

THE GOOD SAMARITAN AS METAPHOR

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ABSTRACT

The parable of the Good Samaritan is commonly understood as an example story, offering an example of what it means to be a good neighbor. But the parable does not invite the hearer to view it as an example of what it means to be a good neighbor. Rather, it invites the auditor to be the victim in the ditch, as a careful reading indicates. The "meaning" of the parable is the way auditors take up rôles in the story and play out the drama. As a drama into which the hearers are drawn, the parable suggests that in the Kingdom mercy is always a surprise.

0. Literary and biblical critics have always deemed it an important matter to determine the kind of language being used in any text to be interpreted. In some cases it is crucial. For example, the argument over whether the parable of the Good Samaritan is a parable or an example story can be settled only in conjunction with determining the nature of the language. The view advocated here is that the Good Samaritan is metaphorical and therefore not an example story (cf. Funk: 199-222). This understanding runs counter to both the ancient and the modern traditions of interpretation. Dominic Crossan has joined the battle on the side of metaphor, while Dan Via has supported the older view with structuralist arguments (*Semeia* 1, 1974).

The Good Samaritan is a particularly interesting case because the story is felt to be a powerful symbol in the Jesus tradition and yet it is taken literally by most interpreters. There is linked to this interest the timely question whether metaphor is native to the modern

positivistic mentality, or whether it constitutes an endangered species among classic modes of speech. In any case, the determination of the language of the Good Samaritan would be an important contribution to biblical criticism. This importance may be spelled out in further detail.

1.1 Traditionally, the parables in the Jesus tradition were taken either as example stories (models of right behavior) or as allegories (coded theologies). Even after the revolutionary work of Adolf Jülicher and his successors, the most influential of whom were C. H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias, the parables were understood as example stories or as illustrations of a point that could have been made, without essential loss, in discursive, non-figurative language. In all these cases, the parables were understood literally: in the case of exemplary stories, they were taken as literally literal; as allegories and illustration, on the other hand, they were understood to be literally figurative.

The literal understanding of figurative language implies that something conceptually known and statable is to be communicated by means of non-literal language: the figure is a vehicle for a univocal tenor. The metaphor, by contrast, is the means by which equivocal because pre-conceptual knowledge is discovered to both speaker (writer) and hearer.

The parable as metaphor thus has an altogether different locus in language, and it was as metaphor that the parables originally functioned, in my judgment. It is not possible to discuss here why, in the transmission of the tradition, the metaphorical horizon of the parables of Jesus was lost--of all parables, not just the Good Samaritan. That is a very interesting question, however; its answer might throw light on our own interpretive dilemma.

1.2 The characterization of the parable as metaphor will bear modest formal expansion.

The parable communicates in a non-ordinary

sense, because the knowledge involved in the parable is pre-conceptual: it is knowledge of unsegmented reality, of an undifferentiated nexus, of a seamless world. Conceptual knowledge is knowledge of reality segmented, differentiated, classified. Knowledge communicated by the parable lies at the threshold of knowledge as commonly understood.

The parable does not, therefore, involve a transfer of information or ideas about an established world from one head to another. In the parable reality is aborning; the parable opens onto an unfinished world because that world is in course of conception. This means that both narrator and auditor *risk* the parable; they both participate the narrative and venture its outcome. He or they do not tell the story; it *tells* them.

These generalizations, and others that might be made, are derivative; their source is a concrete example.

2. The parable of the Good Samaritan is commonly understood as an example story. Everyone knows its "meaning," including the Synoptic writer, Luke, who included it in his gospel. Jesus is asked: who is my neighbor? He answers: a neighbor is someone who helps another person in need. The parable therefore sets the Good Samaritan as an example of what it means to be a neighbor. There is no figurative element in the parable, and the parable is taken as commending this kind of behavior.

It is to be seriously doubted that the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches such a lesson at all, in spite of the fact that it has been predominantly so understood in the tradition. One reason for skepticism is this: *the parable does not invite the hearer to view it as an example of what it means to be a good neighbor.*

Every narrative is constructed in such a way as to cause the reader to view events from a certain perspective. Put differently, a narrative is a device to make the audience observers (Gleason: 41). The question with respect to the Samaritan is how the parable places the auditors in relation to the events of the narrative. This

is the key question in determining whether the Samaritan is literal or metaphorical.

A glimpse of the original register of the parable can perhaps be evoked by a fresh "reading" of the parable. By "reading" is meant "placing the auditor," by means of "criticism," so he/she is enabled to attend the parable in the appropriate key. A "critical reading" of the parable is thus an effort to allow the narrative itself to "place" the hearer.

The parable runs as follows:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, 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, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'

The lead clauses in each section will indicate how the narrative places the auditor.

3.1 *a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...*
The first question is: who is this anonymous man going down the road? The question arises because the narrative is a piece of everydayness which commands the immediate recognition and assent of the auditors. Naturally, this man is any Jew, like those in the audience, who has travelled that dangerous, precipitous road many times, or at least has heard stories of the robbers who lurk there. In any case, the scene is well known and the listeners are able to respond with a certain recognition: yes, that's the way it is on the Jericho road.

The initial perspective of the narrative therefore draws the listener to the victim in the ditch at the side of the road: because the observer confirms the

immediate reality of the incident, he/she takes up a vantage point in the ditch to await developments.

3.2 From the ditch the victim observes...

by chance a priest passing by...

The listeners who are clerical or have clerical sympathies hesitate: they ask for a delay in the proceedings to consider whether they like the turn of events. Something is wrong. It appears that the priest is laying himself open to needless and perhaps unjust criticism.

The anti-clerical interests in the audience applaud. Exactly what one would expect, they say to themselves, of the clergy.

It is to be noted that those belonging to the religious establishment identify with the priest and thus resent being so (rightly) represented. Those excluded from the religious establishment have their opinions of the priests and so watch the priest pass by with glee--from the ditch. The auditors have now been divided into two groups: one retains the perspective of the victim, the other moves away--down the road.

3.3 Then

a Levite also passes by...

This subscene reinforces the previous scene with its attendant reactions. The righteous have become angry; the religious outcasts begin to snicker. The first group is being herded down the road, reluctantly, on the other side; the second is lolling mirthfully in the ditch, having forgotten the beating and the robbery.

3.4 Neither group is prepared for

a Samaritan who has compassion...

The account of the Samaritan is relatively the longest part of the narrative and deliberately so. The Samaritan was the mortal enemy of the Jew because a half-brother. His appearance as friend sows confusion everywhere: all auditors are Jews. Particularly dismayed are those in the ditch, the religiously outcast, because they have been

snickering and because they are now being lavishly befriended. A smile comes momentarily to the faces of the clerics as the spotlight shifts from them. But only momentarily. The narrator looks around to see whether a smile lingers on any face very long.

The Jew who was excessively proud of his blood line and a chauvinist about his tradition would not permit a Samaritan to touch him, much less minister to him. In going from Galilee to Judea, he would cross and recross the Jordan to avoid going through Samaria. The parable therefore forces upon its hearers the question: who among you will permit himself to be served by a Samaritan? In a general way it can be replied: only those who have nothing to lose by so doing can afford to do so. But note that the victim in the ditch is given only a passive rôle in the story. Permission to be served by the Samaritan is thus inability to resist. Put differently, all who are truly victims, truly disinherited, have no choice but to give themselves up to mercy.

In the traditional reading of the parable the significance of the Samaritan has been completely effaced: the Samaritan is not a mortal enemy, but a good fellow, the model of virtuous deportment. Further, the auditors were no longer Jews but goyim. These are just two reasons the parable soon lost its original resonances.

4.1 To summarize: if the auditor, as Jew, understands what it means to be the victim in the ditch, in this story, he/she also understands what the kingdom is all about.

Understand in the context of parable means to be drawn into the narrative as the narrative prompts, to take up the role assigned by the narrative. The parable is therefore also an invitation to comport oneself as the story indicates: it does not suggest that one behave as a good neighbor like the Samaritan, but that one become the victim in the ditch who is helped by an enemy. Indeed, the parable as metaphor was meant to be permission to so

understand oneself. The metaphon is permission because it gives reality that shape.

4.2 The meaning of the parable cannot be made more explicit because it is non-literal: it lacks specific application.

The parable does not dictate the outcome: although auditors are prompted, they may be drawn into the story as they will. That applies both to those privileged religiously and to the religiously disinherited. The terms of the story, in other words, are not literal. Everyone is invited to smile. Anyone may move over into the ditch.

The "meaning" of the parable is the way auditors take up rôles in the story and play out the drama. Response will vary from person to person and from time to time. The parable is perpetually unfinished. The story continues to tell itself, to "tell" its hearers.

That is a partial reading of the parable understood as metaphor.

5. It is possible, to be sure, to reflect on the parable as metaphor and endeavor to raise its meaning into discursive language. To do so on the basis of the "reading" just given, however, results in an abstract interpretation quite unlike the traditional meaning assigned to the parable. For one thing, the abstract language should retain some of the metaphorical quality of the parable itself. With these precautions in mind, the parable of the Good Samaritan may be reduced to two propositions:

(1) In the Kingdom of God mercy comes only to those who have no right to expect it and who cannot resist it when it comes.

(2) Mercy always comes from the quarter from which one does not and cannot expect it.

An enterprising theologian might attempt to reduce these two sentences to one:

(1) In the Kingdom mercy is always a surprise.

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