

GOOD SAMARITAN - Funk

Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper SanFrancisco, 1996),

The Good Samaritan

The parable was understood different way. **On the one side are the common folk who side with the victims**; they agree that the Jericho road is no place to travel alone, and they are modestly bemused by the behavior of the clerics, whom they know to have a callous indifference to such ordinary occurrences. On the other side the chagrined priest and their lay assistants, the Levites, who immediately stiffen when the story makes them out to be unseeing and uncaring. Into the tension between these two segments of Jesus' society rides the Samaritan astride his ass.¹

The moral Judean did not think highly of Samaritans. **The Judean listeners probably doubted that there was a Samaritan in the world who would help a Judean victim.** The religious authorities certainly thought highly of themselves, but it would immediately have occurred to them that contact with blood or with a dead body would defile them and render them ineligible for temple service. There were thus good and sufficient reasons not to stop. Undoubtedly, **some in the audience would have nodded their heads in silent approval at the depiction of the priest and Levite** as completely engrossed in their own importance and safety, to the **exclusion of other concerns.** The story herds listeners into separate social corrals of their own devising.²

The Samaritan works as a parable because it is loaded with heavily freighted literal, social, political, and religious terms. **The Jericho road** was a lonely and dangerous road. **The priests** were powerful upper-class authorities governing the temple cult, and the **Levites** were the priest's associates, providing music, incense, sacred bread, temple curtains and adornments, and administration for a national business that included "kosher metapacking" and banking. The importance of the cult for the economic well-being of Jerusalem cannot be overestimated. Herds and flocks were in constant demand for sacrificial offerings, and the influx of pilgrims at festival times required money changing and banking. **Priests and Levites were known to have quarters in the Jordan valley near Jericho** where they retreated from the beehive of activity surrounding the temple on ordinary days, to say nothing of feasts. The opulence of the priestly class was an irritant for the ordinary Judean, in spite of his or her devotion to the law and the sacrificial system.³

The initial face of the story invites the reader to take it in its **everyday and literal sense.** In other words, the narrative gains the assent of the listener by **affirming everyday reality**, the world as everyone knows it. The story thus rests on a stock of images that are current, concrete, and cogent.⁴

The Samaritans were a bastard race by Judean standards. They were presumably descended from Israelites who had **remained behind when the Assyrians deported the leading families of the**

¹ Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper SanFrancisco, 1996), 171.

² Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper SanFrancisco, 1996), 173.

³ Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper SanFrancisco, 1996), 174.

⁴ Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper SanFrancisco, 1996), 174.

region following their conquest in 722 b.c.e. The Israelites remaining behind intermarried with foreign settlers brought in by the Assyrians in the years that followed, although the Samaritans – the new ethnic group – continued to regard the Torah as their law. They erected their own temple on Mount Gerizim, just outside Shechem (modern Nablus), at a time when there was no temple in Jerusalem. John Hyrcanus, a Maccabean ruler, destroyed that temple during his reign (134–104 b.c.e.) and so raised enmity between the Judeans and Samaritans to a new level of intensity. In Luke, Jesus is made to refer to the grateful Samaritan leper as an alien, a foreigner. To call someone a Samaritan was a term of insult; in John, Jesus is called a Samaritan and a madman (John 15:7). The two epithets were taken as synonymous. Samaritans were regarded by Judeans as gentiles, as outside the scope of God’s chosen people, in spite of the fact that Samaritans claimed Moses as their teacher and ancestor. In fact, the Samaritans claimed they were descended from the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.⁵

Galilean pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for festivals often went through Samaria, which separated Galilee on the north from Judea to the south. The only way to avoid transit through this hostile territory was to cross the Jordan south of the Sea of Galilee, journey south through Trans-Jordan or Perea, and then recross the Jordan at Jericho, to ascend to Jerusalem along the Jericho road.⁶

Josephus records one incident that illustrates the enmity between the two groups. In 52c.e., a group of Galilean pilgrims was attacked and some of them were killed after they crossed the border into Samaria at the village of Jenin. In retaliation, Judean guerrilla forces from Jerusalem raided some Samaritan villages, slaughtered the inhabitants, and burned the towns. The Romans intervened; they crucified or beheaded numerous notables on both sides of the conflict and delivered one of their own tribunes, who had bungled his job, over to the people of Jerusalem. They then dragged him through the streets behind a horse and had him beheaded. It is thus understandable that the labels “Samaritan and Judean stood in considerable tension with each other.”⁷

Those who listened to Jesus tell the parable of the Samaritan, as good Judeans, would have expected the third person along that road to be Judean. The hero of the story would naturally have been one of them. How shocked they must have been when that figure turned out to be a hated Samaritan. At the mention of the Samaritan, Judean listeners would have bristled, rejected the plot, and quit the story, in spite of their initial inclination to give it a sympathetic hearing.⁸

Metaphorical Proclivities of the Good Samaritan Story (P. 176).

The first suggestion derives from the semantic organization of the plot. The first response on the part of the Judean audience would have been to affirm the everyday features of the tale: the Jericho road was known for its robberies, so it would have been natural to identify with the victim in the ditch. The appearance of the priest and then the Levite would have caused the audience to divide over the issue of the clergy: some would have protested, others would have smiled, depending on whether they were pro- or anticlergy. Jesus introduced this preliminary

⁵ Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper San Francisco, 1996), 175.

⁶ Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper San Francisco, 1996), 175.

⁷ Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper San Francisco, 1996), 175.

⁸ Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper San Francisco, 1996), 175.

tension into the story in order to heighten the real tension still to come. With Jesus' audience divided on what will eventually prove to be a secondary issue, the Samaritan, an enemy of both parties, intrudes. This narrative strategy sows additional confusion in an audience already divided.⁹

The confusion of roles in the story was designed to teach the listeners a lesson: be wary of easy identification with characters in the parable. The parable instructs the listener to be circumspect in taking sides.¹⁰

[The second suggestion](#) is less subtle. [The behavior of the Samaritan contravenes](#) normal, everyday expectations. As a consequence, the parable takes on the character of a fairy tale. [The Samaritan acts in an altogether unexpected way.](#) [The peasant listener](#) in the audience would no longer be an innocent victim in the ditch but the object of Samaritan mercy. That is a role no self-respecting Judean wanted to play. To be sure, no self-respecting Samaritan wanted to play the role of the helping hand either. The priest and Levite, on the other hand, must have believed they had been shortchanged, thinking, in retrospect, that they should have been given the role of the hero. And some lay listeners would have objected that the hero should have been an ordinary Judean. [The story thus promoted the transposition or the migration of social roles.](#) The biggest movement of all was called for by the appearance of the Samaritan.¹¹

Listeners would have found it more congenial to adopt the role of the helper as their own than to accept the status of victim. The role helper gives one the initiative, put one in charge of the outcome. The role of victim is passive, helpless, subject to initiatives taken by others. It is not the perspective of the helper that dominates the story – no, it is the perspective of the victim that provides the narrative focus.¹²

Among Jesus' listeners, those who would have responded positively to this story were those who had nothing to lose by doing so. Note that the [victim in the ditch has nothing to do or say.](#) [The victims' inability to resist the Samaritan's ministrations is a weak form of consent, but it plays an essential role in the story.](#) [God's domain is open to outcasts, to the undeserving, to those who do not merit inclusion.](#) [In other words, all who are truly victims, truly disinherited, have no reason and are unable to resist mercy when it is offered.](#) [The despised half-breed becomes the instrument of compassion and grace](#) –Judeans would have choked on that irony. It has occasionally been suggested that there is an autobiographical element in the parable of the Samaritan. After all, Jesus was a lowly Galilean peasant, only slightly higher on the social scale than the Samaritan. Was he thinking of himself as an instrument of his Father's grace? This suggestion is farfetched, although it does square with Jesus' view that salvation will come from unexpected quarters.¹³

The Samaritan is made to behave in a way that runs [counter to expectations.](#) The parable greatly exaggerates his willingness to help. Listeners could no longer believe their ears; [their](#)

⁹ Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper SanFrancisco, 1996), 176.

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¹³ Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper SanFrancisco, 1996), 177.

normal sense of reality was being called into question. In the world of the parable, things run the other way around. ... The parable is understood as an invitation to cross over. The ability to cross over will depend on both the tenacity with which one holds to the inherited order of reality, the received world, and on one's willingness to cut the ties to comfortable tradition. The parable is pitted against the power of the proven. Making the transition under such circumstances does not come easily.¹⁴

Another way of understanding the parable is:

By the time Luke edits this parable for his gospel, much has changed. Judeans and Samaritans no longer hate each other. For Luke, the Samaritan is just another gentile, who fits nicely into his geographical plan for the march of the gospel from Jerusalem to Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. The temple and its priests and Levites are gone when the temple was destroyed in 70 c.e. The Jericho road has become any Roman roadway. And Luke's audience is made up not of Judeans but of gentiles; in fact, Luke makes no mention of Judeans in the story at all.¹⁵

This parable also passes the coherence test. Jesus steadily privileged those marginalized in his society – the diseased, the infirm, women, children, toll collectors, gentile suppliants, perhaps even Samaritans – precisely because they were regarded as the *enemy*, outsider, the victim. The Samaritan as helper was an implausible role in the everyday world of Jesus; that is what makes the Samaritan plausible as a helper in a story told by Jesus.¹⁶

The parable, however, is not about Samaritan helpers. It is about victims. No one elects to be beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Yet in this story the way to get help is to be discovered helpless. The parable as a metaphor is permission for the listener to understand himself or herself in just that way. There were many in Jesus' society who could identify with that possibility without strain. Others could not imagine themselves being helped by a Samaritan. That is where the differences lay: how his listeners understood themselves. In the parable only victims need apply for help.¹⁷

¹⁴ Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper San Francisco, 1996), 177.

¹⁵ Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper San Francisco, 1996), 178.

¹⁶ Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper San Francisco, 1996), 179.

¹⁷ Robert W. Funk. *Honest to Jesus* (Harper San Francisco, 1996), 179.