the Parable of the Good Samaritan are not avoided when one excludes Jesus as the referent of the parable, since Jesus calls the lawyer to “act like a Samaritan.” Why should Jesus, a Jew, expect something of a Jewish lawyer that he is not prepared to do himself?

## CONCLUSION

It is in the offense of the image of the Samaritan as a Christ figure that the Parable of the Good Samaritan has its fullest evocative power. The exegetical tradition that understood the parable Christologically presents a more compelling reading in the context of Luke’s Gospel than the modern critical consensus.

This conclusion raises larger questions that cannot be answered in this article. While we should not abandon our search for the Jewish context of Jesus’ parables, how shall we incorporate into our interpretation the larger Greco-Roman context in which the Gospels circulated? What is the Christian to do with patristic and medieval interpretations of the Bible?

Specifically what are we to do with ecclesiastical allegory of Jesus’ parables?

What we should *not* do, I wish to insist, is simply ignore the exegetical tradition of the church that has accumulated over nearly two millennia. I realize this goes against every critical fiber of our being, and this is certainly no plea to return to the kind of allegorizing that agonizingly sees a referent for every detail of the text. Certainly our interpretation of the text will at

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times, perhaps often, disagree with the exegetical tradition. That is inevitable and surely as it should be. But to approach the Bible, and especially Jesus' parables, with a predisposition to dismiss the existing exegetical tradition as "perverse" or "far-fetched" (as some have done) without engaging it is unacceptable. Nor should we quickly sweep aside a time-honored interpretation before moving on to engage the "more important" scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

So let us take seriously not only the Jewish setting of the parables in the life of Jesus, but also the Greco-Roman reception of the parables in their Gospel context. And let us once again engage, even if antagonistically, the church's exegetical tradition. Occasionally, as in the case of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, we may find that the Greco-Roman cultural and rhetorical contexts open up new vistas on Jesus' parables and that patristic readings are more sensitive to the literary and canonical contexts of the Christian Scriptures than their modern counterparts.

## NOTES

1 Schweitzer observed, "The historical investigation of the life of Jesus did not take its rise from a purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma." *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: A. & C. Black, Ltd., 1910), 4.

2 C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, third edition (London: Nisbet & Co., 1941, first published in 1935), 11-13.

3 Scripture quotations are my translations.

4 The following argument is taken from pp. 129-137 of Ronald F. Hock's "Why New Testament Scholars Should Read Ancient Novels," in Ronald F. Hock, J. Bradley Chance, and Judith Perkins, eds., *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 121-153.

5 For the use of these terms in other philanthropic contexts, see (for "half-dead") Chariton, 3.316; 4.6; 5.4; ("take care of") Chariton, 1.13.10; 2.2.2; Xenophon of Ephesus, 1.15.2; 2.2.5; ("neighbor") Chariton, 3.10.6; and ("showing mercy") Chariton 1.10.2, 4; 3.4.9-10; Longus 1.3.1; 1.6.1.

6 For a convenient collection of allegorical (and ethical) interpretations of Jesus' parables, see Stephen Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus' Parables* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

7 The Greek word for stranger, *allogenes*, has a negative connotation in the Septuagint translation of Leviticus 22:10, 12, 13; 22:25; 1 Esdras 9:7, 9, 12, 17, 18, 36; and 1 Maccabees 3:36, 45; 10:12.



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