

its earliest and original listeners and then what we might do with that impression today.

I have chosen the parables here on the basis of what I have to say that is original and in recognition that there is a law of diminishing returns. There is no reason to produce a twenty-page discussion of what one can find in numerous other books on parables. As Martin Bresler said while chairing a meeting of a major Jewish organization and despairing of its ever ending: "Everything that needed to be said was said, but not everyone had said it." This book is not a volume at which well-known interpretations are repeated. To repeat what is already known would be a waste of my time, and yours.

This book is an act of listening anew, of imagining what the parables would have sounded like to people who have no idea that Jesus will be proclaimed Son of God by millions, no idea even that he will be crucified by Rome. What would they hear a Jewish storyteller telling them? And why, two thousand years later, are these questions not only relevant, but perhaps more pressing than ever?

CHAPTER 1

Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son

Which person among you, having a hundred sheep and losing one out of them, will not leave behind the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost until he finds it? And finding, he puts it up on his shoulders; rejoicing. And coming into the house he calls together the friends and the neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice together with me, because I have found my sheep, the lost one." I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven at one sinner repenting than at ninety-nine righteous, those who have no need of repentance.

Luke 15.4-7

Or what woman, having ten drachmas, if she would lose one drachma, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek resolutely until she finds? And when she finds, she calls together (female) friends and (female) neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, because I have found the drachma, the one I had lost." Likewise, I say to you, there will be rejoicing before the angels of God at one sinner repenting.

Luke 15.8-10

Some man had two sons. And said the younger of them to the father, "Father, give to me the portion of the property that is falling to me." And he divided between them the life.

And after not many days, gathering together all, the younger son took a journey into a far region, and there he

scattered the property through excessive living. And having spent all, there was a strong famine in that region, and he himself began to be in need. And going, he became joined to one of the citizens of that region, and he sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was desiring to be filled from the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one was giving to him.

And coming to himself, he said, "How many hired laborers of my father are abounding of bread, but I by famine here am lost? Getting up, I shall go to my father and I shall say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; not still am I worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired laborers.'"

And rising up, he went toward his father. And yet when he was far off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and running, fell upon his neck and continually kissed him.

And said the son to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; not still am I worthy to be called your son."

And said the father to his slaves, "Quickly carry out a robe, the first, and put it on him, and give the ring to his hand and sandals to the feet. And bring the calf, the grain-fed one, sacrifice and, eating, we may rejoice. Because this, my son, was dead, and he came back to life; he had been lost, and was found." And they began to rejoice.

And his son, the elder, was in the field, and as he, coming, drew near to the house, he heard symphony and chorus. And calling over one of the servants he inquired what these things might be. And he said to him, "Your brother has come, and your father has sacrificed the grain-fed calf, because he received him healthy."

And he became angry, and he did not want to go in. And his father, going out, comforted/urged him.

And answering, he said to his father, "Look, all these years I am slaving for you, and not one commandment of yours have I passed by, and for me not one young goat did you give so that with my friends I might rejoice. But when your

son, this one, the one who ate up your life with whores came, you sacrificed for him the grain-fed calf.

And he said to him, "Child, you always with me are, and everything that is mine is yours. But it remains necessary to cheer and to rejoice, because your brother, this one, was dead, and lived to life, and being lost, even he was found."

Luke 15.11-32

According to Luke, the narratives traditionally called the parables of the Lost Sheep, the parable of the Lost Coin, and the parable of the Prodigal Son are about sinners repenting and graciously offering forgiveness and reconciliation. Luke misleads by turning the parables into allegories. It is unlikely a first-century Jewish listener would hear the first two parables and conclude that they had something to do with sheep repenting or coins confessing. Sheep sleep, poop, produce wool, and give milk—but an awareness of sin and a sense of eschatological salvation is not part of ovine nature. Although one could adduce Psalm 119.176—"I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek out your servant, for I do not forget your commandments"—the parable offers no angora angst or merino *metanoia* (Gk., "repentance"). Neither sheep nor coins have the capability to repent, and I doubt the younger brother does either.

If any blame is to be assigned in the first two parables, then the shepherd and the woman are at fault, for they "lost," respectively, the sheep and the coin. Were the parables called "The Shepherd Who Lost His Sheep" and "The Woman Who Lost Her Coin," we might be closer to an earlier meaning. Regarding the issue of fault in the third parable, were the prodigal son a sinner for demanding his inheritance—well, it is unlikely to be the case, as we'll see—he had help; his father, instead of disciplining him, abetted his request by complying with it. Thus the third parable too might be renamed: "The Father Who Lost His Son(s)."

Not only do many of Luke's readers, as numerous sermons and commentaries attest, regard the three parables as about sinning and repenting;

also see the parables as correcting an artificially constructed, pernicious Judaism—and at this point a harmless allegory becomes a dangerous stereotype. Common is the claim that the parables, especially the third, reveal an extravagant, earth-shattering image of a God the Father who forgives, as if Jews had no notion of a divinity who seeks relationship and reconciliation. Common is the view that the older son is an allegorical representation of the Jews, who slavishly serve God the Father in order to earn a reward, while Jesus proclaims salvation by grace. And common is the interpretation that the prodigal, given his connection to pig farming, represents gentile Christians, whereas the older brother, the stereotypical Jew, resents God the Father's outreach beyond the so-called chosen people, with their elitist, nationalistic attitudes.

In these readings and more, the younger son is the repentant Christian, the older son is the Pharisee or the Jewish people, and the father is God. Such interpretations not only yank the parable out of its historical context; they lessen the message of Jesus and bear false witness against Jews and Judaism.

In its original context, the parable of the Prodigal Son would not have been heard as a story of repentance or forgiveness, a story of works-righteousness and grace, or a story of Jewish xenophobia and Christian universalism. Instead, the parable's messages of finding the lost, of reclaiming children, of reassessing the meaning of family offer not only good news, but better news.

Titles Matter

The term "prodigal son" does not appear in the parable most often known by that name. The earliest reference is from the church father Jerome (347–420), who speaks of having written "on the prudent and the prodigal sons."¹ Nevertheless, the label "Prodigal Son" necessarily influences both what messages we take from the parable and what lessons we fail to hear.

On the simplest level, far too many people think the term "prodigal" has a partially positive connotation, such as "adventurous" or

"daring" or "ambitious." A few students who did not do well on their SATs hear "prodigal" and think "prodigy." The word "prodigal" indicates wasteful spending, financial recklessness. Aristotle wrote, "... [W]e call prodigal those who lack self-restraint and who, in their licentiousness, spend lavishly. Hence the prodigal are held to be very base people, since they have many vices simultaneously."² Contrary to today's appropriations of the term, such as *Prodigal Magazine*, a Christian "online publication that is passionate about helping people live and tell good stories,"³ or Prodigal, a global hedge fund that promotes "innovation in financial services,"⁴ or the various claims that speak of God's interest in "reckless," "radical," or "extreme" love, there is nothing complimentary about being prodigal, that is, in wasting resources for personal gratification.

Despite the connotations of prodigality, the traditional interpretation of the parable actually forecloses rather than opens it up to broader meaning. The prodigal disappears from the second half of the narrative; therefore, when readers focus only on the prodigal, it is a prodigal act. It wastes the rest of the story, and it tosses aside the several profound challenges it offers.

Better is "The Prodigal and the Prudent," as Jerome had it. Also plausible is "The Lost Son," which is how the parable is known in Egyptian Christian sources; this title has the added value of opening the question: "Which son is lost?" Lebanese Christians refer to "The Clever (Arabic *shatter*) Son," a title that plays on the similar term *shatr*, meaning "divide" or "separate."⁵ Thus the younger son is "the clever and separated." In Germany, *Der verlorene Sohn*, "The Lost Son," is the common title, although ironically the traditional German reading sees the title as applying only to the younger son. At least with this designation, the younger son's ambiguous character is open for discussion.

On my more cynical days, I am inclined to call the story the parable of "The Absent Mother." "The Symphony and Chorus," "The Grain-Fed Calf," and "Dissolute Living" are also possibilities, although not in this volume.

The main reason that the name Prodigal Son caught on was Christian focus on the younger son's character. In the early years of the

church, some patristic readers, who never met an allegory they didn't like, saw the younger son as Jesus himself. This Beloved Son left the paradise of his heavenly father, went to dwell in the world of sin, engaged in a gentile mission indicated by his becoming a servant to a pig farmer (by definition, a gentile), and then returned home to be welcomed with ring and robe and feasting. In a number of such appropriations, the elder brother goes missing entirely.⁶ This reading, which requires a decoder key (e.g., the Christ hymn in Phil. 2.6–11) to explain the allegorical connections, is not something Jesus's Jewish audience would have heard.

Although the idea that the prodigal is Jesus has become less popular, from antiquity to the present the view that the father is God the Father has prevailed. As early as the second century, the North African church father Tertullian made the connection: "Who is that father to be understood by us? God, surely; no one *is* so truly a Father, no one so rich in paternal love."⁷ I do wonder about Tertullian's own parenting, for surely other dads have been generous to a fault (literally) with their younger children.

This allegorical connection is then exploited by more recent commentators who insist that the father's welcoming of the prodigal not only surprises, but transgresses cultural standards of honor. Here is a standard trope that misrepresents Judaism. According to this reading, Jesus creates a new image of the divine to replace the demanding, stern, and punishing God of Judaism. Swiss theologian Eduard Schweizer goes as far as to claim that "those who nailed [Jesus] to the cross because they found blasphemy in his parables—which proclaimed such scandalous conduct on the part of God—understood his parables better than those who saw in them nothing but the obvious message, which should be self-evident to all, of the fatherhood and kindness of God, meant to replace a superstitious belief in a God of wrath."⁸ Perhaps he missed such Jewish texts as Psalm 23, which states, "The Lord is my shepherd," not "The Lord is my sadist."

Just as the father is today usually seen as a cipher for God and the prodigal as the Christian who repents of his sin and is welcomed back by the gracious God, so also that older brother, out in the field, remains

the Jew or, in a variation on that theme, the "Pharisaic Christian" (in such settings, the label "Pharisee" is never a compliment), who obeys the Father out of a sense of duty rather than of love, who mistakenly thinks that one must earn God's grace, and who refuses to welcome the marginal, outcasts, gentiles, or whatever group Christian readers see themselves as welcoming and the Jews, conversely, as rejecting. Or, as New Testament scholar Klyne Snodgrass puts it, "At least [Luke] ch. 15, if not the whole of 14.1–17.10, is focused on the gospel for the outcasts."⁹

As early as around 383, Jerome claimed that the elder brother represented unrepentant Israel; in the field, he is "far from the grace of the Holy Spirit, banished from his father's counsel."¹⁰ Apparently Jerome did not quite make it to the end of the parable, where the father attempts to reconcile with his older son and states, "Everything I have is yours." Augustine similarly reads the elder brother as "the people of Israel following the flesh . . . toiling with reference to earthly things."¹¹ Calvin rejects limiting the elder brother to the Jews and extends the reference to "hypocrites with intolerable pride";¹² the move still condemns the older son by attributing to him motives that the parable leaves unmentioned. Yet another variant, albeit out of the mainstream, is the present-day identification of the unforgiving elder brother with Simon Wiesenthal, the Jewish American Nazi hunter.¹³ Underlying this unfortunate reading is the view that Nazi hunters should let bygones be bygones. The comparison of the personal spending of one's fortune in dissolute living with genocide strikes me as a tad overstated.

Such positive readings of the father and the prodigal and negative readings of the older brother are prompted substantially by Luke's contextualization, to which we now turn. Luke places the three parables after these words:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15.1–2)

We can see Luke's hand at work by comparing Luke 15 with Matthew's version of the first of those three stories.¹⁴ Matthew 18.10–14 offers more or less the same first parable, but with a much different context:

Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

Speaking neither to sinners and tax collectors nor to Pharisees and scribes, but to his own disciples, Matthew offers in the two center sentences of that passage a parable that can legitimately be called the Lost Sheep (vv. 12–13). The NRSV, however, cleans up the language by describing the sheep as having “gone astray,” whereas the Greek (*plano*) has the main connotation of “deceive/deception.” A better translation would be: “If a person has a hundred sheep and one of them is deceived, does he not leave the ninety-nine upon the mountain and going, seek the deceived? And if he comes to find it—amen, I say to you—that he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine who were not deceived.” The opening (v. 10) and concluding (v. 14) verses—the context—appear to be from the hand of the evangelist, who favors designations such as “little ones” and “Father in heaven.”

For Matthew, the parable is about the church's responsibility to care, doctrinally, for its members, who may be deceived by false claims. The allegory is stronger here: it is the sheep who is “deceived.” For Luke, the parable is about repenting and forgiving. Both evangelists had the story, and each recontextualized it to make a point consistent with the rest of the Gospel. Detached from either context, the parable may well have had quite a different message.

For Luke, the three parables are designed to show the different concerns of two groups of people: those with whom the Gospel readers are to identify (sinners and tax collectors) and those whom the readers are to reject (Pharisees and scribes). Luke's Gospel gives us numerous negative portraits of Pharisees and several darling images of tax collectors. In Luke, some of those who come to John the Baptist in repentance are tax collectors (3.12), as is one of Jesus's disciples (5.27). Tax collectors acknowledge divine justice (7.29), and one of them finds reconciliation in the Jerusalem Temple (18.14). And of course there's Zacchaeus (whose name basically means “Mr. Righteous”), the chief tax collector and richest guy in town, who, because he is short, climbs a sycamore tree to see Jesus as he enters Jericho (19.1–10).

The Pharisees and scribes, for Luke's readers, tend to remain coded as Jews, and thus a number of readers go even further than Luke in applying stereotypes. For example, in some commentaries, these “sinners and tax collectors” are understood to be people who “abandoned the law and for all practical purposes had denied God's covenant with Israel.”¹⁵ Then, with amazing sleight of hand, these tax collectors and sinners become “outcasts,” and the parable is understood to be about “the Pharisaic refusal out of envy and resentment to accept this good news extended to the outcast. . . . They, like the elder son, had stayed within the covenant, . . . they had never broken any of the commandments. But (the story suggests) they regarded themselves not as sons so much as slaves. And they resented others being allowed into the people without cost.”¹⁶

For a first-century Jew, and even for Luke's Gospel, the tax collectors and sinners are not those who have “abandoned the law” or “denied the covenant.” That Jesus tells a parable in which a tax collector prays in the Jerusalem Temple does suggest some investment in that covenant. The problem with “tax collectors” is not that they denied the covenant; it is that they work for Rome and so would be seen by many within the Jewish community as traitors to their own people.

Sinners are not “outcasts”; they are not cast out of synagogues or out of the Jerusalem Temple. To the contrary, they are welcome in such places, since such places encourage repentance. The Gospels generally present sinners as wealthy people who have not attended to the poor.

That is a dandy definition of the term. Thus, in a first-century context, sinners, like tax collectors, are individuals who have removed themselves from the common welfare, who look to themselves rather than to the community.

The problem is that many of us today hear “sinner” and think only in religious categories. The sinner is the one who “breaks the Law,” but the “Law” becomes understood not in terms of “Love your neighbor as yourself” or “Leave the corners of your field for the poor,” but in terms of earning one’s way into heaven, legalism, or works-righteousness. Many Christian readers, already primed to think of Law as the antithesis of grace and as a “burden,” come to identify with the “sinner” who is freed from this dreadful legalism. Again, this is not what first-century (or twenty-first-century) Jews would hear.

Similarly, there are no “outcasts” in any of the three parables in Luke 15. The shepherd did not expel the sheep for bleating a blasphemy or grazing on nonkosher grass. The sheep did not sin. Rather, the shepherd lost the sheep. Similarly, the coin was not cast out; the woman was looking for her money, not divesting from it. Nor was the prodigal cast out; he walked out on his own two feet, or perhaps on a horse he bought with his inheritance. Once the term “outcast” is used in reference to Jesus’s Jewish context, dualistic models are in place, negative stereotypes of Judaism are implied, and Christian apologetic is well under way.

We need not have negative views of Pharisees in order to understand the parables. To the contrary, such readings reverse general Jewish views. The Pharisees were the ones respected by the people at large. Paul, the only self-identified Pharisee from whom we have written records, trots out his Pharisaic origins as something worthy of admiration (although heaven forbid he would boast; see Phil. 3.5). As for sinners—that is, those who think about themselves and not of others—Paul provides the standard instruction. In 1 Corinthians 5.11, Paul advises his fledgling church, “But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard,

or robber. Do not even eat with such a one.” They are the ancient drug pushers, insider traders, arms dealers, and, especially, colonial collaborationists. And yes, Jesus eats with them—that’s part of his genius, that he recognizes that they are part of the community and he goes out to get them.

Both Matthew and Luke have provided our parables with a context, and in so doing they have begun the process of interpretation. We do well to see what the parables might have meant prior to their reception as Matthew’s “instruction for church leaders” and Luke’s “we love tax collectors, but Pharisees not so much.”

Lost Sheep

Traditional interpretations see the sheep as the believer who has strayed from the fold; the one in search is Jesus or one of his representatives, who makes every effort to save this lost sheep from destruction; and the friends who join in feasting at the end are the church. This is an encouraging message; it is certainly good news. What has gotten lost, however, is any provocation, any challenge. A second listen is in order.

Which person among you, having a hundred sheep and losing one out of them . . . (Luke 15.4a)

The question would provoke from the majority of people in Jesus’s audience the answer, “Not I.” Most peasants do not own a hundred sheep. The parable’s opening presupposes a person of some means. So does the story of the woman who has lost her silver coin and the father who has a sufficiently large estate to have fattened calves, lots of clothing, and good accessories. Although “having” might simply mean “having

charge over," the image conveyed by all three parables is that of substance. Perhaps it is those who "have" who are more likely to fail to notice what is missing.

That audience might have remarked on the owner's recognition that a sheep was missing. If one has five sheep, noting only four on the hillside would be easy to do. It is less easy, perhaps impossible, to notice one missing out of one hundred; most people, expecting a hundred coins in a jar or daisies in a field, could not spot one missing without not only counting, but also organizing into rows. One out of a hundred is easy to overlook, but as soon as the owner recognizes his loss, he takes whatever steps are needed in order to bring the group to wholeness. Even a missing 1 percent must be noticed. And if he can notice the missing one and diligently seek to find it, he reminds listeners that perhaps they have lost something, or someone, as well, but have not noticed it. Before the search can begin, we need to notice what, or who, is not there.

The initial audience may also have had some concerns about the owner of those sheep. At fault, if there is blame to be assigned for the missing sheep, is the one who was to watch over the flock. The story could have gone otherwise. In Matthew's version of this parable, as we have seen, it is the sheep that has been deceived (Matt. 18.12-14; *Thomas* 107). But in our parable, with the fellow having lost the sheep, the idea that the owner is Jesus or God is compromised. The owner is an owner, and he is down one animal. Rather than the parable of the Lost Sheep, the same short story could be called the parable of the Initially Oblivious Owner.

... will not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost until he finds it? (Luke 15.4b)

The seeker who leaves ninety-nine sheep to find one will have, at the end of the day, only one sheep. Sheep are not among the animal kingdom's brightest creatures. Sheep stray. When in John 10 Jesus—who here really is the "Good Shepherd"—describes how the shepherd "calls his own sheep by name" (10.3), he is being generous; sheep may recognize the voice of the shepherd, but they do not know their own names. "Here, Fluffy" or "Here, Lamb Chop" (one does wonder about naming a sheep "Lamb Chop," but then again neither sheep nor sock puppets would understand the irony¹⁷) would yield either a hundred blank stares or the faces of a hundred hungry animals.

In Luke's parable, the owner has lost a sheep and, in desperation, does what he can to find it. He is so concerned about the lost sheep that he not only "leaves" (Gk. *leipo*), but "leaves behind" (*kataleipo*) the others.¹⁸ That missing one out of one hundred is as important to him as all the others, as perhaps all congregants are important to their churches or all children are important to their parents. One hopes he has helpers to watch the rest of the flock.

And finding, he puts it up on his shoulders; rejoicing.
(Luke 15.5)

Whereas the owner is enormously relieved, whether the sheep cared one iota about being found is irrelevant to this parable. Nor are most sheep, so Merino farmers in Australia tell me, all that happy to be carried on a person's shoulders. We might picture a bit of a struggle. For the owner, the important thing is that he has found the sheep, and now his flock is complete.

And coming into the house he calls together the friends and the neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice together with me, because I have found my sheep, the lost one." (Luke 15.6)

The setting arranged for the party is not in the barn or the sheepfold, but in the house. The Greek used for the guest list takes the form of the masculine plural, and so women may be included in the invitation (in Greek, as in most gendered languages, the term for a group of thousands of women and one man would be in the masculine). The finder of the lost, who rejoiced when he found the sheep, wants to share his joy. Whether inviting only the guys or including women as well, the host would be expected to provide hospitality—the excitement over the finding of a lost sheep only goes so far. It would not surprise me to learn that at the reception the joyful finder served mutton.

I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven at one sinner repenting than at ninety-nine righteous, those who have no need of repentance. (Luke 15.7)

With this verse, it is Luke who provides the first interpretation by turning the parable into an allegory. The idea that someone, let alone ninety-nine such someones, "do not need repentance" tends to be overlooked in the church, where the prevailing view is that everyone needs to repent. If there are ninety-nine folks in the neighborhood who have nothing to repent for, we really are in the land of fantasy rather than reality. Also overlooked is how the allegory fails to match the parable. There was no repenting in the story; there was no sin; the sheep did not

"come to itself" and find its way home. It was the owner who lost the sheep, and if this losing were sinful, he's not seen repenting.

Luke is not the only one to interpret the parable in a way that requires an allegorical key. Consistent with Luke's suggestion that the one repentant sinner is of greater value than the righteous ninety-nine, in the *Gospel of Thomas* our parable appears in a form that is closer to Matthew's version than to Luke's. In this rendition, "Jesus said, 'The (Father's) imperial rule is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One of them, the largest, went astray. He left the ninety-nine and looked for the one until he found it. After he had toiled, he said to the sheep, "I love you more than the ninety-nine"' (107).¹⁹ *Thomas's* shepherd easily notices the missing sheep—it is the largest of the flock. Further, *Thomas's* shepherd plays favorites. This version offers no challenge, provides no moral lesson, and creates no community. There is no celebration, no feasting, just favoritism.

Beyond those of Luke and *Thomas*, allegorical interpretations abound. Popular today is the claim that Luke's parable, along with Matthew's companion version and John's "Good Shepherd discourse" (John 10), in which Jesus states, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (10.11), serves to enhance the role of the shepherd within a Jewish culture that despised laborers. From allegories of repenting and forgiveness to an allegory about inversions of social class, more anachronism and more negative depictions of Judaism emerge.

Commentators first conclude that Jewish listeners, or at least enough of them, would have despised shepherds and therefore seen the parable as challenging social convention by depicting a positive image of shepherds. From both the academic study and the Sunday pulpit, the faithful are told: "Pharisees and scribes would never even have contemplated taking up the task of the shepherd. Shepherds belonged to a class of despised trades";²⁰ "The rabbis both revered the shepherd of the Hebrew Bible and classed the contemporary shepherd among robbers and thieves, the outcast"²¹ (it is almost impossible to read about Luke 15 without encountering the term "outcast" every three of four

pages); or the parable "would have caused the Pharisees and scribes, people immensely concerned about cleanness, to imagine themselves involved in a trade they considered unclean."²² The inevitable pernicious conclusion is: "In contrast to rabbinical contempt for shepherds, . . . Jesus, who has fellowship with the despised and sinners, knows and appreciates them as people."²³

Such views are nonsense. First, the citations do not match the claim. The usually adduced passages are Philo's *On Agriculture* 61; the Mishnah, *Qiddushin* 4.14; and the relatively late *Midrash on Psalms* 23.1–2. Philo was not a Pharisee, but an upper-class philosopher living in urban Alexandria. His comments are in relation to Joseph's brothers, who explain to Pharaoh that they are keepers of sheep and goats (and so not political or economic threats). Philo first notes that they "are testifying their high opinion of the profession of life which they have adopted, not in honor of themselves alone, but of their father also, as being worthy of all possible care and diligence."²⁴ He then states, "Such occupations are accounted inglorious and mean among those who are loaded with great prosperity, without being at the same time endowed with prudence, and especially among kings." In other words, the very rich who lack wisdom see shepherds as mean. How these very wealthy ignorant people in Egypt became transformed, by a few biblical commentators, into Pharisees in Galilee is a miracle of exegesis.

In the Mishnah, *Qiddushin* 4.14 is a very long passage expressing the personal opinions of a number of rabbis, and it has nothing to do with shepherds per se. The relevant portion reads:

Abba Gorion of Zaidan says in the name of Abba Guria: A man should not teach his son to be an ass-driver or a camel-driver or a barber or a sailor or a herdsman [here's the shepherd reference] or a shopkeeper, for their craft is the craft of robbers. R. Judah says in his name: Ass-drivers are most of them wicked, camel-drivers are most of them proper folk, sailors are most of them saintly, the best among physicians is

destined for Gehenna, and the most seemly among butchers is a partner of Amalek.²⁵

Abba Gorion, a second-century sage, is a snob, but his views are hardly indicative of those of all Pharisees or even any from the late Second Temple period. Further, to draw a general view of shepherds—or butchers, doctors, sailors, and so on—from one rabbi, whose views are immediately contradicted in the same passage, is tantamount to borrowing a comment from one of the church fathers and ascribing the view to Jesus or Paul. One could equally cite, from the Mishnah, *Baba Qamma* 10.9, which speaks of accepting shepherds (the same word, *ro'eh*) as judges. Selective citations from later rabbinic sources retrojected into the first century, set up as indicative of all Pharisaic views, and then used to create a contrast with Jesus result in a nasty game of proof-texting.

On the other hand, the numerous positive comments about shepherds made by Philo, the rabbis, the scriptures of Israel, and the Dead Sea Scrolls all go missing in most of these treatments: the Lord is a shepherd (Ps. 23.1; see also Isa. 40.11; Ezek. 34.11–13, 15–16; 37.24–25; Jer. 23.2–4); Rachel tended sheep, as did Zipporah, and they both made splendid wives; David was a shepherd, as was Moses. From the community eventually associated with Qumran, the Damascus Document (CD) asserts, "He [the Guardian of the community] shall love them [the Congregation] as a father loves his children, and shall carry them in their distress like a shepherd a sheep."²⁶

Since rabbinic texts are sometimes adduced to show how "the Pharisees" despised shepherds, it becomes appropriate to cite rabbinic texts, indeed, parables, on how shepherds functioned in storytelling. The midrashic text *Exodus Rabbah* offers a "good shepherd parable" featuring Moses (2.2). The prompt for the parable is Exodus 3.1: "Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro." The parable reads:

The Holy One tested Moses by means of the flock, as our rabbis explained: when *Moshe rabbenu* (Moses our teacher) was

tending Jethro's flock in the wilderness, a lamb scampered off, and Moses followed it, until it approached a shelter under a rock. As the lamb reached the shelter, it came upon a pool of water and stopped to drink. When Moses caught up with it, he said, "I did not know that you ran away because you were thirsty. Now you must be tired." So he hoisted the lamb on his shoulder and started walking back with it. The Holy One then said, "Because you showed such compassion in tending the flock of a mortal, as you live, you shall become the shepherd of Israel, the flock that is mine."

I do wonder if there's an edge to this parable. The shepherd is supposed to know if his sheep are thirsty. There may be a warning here to Moses and so to any leader: "You may have the right compassion, but you also require knowledge of the needs of your flock." The parable would have also evoked, for its Jewish listeners, the account in Exodus 17 of the Israelites camped at Rephidim with "no water for the people to drink" (17.1).

Returning to the first parable in Luke 15 and reading it in light of these multiple shepherding images, we find that Jesus, in describing a man who has lost and then found his sheep, is not elevating the role of shepherd. Indeed, the parable no more speaks to the elevation of the so-called despised shepherd than a pastor who refers to his congregation as a "flock" has elevated the role of sheep.

Once we get beyond the common moves to make Jesus look good by making Judaism look bad, and once we recognize that Luke's allegorical reading, which connects the lost sheep with the repentant Christian, is not what the parable's original audience would have concluded, we can begin to see what the parable is actually doing.

The parable presents a main figure—the owner, not the sheep—who realizes he has lost something of value to him. He notices the single missing sheep among the ninety-nine in the wilderness. For him, the missing sheep, whether it is one of a hundred or a million, makes the flock incomplete. He engages in an exaggerated search, and when he has found the sheep, he engages in an equally exaggerated sense of

rejoicing, first by himself and then with his friends and neighbors. If this fellow can experience such joy in finding one of a hundred sheep, what joy do we experience when we find what we have lost? More, if he can realize that one of his hundred has gone missing, do we know what or whom we have lost? When was the last time we took stock, or counted up who was present rather than simply counted on their presence? Will we take responsibility for the losing, and what effort will we make to find it—or him or her—again?

Lost Coin

Or what woman, having ten drachmas, if she would lose one drachma, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek resolutely until she finds? (Luke 15.8)

Just as commentators see Jesus as elevating the role of the "outcast" shepherd over and against a Jewish elitist view, so they see him as elevating the role of the "despised" woman within an early Judaism or at least a Pharisaic context that makes the Taliban look progressive.²⁷ All too familiar are comments such as, "Luke combines parables in this instance in which there could only be negative feelings among Pharisaic critics about the main actors—first a shepherd, now a woman."²⁸ One popular homiletic commentary observes: "In a patriarchal society where pious men could pray, 'Blessed be God that he [sic!] has not made me a woman,' Jesus's stories with central female characters would be startling, if not offensive."²⁹

Apparently, the authors of Esther, Ruth, Judith, Susanna, 2 and 4 Maccabees, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, and a host of other Jewish sources never got the message that central female characters are offensive. Yet the commentators still want to find Jews offended by central images of a shepherd and a woman. Rather, perhaps we might find it offensive that Jesus's own context is so negatively portrayed.

Instead of putting the parable on the offensive list, it is better used as one coin among many in the treasury of information about Jewish women in antiquity. This treasury reveals not a population oppressed by "patriarchal Judaism," but a diverse group with various notable social roles.

For example, the woman who has ten drachmas, silver coins, is by no means marginal, outcast, or poor. She's not only relatively well-off; she has her own home and her own set of friends. The parable fits neatly with what other accounts tell us. Our homeowner in Luke 15 confirms what we know from other sources: women have access to their own funds, and Jewish women are hardly the poorest of the poor. All four Gospels, in various ways, describe a woman who anoints Jesus with extremely expensive ointment (Matt. 26.9; Mark 14.5; Luke 7.38–39; John 12.5). According to Luke, Jesus and his followers are supported by the female Jewish patrons Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna (8.1–3). Mark (5.26) and Luke (8.43) describe a woman who spent her money on physicians. These same two Gospels record the story of a woman who gives her last two coins, her whole "life" (the same term used to describe what the father of the prodigal divided), to the Temple treasury (Mark 12.42–43; Luke 21.2–3). Other women also appear in the Temple, such as the widow Anna (Luke 2.36–37) and Mary the mother of Jesus (Luke 2.22–39, 46–50). Jesus heals a woman in a synagogue (Luke 13.10–17), where she is not restricted to a balcony or behind a screen. In the parable of the Widow and the Judge, a woman appears in court (Luke 18.2–8). The "daughters of Jerusalem" appear in public to weep for Jesus (Luke 23.28), as does the widow of Nain, whose only son Jesus raises from the dead (Luke 7.11–16). The list goes on. I am not arguing that first-century Judaism was an egalitarian paradise; I am arguing that Jesus was by no means unusual in telling stories about women. Given his Jewish context, it would have been peculiar if he did not.

And when she finds, she calls together (female) friends and (female) neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, because I have found the drachma, the one I had lost." (Luke 15.9)

Finally, we also learn from the Lost Coin that the "friends and neighbors" our joyful woman invites to celebrate are female, as the form of the Greek nouns tells us. The happy homeowner does not ask anyone's permission to issue her invitation, and there is no reason to think that these friends and neighbors had to ask permission to join in the rejoicing.

As with the Lost Sheep, the parable of the Lost Coin does not need to invent a negative Judaism to surprise and provoke. The second parable sounds the same themes of loss, search, completion, and joy. As the flock of one hundred is incomplete at ninety-nine, so the silver coin collection is incomplete at nine. It is easier to notice one item missing from a collection of ten than one out of a hundred, but it is still difficult to distinguish nine coins from ten in a pile. The woman, like the owner of the flock, counted. When she found a coin missing, she went all out for the search.

The shepherd's urgent search for his lost sheep is replayed in the woman's urgent search—lighting the lamps, sweeping the floor—for her coin. Both shepherd and woman experience the joy of finding, and both share that joy with friends and neighbors.

But there is a subtle shift from the first parable to the second. The guardian of the flock speaks only of "my sheep, the lost one" (15.6). He does not claim responsibility for losing it. The woman mentions "the one I had lost" (15.9); she claims responsibility. We are provoked again. We can celebrate when what we have lost is found, but can we also admit our responsibility in the losing?

Likewise, I say to you, there will be rejoicing before the angels of God at one sinner repenting. (Luke 15:10)

Luke does not permit us to ask such questions about responsibility, since Luke insists the parable is about repenting and forgiving. Luke finds no fault with the owner or the householder; for Luke, the focus is on the sheep and the coin, despite the fact that neither took any action. The sheep and coin were “lost” and then “found”; they were passive objects. It is their owners, who first lost, then found, then celebrated, who should be the focus of our attention. They had the problem, and they fixed it. Thus when we turn to the third parable in Luke 15, we might want to pay attention to the father, who comes to realize what he has lost and desperately wants to find and celebrate.

Finally, if readers want to maintain the traditional view that the shepherd in the first parable and the father in the third are meant to represent God, then it is only fair to regard the woman with her coin as divine as well. Augustine already associated her with Christ in his role as the Wisdom (Gk. *sophia*) of God.³⁰ I don’t think Augustine’s reading is one that Jesus’s first-century Jewish audience would have taken; nevertheless, at least here there is something we might all celebrate.

Sheep, Coin, and Prodigal: Clues in Interpretation

We do not know if Jesus told the parables now found in Luke 15 as a set of three. Matthew and *Thomas* offer only variants on the Lost Sheep and do not present either the Lost Coin or the Prodigal Son. Nevertheless, the three parables are connected in numerous ways: by the themes of loss, and joy and feasting, as well as by structure.

We might think about the three parables, each with its main character (flock owner, householder, father) and something that is lost (sheep, coin, son[s]), as following the folkloric “rule of three.” This

rule, familiar from “Cinderella and Her Two Stepsisters” or, to use a nonkosher image, “The Three Little Pigs,” uses two models to set up a third, and the third creates the variation on the theme. We will find the same “rule of three” operative when we turn to the parable of the Good Samaritan; there, the first two figures, priest and Levite, set up anticipation of the third, but the third, the Samaritan, is quite the variation.

In the first two parables in Luke 15, one of one hundred and then one of ten is lost. We may be surprised that the owner even notices that one of a hundred has gone missing, and even with one out of ten the loss may not be self-evident (as an experiment, one might put ten quarters in a pile, remove one, and see if a quick glance reveals any difference). Yet in the third parable there are only two sons. The father is convinced that the younger, the prodigal, is the one who is lost, and in many respects he is correct. However, we find at the end of the parable that the son who is in fact “lost” is the elder. The owner spots the missing sheep among the hundred, and the woman spots the missing coin among the ten. The father, with only two sons, was unable to count correctly.

In the first two parables, a man and then a woman diligently, if not frantically, search for the precious lost object. In the third, the father does not search for the younger son; the prodigal has taken himself to a “far region,” out of his father’s purview. Yet we get the impression that the father is waiting for the child’s return: when the son is still far off, the father sees him. Perhaps he had been watching the road rather than his estate or his account books. It will turn out that the urgent search will not be for the prodigal, but for the elder brother.

In the first two parables, feasting and rejoicing end the story; in the third, the feasting and rejoicing are left behind as the desperate father tries to make his family whole. The story does not end with the party, but with two men in the field, one urging and comforting, the other resisting, vacillating, or reconciled—we do not know.

In the first parable, the shepherd does not take responsibility for losing his sheep; in the second, the woman admits her fault; in the third, the father does not initially even realize that his elder son is lost; his desperate search then is not for the younger who himself

went astray, but for the older, whom he had lost. The first two parables have happy endings; the third leaves us with father and older son in the field. The challenge continues.

Some man had two sons. (Luke 15.11)

As all biblically literate people know, the beginning words of this parable, "There was a man who had two sons," introduce a literary convention. As these readers also know, we do well to identify with the younger son. However, the story in Luke 15 is a parable, and parables usually do not do what we might expect.

Adam had two sons, Cain and Abel. Granted, Abel, the younger, is dead for most of Genesis 4, but his is the sacrifice that is accepted. The elder, Cain, who committed fratricide, is driven from the soil, hidden from the face of the divine, and made a fugitive and a wanderer (4.14). Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. The younger, Isaac, the child of the promise (see Gal. 4.23, 28), inherits Abraham's covenant and is revered as Israel's second patriarch. The prediction for the older son, Ishmael, is: "He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin" (Gen. 16.12). Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, are exiled from Abraham's camp.

Isaac has twin sons, Esau and Jacob. The younger, Jacob, barter a bowl of lentil soup for the elder's birthright and then tricks his father into giving him the blessing that was rightfully Esau's. Jacob, the younger, becomes both the recipient of the vision of the ladder that extends between heaven and earth and the father of the twelve tribes that comprise the nation that bears his new name, Israel.

Jacob's favorite son, Joseph, has two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. When it comes time for Jacob to bless his grandchildren, Joseph positions the boys so that the elder, Manasseh, is by Jacob's right hand; the

younger, Ephraim, stands by Jacob's left. The aged patriarch, in blessing Joseph's children, crosses his hands, so that the younger receives the primary blessing.

The pattern continues throughout Israel's history. David is the youngest of seven; Solomon is the second child born to David and Bathsheba; and so on.

All biblically literate listeners know to identify with the younger son. But those first-century biblically literate listeners were in for a surprise, when the younger son turns out not to be the righteous Abel, faithful Isaac, clever Jacob, strategic David, or wise Solomon. He turns out to be an irresponsible, self-indulgent, and probably indulged child, whom I would not, despite his being Jewish, be pleased to have my daughter date.

And said the younger of them to the father, "Father, give to me the portion of the property that is falling to me. And he divided between them the life." (Luke 15.12)

To ask for one's share of an inheritance indicates a potential lack of wisdom, but it is not a sin. It was not particularly unusual then, nor is it even now. Yet numerous commentators, academic and homiletic, insist that by asking his father for his inheritance, the younger son has sinned; he is in violation of the commandment, "Honor your father and your mother" (Exod. 20.12; see also Lev. 19.3; Deut. 5.16; Luke 18.20).³¹ He has treated his father as if he were as good as dead is the common interpretation.³² Jewish legal scholar Bernard Jackson trenchantly observes, "Jewish sources give no support to [the idea] that the prodigal, in seeking the advance, wishes his father dead."³³

Even those commentators who do see the younger son as violating his father's honor rarely remark on the father's reciprocal complicity. Leviticus 19, the chapter that contains the famous commandments,

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 18) and, "The alien who resides with you . . . you shall love . . . for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (v. 34), also insists on the *mitzvah* ("commandment") of reproach, what is called in Hebrew *tochecha*. Leviticus demands: "You shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself" (v. 17). If a person is sinning, it is the responsibility of others to stop the sin. Had the prodigal "sinned" in asking his father for his inheritance (and that is unlikely), then the father should have reproved the boy. He did not. Instead, he acquiesced.

Ignoring Ben Sirach, who sagely counseled, "In all that you do retain control. . . . When the days of your life reach their end, at the time of your death distribute your property" (33.23–24), the father in our parable agrees to his son's request. Anticipating King Lear, he provides an example of the Babylonian Talmud's negative view of someone "who transfers his property to his children in his lifetime" (*Baba Metziab* 75b). The events so far may be foolish, but there is nothing to suggest sin, and so no reason to see the parable, yet, as about repenting and forgiving.

That the father is himself prodigal is suggested by the idea that he gave half of his estate to the younger son. The NRSV mitigates the father's staggering foolishness. "Divided his property" sounds at least fiscally appropriate. The Greek is starker: "He divided between them the life (*bios*).³⁴ When the widow gives two small coins to the Temple treasury, it is her whole "life" that she gives (Mark 12.44). We should not pass over this phrasing too quickly. The father has, in an ironic anticipation of his son's spendthrift ways, been prodigal: he has given what he has.

One can, and generations have, read the father as God the Father. However, this reading runs contrary to the sense of the parable, for the son is, at least on first reading, just a son, in the same way that the man who had a hundred sheep is just an owner of a flock and the woman who had ten coins is just a householder. Like the shepherd who lost his sheep and the woman who lost her coin, the father is about to lose his younger son.

Dad has divided his property. Deuteronomy 21.17 states, "He must acknowledge as firstborn the son of the one who is disliked, giving

him a double portion of all that he has; since he is the first issue of his virility, the right of the firstborn is his." Consequently, the older son should have received a two-thirds share. However, in the first century, fathers determined allocation.³⁴ By getting half of the estate, the soon-to-be prodigal is doing remarkably well.

We might wonder if this generosity toward the prodigal is designed to remind us of Joseph, just as "the man who had two sons" reminds us of Adam, Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph himself. According to Genesis, Jacob gave to Joseph a double portion by treating Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as equal to each of his other sons (see Gen. 48.13–20). Attentive readers may hear at this point and subsequently in the parable not only echoes of those numerous fathers with two sons, but also, particularly, the Joseph story. The younger son mirrors Joseph in his move to a foreign land, his increasing degradation, and then his elevation to an elite position. We might wonder if this indulged son is the child of the father's beloved wife, as Joseph was Rachel's son.

Up to this point, no one in this family is behaving well. That first-century Jewish audience, already discomforted by their inability to identify with the overgratified son, finds itself increasingly distanced from him, even as the son increasingly distances himself from his father and his land.

And after not many days, gathering together all, the younger son took a journey into a far region, and there he scattered the property through excessive living. (Luke 15.13)

What happened during the few days the son remained at home goes unspoken. The father may have been waiting for the son to rethink his venture. He would have been in the process of "dividing his life"—not only selling property in order to provide the inheritance in liquid assets, but also feeling the heart-wrenching pain that comes when the

child who is the light of his life is about to leave. The older brother may have been busy exulting in having his own share of the estate, fuming over having been given half rather than two-thirds, or feeling resentful that once again Dad had indulged Junior's ill-conceived request. That he is not mentioned following the opening verse should give readers pause in attempting to ascribe motivation to him. Absence of evidence—his reaction, his views—is not the same thing as evidence of absence. Attempts to condemn the older brother for failing to mediate the relationship between father and prodigal would be fair, if those who find him to have failed also condemned the father for his own prodigality.³⁵ It is evident at this stage of the parable that the younger son is not doing much thinking at all.

Without a word of leave-taking, the prodigal cuts himself off from his family, friends, neighbors, and homeland, and he heads to a region where love of strangers was not in the law code. There he proves himself prodigal: instead of showing reckless generosity, he scatters (Gk. *diaskorpidzo*) his property in dissolute living (*zoon asotos*). The NRSV's translation, "squander," correctly finds the nuance of the verb. The same term appears in the next chapter, Luke 16.1, where Jesus recounts a parable in which a dishonest manager "scatters" or "squanders" the property of his employer. The son and his counterpart in the next parable are interested only in self-gratification; they are not building food banks or staffing homeless shelters. Not only are they fiscally irresponsible; they are self-indulgent, greedy, and therefore, to say the least, hardly admirable.

They both also involve others in their scattering, and so they are culpable in spreading sin. Philo notes that prodigals destroy not only themselves, but those who enter their sphere: "A life spent on drink and licentiousness (*asotos bios*) is a menace for everyone."³⁶ Although Luke does not tell us what exactly constituted the prodigal's "dissolute living," the implications are that Junior is engaging in gambling, alcohol abuse, sexual indulgence, and a variety of other activities of which we good folk would not approve.

The younger son's actions may reflect negatively on his father; by failing to discipline his son and by acquiescing to his dishonorable re-

quest, the father may be seen as complicit in the son's debauchery. Dad could never get a job as an ecclesial authority, for as the Letter of Titus states, "You . . . should appoint elders (*presbyters*) in every town, . . . someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery (*asotia*) and not rebellious" (1.6). To see the father as God the Father becomes, at least for a nonallegorical reading, increasingly difficult.

And having spent all, there was a strong famine in that region, and he himself began to be in need. And going, he became joined to one of the citizens of that region, and he sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was desiring to be filled from the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one was giving to him. (Luke 15.14-16)

What exactly caused Junior's fall is a matter of cultural understanding. Readers in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and South Africa tend to attribute his desperate state to a combination of bad parenting, lack of community values, separating himself from his network, and personal irresponsibility. One individual in a church-based adult-education program suggested, when I asked what went wrong with the prodigal so that he found himself in such a dire condition, that, had Junior experienced prayer in the public-school system, none of this mess would have happened.

Readers in Russia tend to note neither parental failure nor fiduciary ineptitude, but the famine—there was no food to distribute.³⁷ In a Vanderbilt University seminar on Luke's Gospel, a graduate student from Kenya proposed that the real problem was lack of generosity, for no one gave him anything.³⁸ This reading is particularly commended by the narrative context of the parable. Junior's yearning to be filled

(Gk. *epithymein chortasthenai*) is the same term used to describe the sick and destitute Lazarus in Luke 16.21. Whether from personal, familial, natural, or cultural causes, the younger son is in trouble. He has encountered the perfect storm.

The question then becomes: In a situation of famine, lack of generosity, and poverty created by personal lack of responsibility, what does one do to survive? Before we can determine what the prodigal does in answer to this question, again we need to clean out readings that are mistaken about early Judaism.

That the prodigal finds himself in non-Jewish territory is evident from the reference to pigs. Archaeological digs in the lower Galilee reveal no pig bones; in the Decapolis, where Jesus exorcised the demon-possessed man by sending his tormentors into a herd of pigs, pig bones appear (see Matt. 8.30; Mark 5.12; Luke 8.32–33). The Mishnah, *Baba Qamma* 7.7, insists, “No Israelite may raise swine anywhere,” and this later ruling appears to have reflected Jewish culture at the time of Jesus, as archaeological studies suggest.

The prodigal’s location does not, however, harp on Jewish obsessions regarding purity or xenophobia, two stereotypes that commentators typically import into the parables. For example, one commentator asserts, “Jews would immediately recognize that [the prodigal had gone into] unclean Gentile territory made up of unclean Gentile people.”³⁹ The idea of being in gentile regions—which means everywhere outside Judea, Samaria, and lower Galilee—was not anathema to most Jews, then or now. Jews in the Diaspora welcomed gentiles into their synagogues, worked with gentiles in the marketplaces, talked to gentiles in the public baths. At the time of Jesus, there were probably more Jews living outside Judea and lower Galilee than there were in the Jewish homeland; over a million were in Alexandria in Egypt. The prodigal’s problem is that he is hungry, not that he is “unclean” amid the “unclean.”

Nor should we charge him, as some commentators do, with apostasy,⁴⁰ despite the fact that Leviticus 11.8 states of pigs: “Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch; they are un-

clean for you.” First, the son ate no ham hocks or pigs’ knuckles; if he did, he would not be starving. Second, he was sent to feed the pigs, not to butcher them. Third, the son hired himself out to a citizen; there is no indication that he knew his task would be to feed pigs.⁴¹ Finally, the son did what he did in order to live; Jewish Law is law by which one lives, not by which one dies. The prodigal is in an impossible situation, but the issue is not Jewish xenophobia or purity. The problem is starvation.

And coming to himself, he said, “How many hired laborers of my father are abounding of bread, but I by famine here am lost? Getting up, I shall go to my father and I shall say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; not still am I worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired laborers.’” And rising up, he went toward his father.

(Luke 15.17–20a)

A proverb from the rabbinic commentary *Leviticus Rabbah* (13.4) notes, “When Israelites are reduced to eating carob pods, they repent.” The son’s comments fall in line with this idea. Junior speaks of his sin and his desire for restoration to the household, albeit on lesser terms as a day laborer rather than a beloved son. His rehearsed lines sound contrite. Thus, for many readers who, influenced by Luke, see the parable as about repenting and forgiving, Junior is understood to have repented.

And yet first-century listeners may have heard not contrition, but conniving. Junior recalls that Daddy still has money, and he might be able to get more. Unlike the sheep and the coin, he has not been “found.” Rather, he recovers his true nature—he is described as “coming to himself”—and that self is one who knows that Daddy will do

anything he asks. In his planning, the prodigal and the narrator repeat the term "father": "... laborers of my *father* ... go to my *father* ... *Father*, I have sinned ... went toward his *father*." Although Junior speaks of being treated as a hired hand, his repeated paternal language suggests that he still thinks of himself as his father's "son." He is not questioning the relationship. His phrasing "not still am I worthy" suggests that he still has the title "son."

Further suggesting Junior's lack of remorse is his line, "I have sinned against heaven and before you." Biblically literate listeners hear an echo of the empty words Pharaoh mouths in order to stop the plagues: "Pharaoh hurriedly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, 'I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you'" (Exod. 10.16). The prodigal is no more repentant, has had no more change of heart, than Egypt's ruler. Homileptic David Buttrick concisely summarizes the prodigal's strategy: "I'll go to Daddy and sound religious."⁴²

In his thoughts, the prodigal also puts himself in the company of the self-absorbed figures in other parables. The "rich fool" of the same-named parable thinks to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" (Luke 12.17). His conclusion is to build more barns, not to distribute his food to the poor. The dishonest manager speculates, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg" (16.3). His conclusion is to draw others into his dishonesty. Even the judge who faces the tenacious widow eventually says to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming" (18.4-5). All four parables use the device of interior monologue to let listeners know what the characters are thinking, and in all cases what they are thinking leads to at best morally ambiguous action.⁴³

And yet when he was far off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and running, fell upon his neck and continually kissed him. (Luke 15.20b)

Before the prodigal gets to his rehearsed speech, his dad runs to welcome him. It is possible he was watching for his son. After all, he had divided his life and lost half of it when his beloved son left home. His "compassion" need not be taken as a surprising reaction; there is no reason to expect the father to be a detached patriarch who would show neither care nor compassion. Rather, his compassion should remind us of the Samaritan, who saw a wounded man and reacted with compassion, viscerally, in his gut (Luke 10.33); it is the same reaction Jesus himself has when he sees the funeral procession of the only son of a widow (7.13). The term indicates recognition that one who might be considered dead could become alive.

Despite the father's rejoicing, which should have been anticipated by the joy of the sheep owner and the woman, commentators racing out with him conclude that his actions are at best undignified and even dishonorable. New Testament scholar Luise Schottroff traces this reading to Joachim Jeremias, who saw the father as tossing aside the dignity of an "aged oriental."⁴⁴ Another commentator, asserting that "fathers were remote and figures of authority," sees the father's running as not only surprising, but also shocking, for "gentlemen of honor do not run except in cases of emergency."⁴⁵ Another suggests that to run, the father would have had to pull up his robes and so expose his legs, "which would have been considered shameful in a Semitic culture."⁴⁶ Still another insists, "The father in the parable is playing a role no proper Semitic patriarch would enact. He has left his honor behind, his position, his community standing."⁴⁷

From these already overstated observations, the comments, not unexpectedly, descend into a negative picture of Judaism over and against which Jesus shines ever more brightly. For example, we are told, "A more expected reaction would have been for the father to rend his

garments and declare his son disowned.”⁴⁸ Some commentators even propose that the father had participated in a Jewish ceremony known as *getsatsah* and so had legally cut the son out of the family⁴⁹ or that “it is obvious the father never performed the *common* Jewish ceremony of forever disowning the boy,”⁵⁰ and that “the *typical* Jewish father would have forever ‘cut off’ his son with a formal ceremony.”⁵¹ The so-called common tradition, absent from the Mishnah, appears in the relatively late texts *Ruth Rabbah* 7.11 and the Jerusalem Talmud (*Ketubot* 2.10; *Qiddushin* 1.5). Our parable offers no hint of it.

The most extreme of these readings claims that the father ran to protect the son from the ire of the locals who, knowing of the son’s shameful behavior, would be likely to stone him⁵² and that the father holds a dinner party “as a gesture of reconciliation with the villagers.”⁵³ We thus go from a loving father who desperately misses his son and, like his predecessors who find their sheep and coin, rejoices when he sees him to an intolerant Jewish father and his bloodthirsty Jewish neighbors who cannot wait to stone the son who shamed his father. Exegesis gives way to stereotype at best.

Proverbs, which does come close to being a “Semitic patriarch rule book,” presumes that its readers run, both literally and metaphorically: “When you walk, your step will not be hampered; and if you run, you will not stumble” (4.12); “The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run into it and are safe” (18.10). Isaiah, an “ancient Semitic patriarch,” proclaims, “but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (40.31). The book of Tobit recounts the angel Raphael’s words to his young charge Tobias, “You are aware of how we left your father. Let us run ahead of your wife and prepare the house” (11.3). Running is fine—a potential disciple runs to Jesus (Mark 10.17); Zacchaeus runs to see him (Luke 19.4); Peter runs to Jesus’s tomb (Luke 24.12)—the point is, as Paul states, not to “run aimlessly” (1 Cor. 9.24–26).

The father is hardly aimless. He sees the son he thought was lost, was dead, and he reacts with compassion and love. Of course he would be delighted with the boy’s return, and of course he would again dis-

play his generosity toward him. That is why he kisses him with the same fervor (Gk. *kataphileo*) that the woman who “showed great love” kissed Jesus’s feet at the home of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7.38, 45). In so doing, the father lost no status. Had the father lost his honor, then those who attended his banquet would have lost theirs as well. As for the idea that the locals were seeking to stone the son, the claim constructs, on the basis of no evidence, a retrograde and wrathful Jewish culture over and against which, again, Jesus stands as inventing grace and compassion.

Jewish fathers of the first century were not, at least according to the sources we have (which should be the sources that inform our history), distant or wrathful. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asks, “Is there anyone among you, if his child asks for bread, will give a stone?” (7.9). Thus, children ask fathers for bread, and the dads provide. The popular claim, designed to create a feminist Jesus, that “cash is male, bread is female,” and so the father who has “bread enough to spare” is cast in the role of mother,⁵⁴ attends neither to the Lord’s Prayer, in which one asks the “father in heaven” for “bread,” nor to Jesus’s example of fatherly concern. We find numerous fathers seeking healing for their children: the synagogue ruler Jairus begs Jesus to heal his daughter (Mark 5.23 cf. Matt. 9.18; Luke 8.41); the father of an epileptic boy entreats first the disciples and then Jesus to heal his son (Matt. 17.14–15; Luke 9.38–42).

Philo, yet another good source for the “Semitic patriarch rule book,” remarks that parents often “do not lose thought for their wastrel (*asoton*) children but . . . lavish their kindness on the wastrels more than on the well behaved. . . . In the same way, God too . . . takes thought also for those who live a misspent life, thereby giving them time for reformation, and also keeping within the bounds His own merciful nature.”⁵⁵ Thus at least this one Jew sees a father as doting rather than distant, and God as doting rather than distant as well.

As for what “typical oriental patriarchs” might do, today’s scholars sometimes derive their models not from ancient sources, but from contemporary Muslim and Christian informants in the Middle East. One major problem with such fieldwork approaches is that the questioners

sometimes forget to ask the women. Biblical scholar Carol Shersten LaHurd, reading the parable with Yemenite women, posed the question: "What would your husband do if his son returned home after wasting all his money?" The women unanimously agreed that the father would lovingly welcome the son, especially if he were a child of his old age.⁵⁶

Some commentators today, still regarding the father in the parable as the Father in heaven, want to credit Jesus with inventing a new theology that rejects the supposed Jewish or Old Testament God of wrath in favor of the Christian or New Testament God of love, a view popularly espoused by the second-century heretic Marcion. Therefore, the more surprising they can make the father's actions, the more they can solidify what is ultimately a Marcionistic theology. Residual marcionism, the view that God had a personality transplant somewhere between the pages of Malachi and Matthew, is still alive and well in churches today; it is also still a heresy. There is no compelling reason in the parable itself to see the father as God, but even if Jesus's Jewish audience had made this connection, they would have found nothing surprising. The covenant is still in place; God still loves the wayward, from David to Ephraim to Israel.

Rabbinic literature, to which a number of commentators turn in order to find their negative depictions of the Prodigal Son's Jewish context, actually offers a contrary view. *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 2.24 recounts a parable that opens with a citation from Deuteronomy 4.30, "You will return to the LORD your God." It continues:

R. Meir said, "To what is the matter like? It is like the son of a king who took to evil ways. The king sent a tutor to him who appealed to him, saying, 'Repent, my son.' But the son sent him back to his father [saying], 'How can I have the effrontery to return? I am ashamed to come before you.' Thereupon his father sent back word: 'My son, is a son ever ashamed to return to his father? And is it not to your father that you will be returning?'"⁵⁷

Pesikta Rabbati 184–85 recounts:

A king had a son who had gone astray from his father on a journey of a hundred days. His friends said to him, "Return to your father." He said, "I cannot." Then his father sent word, "Return as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way to you." So God says, "Return to me, and I will return to you."⁵⁸

For the rabbis, the challenge is not in seeing God's love in a new way; the challenge—an inevitable challenge in every religious system—is to get the wayward to return.

Now that we've cleaned out the negative, ahistorical, and at best unfortunate stereotypes, we can get back to the prodigal.

And said the son to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; not still am I worthy to be called your son." And said the father to his slaves, "Quickly carry out a robe, the first, and put it on him, and give the ring to his hand and sandals to the feet. And bring the calf, the grain-fed one, sacrifice and, eating, we may rejoice. Because this, my son, was dead, and he came back to life; he had been lost, and was found." And they began to rejoice. (Luke 15.21–24)

The prodigal's beginning words to his father are a perfect repetition of what he had planned to say. We might imagine him rehearsing all the way from the pig farmer's house to his own home. Although we could conclude that the son has returned repentant and humbled, with genuine feelings of unworthiness, his initial address belies that reading. He begins with the word "Father," not "Sir" or "Lord" (*kyrios*) or "Master" (*despotes*). As soon as he speaks the word, he reinstates himself as a

son, not a hired worker or slave. Dad had agreed to his earlier request; perhaps, like Jacob with Joseph, Dad has always indulged the younger son, and the son could count on that love continuing.

Whether the son is sincere or not, his father doesn't care, any more than the sheep owner cared about ovine repentance or the woman cared about the emotional state of her found coin. The father preempts the son from reciting the rest of the script he had planned. He is joyful, he wants to celebrate, and he wants everyone to share his joy.

The father then calls for the "first," or best, robe. In a society where most people only had two garments, this family has a closetfull. Its wealth has remained secure, even with the prodigal's profligacy.

The accessorizing also has an ironic textual resonance. Just as the son's words echo those of Pharaoh to Moses, so the ring and the garments given to the young man, who left his wealthy estate, hit bottom, and returned, might remind us of the story of Joseph. His new patron or father figure, Pharaoh, took "his signet ring from his hand" and "put it on Joseph's hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen" (Gen. 41.42).⁵⁹ The irony is delicious. In both Genesis and our parable, the favored younger son, himself not initially of the most admirable character (Joseph is an annoying twit who tells his family that one day they will all bow down to him, has no problem with his father's favoritism, and rattles on his brothers), finds himself in a foreign land, initially in dire circumstances, in the employ of gentiles, and surviving famine.

However, their situations also create an ironic contrast. Joseph might be both pitied and admired, because he is sold by his brothers into slavery, escapes dissolute living by resisting the advances of his master's wife, earns his elevation to Pharaoh's court by his wisdom and his recognition of divine support, unites his family, and preserves them from starvation.⁶⁰ The prodigal leaves home on his own, does nothing to benefit anyone except himself, and still ends up well accessorized. Whether his family can be united remains to be seen. The prodigal may ultimately be the cause by which father and older brother come to be united, but although he created the circumstances for a possible reconciliation, he did not do so with any intent.

From the father's concerns for food and clothes, several exegetes fatten up the view that the father with "bread enough to spare" is gender-bending or, to put the point directly, "In a way, he is behaving like a mother—kissing, dressing, feeding."⁶¹ The next step is of course to claim, "This father abandons male honor for female shame."⁶²

Although they are a good faith effort, the claims ultimately undermine a concern for both women and gender. First, in making the father also the mother, ignored are questions concerning actual women in the family. Did the mother die? Was she, like Anna in the book of Tobit, thrilled at the return of her son? Were the two brothers children of different mothers,⁶³ the younger perhaps the son of Rachel's beautiful descendant and the older, faithful one the scion of her less loved or possibly hated sister, Leah (Gen. 29.33)? Second, making the dad into a mom presumes that fathers were not, and could not be, nurturing, loving, or invested in their children, and we have seen that this is not the case. Nor, finally, has the father done anything shameful.

The language of resurrection—"was dead and came back to life"—speaks to the father's true joy: he has his son back. There is no reason to move immediately into allegorical reading, despite the resonances with the story of Jesus himself. Were Jesus to have told this parable, his initial audience would have had no clue that he would be proclaimed both dead and resurrected. Moreover, if we take the prodigal as autobiographical, then the older brother becomes completely removed from the narrative.

Such Christological readings that see Jesus as the protagonist of all of his stories are not "wrong"; they are legitimate interpretations in light of church doctrine, and they are often profound. For example, Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen suggests: "I am touching here the mystery that Jesus himself became the prodigal son for our sake. He left the house of his heavenly Father, came to a foreign country, gave away all that he had, and returned through his cross to his Father's home."⁶⁴ While Nouwen's reading at least fits the words of the parable, I'm a bit less convinced by the extended version of this allegory, in which we hear that it is Jesus who comes to us "in the guise of the sinner, the debauched, the prostitute, the unclean, the enemy, the unsavory" and so "challenges us to participate in a

radical, irresponsible hospitality that turns the rules of polite society upside-down.”⁶⁵

Rather, the allegory might function better as a negative exemplar. The prodigal squandered his inheritance; Jesus did not. The prodigal sinned; Jesus did not. The prodigal is thinking about his stomach; Jesus, as Christian tradition tells us, was thinking about the salvation of the world. Contextually, Jesus does not come to us as a lost coin, lost sheep, or lost son. With regard to plot, it is one thing to welcome a “debauched” stranger to our home; it is something else entirely to welcome back a child. Nor does the father turn “the rules of polite society upside-down”; there is no reversal in the welcoming home of a prodigal son. Finally, the heavenly Father in Christological configuration does not have “two sons,” but the “only begotten” one. Despite its ingenuity, the reading fits neither the context nor the plot.

Other than the generic “they” who begin to rejoice, the parable says nothing about Junior’s reaction to the welcome. Therefore, it is at best generous to conclude that he is “shattered by the offer of grace, confesses unworthiness, and accepts restoration to sonship in genuine humility.”⁶⁶ That would be nice, but I still have a picture of a manipulative, pampered, and perhaps relieved kid at the fatted-calf buffet.

Before rushing off to allegory, we do well to look at this father as a happy dad whose favorite son has returned. And we do well to notice who is not mentioned as invited to the party.⁶⁷ “Some man had *two* sons.” Most of us, including the dad in the parable, had lost count.

And his son, the elder, was in the field, and as he, coming, drew near to the house, he heard symphony and chorus. And calling over one of the servants he inquired what these things might be. And he said to him, “Your brother has come, and your father has sacrificed the grain-fed calf, because he received him healthy.” And he became angry, and he did not want to go in. (Luke 15.25–28a)

At last we meet the older brother, and again expectations are disrupted. He is no Cain, who kills his brother; he is no Ishmael, a “wild ass of a man,” or Esau, who having despised his birthright and being tricked out of his blessing, wants to murder his twin. He is not, in other words, a conventional older brother. He is rather a figure for whom we might feel some initial empathy. The man who searched for and found his sheep and the woman who searched for and found her coin called their friends and neighbors to celebrate; no one runs out to invite the older son to the feast. No one noticed he was missing.

We do not know what the brothers’ relationship had been, but the tradition suggests that it may well have been dysfunctional, for sibling rivalry is another biblical convention: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Leah and Rachel, Joseph and his brothers, Perez and Zerah, Solomon and Adonjiah, and so on, even to Luke’s Gospel, where Mary and Martha (10.38–42)—sisters who never speak to each other, one who is closer to Jesus and one who is resentful of that closeness—anticipate the prodigal and the elder. Even were the brothers’ relationship a good one, the older cannot find it in his heart to rejoice at the news of Junior’s return. His own sense of being ignored—by both the reinstated brother and the happy father—counters any possible joy he might have had. As one commentator observes, the father indulges the one who slights him and slights the one who indulges him.⁶⁸

The elder brother’s anger is not unprovoked—he has been ignored by those who are feasting and celebrating, even as he has also been ignored by numerous readers. His alienation is palpable. Whereas the prodigal comes home to his “father,” the older brother approaches the “house.” The slave’s words reinforce the elder’s embeddedness within his family: “your brother . . . your father,” but the elder does not, perhaps cannot, acknowledge these relationships.

Perhaps the elder is even legitimately worried that this father is giving to Junior what according to the disposition of his estate should have gone to him. On this matter, Dad will reassure him that his own inheritance is intact.

And his father, going out, comforted/urged him.

(Luke 15.28b)

The father is now in the role of the man searching for his sheep and the woman searching for her coin. He needs to return the lost to the home; he needs to make his family complete. But children are not sheep or coins; they are not property; they are people. Unlike a sheep that can be lifted on one's shoulders or a coin that can be picked up from the floor, returning the lost son to his home proves much more difficult. Children, unlike sheep and coins, have long memories, emotional needs, and a voice of their own.

The father did not know until this moment that the elder was the son who was truly "lost" to him. Once the recognition comes, he does what the shepherd and the woman do: realizing his loss, his lost *son*, the son whom he *loves*, he seeks to make his family whole. He pleads with him. The NRSV translates Luke 15.28, "His father came out and began to plead with him." Though technically correct, the translation misses the nuance of the Greek. The verb here is *parakaleo*, and it has the sense both of pleading or urging and of comforting. Those familiar with John's Gospel may recall references to the "Paraclete," usually translated "Advocate" or "Comforter"; the Paraclete, John's Holy Spirit, remains with the community in Jesus's absence to provide comfort, instruction, and advocacy.

For this parable, the term is apt. The father wants to urge and to plead with the elder to join the celebration, and he wants to provide comfort by telling him that he has always had paternal love. The parable wisely refrains from providing the father's words—no rehearsed speech, no pat lines can rectify a broken relationship. Nor, at this point, would any speech resolve the older son's emotional turmoil. He first needs to express his own resentment.

And answering, he said to his father, "Look, all these years I am slaving for you, and not one commandment of yours have I passed by, and for me not one young goat did you give so that with my friends I might rejoice. But when your son, this one, the one who ate up your life with whores came, you sacrificed for him the grain-fed calf." (Luke 15.29-30)

Years of resentment have finally boiled over and found expression. The son's fidelity has been overlooked. Once again, the problem child receives more attention, or more love, than the prudent and faithful one. By announcing that there is "more joy in heaven" for the one who repents than for the ninety-nine who need no repentance, Luke reinforces this preference. We might think of the older son as speaking for those ninety-nine who have no need of repentance but who appear to bring less joy.⁶⁹

The son's alienation is reflected in his words. In contrast to the narrator's language of "his father" in connection with him ("And his father, going out, comforted/urged him. And answering, he said to his father"), the servant's "your brother" and "your father," and the prodigal's frequent mention of and address to his "father," there is no relational language in the older son's remarks. Instead, he distances himself from both father and brother by speaking of "your son, this one."

The mention of "whores" (Gk. *pornai*) could be an attempt to sway the father's opinion against the prodigal, since the parable never made clear that sexual gratification was the way the younger son lost his money. There is no notice that Junior sent home a postcard with a picture of the Whore of Babylon and an inscription, "Having a wonderful time . . ." Then again, such action would be in keeping with "dissolute living" as well as something that good sons, according to convention, would avoid. As Proverbs 29.3 states, "A child who loves wisdom makes a parent glad, but to keep company with prostitutes is to squander one's substance."

The elder might have gone out of his way to distance Junior from Dad, but he looks an amateur compared to Luke, who seeks to distance readers from those grumbling Pharisees and scribes with which the chapter begins. Luke leads readers to see the elder son as representing Pharisees and scribes who object to Jesus's table fellowship with sinners. Then the commentators run with Luke's prompt and begin to pile up the elder brother's negative traits: he epitomizes works-righteousness; he follows the father's wishes in order to earn the father's love; he is obedient as a slave rather than as a son and so shows the terrible yoke of Torah; he remains faithful because he wants the reward and not because he finds value in the family; he perceives his relationship with his father to be based on "law, merit, and reward" rather than on "love and graciousness."⁷⁰ Among Presbyterian pastors, as one survey reveals, "It is the dutiful, religiously obedient, yet joyless, older brother who tends to serve as the emblem of sin."⁷¹

One commentator even suggests that the son's refusal to join the banquet shames the father and might be expected to result in a beating.⁷² Following this view, another suggests that the elder has insulted his father, "not only by refusing to enter the feast, but by addressing him without a title. This insult is even worse than that given by the younger son, for this is public."⁷³ Who else is in the field aside from perhaps the servant is not clear (everyone is at the buffet), so how the setting can be seen as "public" is but one problem with this reasoning. The scene is intimate, with a focus on family dynamics, not village vengeance. The father "urges" and "comforts" his son to return; he is not the sort of dad who would beat his child into submission.

In a more sympathetic variant on reading the older son as representing restrictive Judaism, New Testament professor Barbara Reid speaks of how, in the context of Luke's community, the narrative may have "addressed the painful issue of incorporating the Gentiles into the people of God."⁷⁴ Jesus's original audience would not have heard this message, since there's nothing about the prodigal that suggests he represents the "gentile" nations. Working for a pig farmer is not the same thing as advocating for him. As for the "painful" issue

of such incorporation, it would be good to know what exactly was painful. Much Jewish eschatological speculation suggests that, in the messianic age, the gentile nations will come to worship the God of Israel, but they will come as gentiles, not as converts to Judaism; see, for example, Zechariah 8.23, which offers the prediction: "Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten people from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'" The gentiles come with Israel to Zion, but they do not say, "Circumcise us when we get there." Why Jews would find gentiles worshipping the God of Israel "painful" is unclear. Given that gentiles were welcome to worship with Jews in the synagogue and in the Jerusalem Temple, where the outer court was called the Court of the Gentiles, the pain is not self-evident.

In another sympathetic vein, theological ethics professor Nancy Duff compares the elder's attitude to the "self-righteous" in churches today who do not welcome and do not want to be reconciled to fellow church members who promote "the re-imagining conference, the ordination of homosexuals, and abortion."⁷⁵ The ends are fine; the means don't work. Those who seek inclusion within the church are not analogous to our prodigal, who is not a representative of inclusiveness. The congregation who hears this sermon will then, likely, associate the unwelcoming attitude with the "Jewish" view and see reconciliation as a uniquely Christian virtue. That is not the intent of the homiletic suggestion, but, given its appropriate connection of the elder brother to fellow congregants, it is a likely result.

More helpful might be the comments LaHurd adduced from Arab women when she asked their views of the elder son. Not only did these women see the elder as expressing the "work level of an older child" in comparison to the younger siblings who were not held to the same standards of responsibility; two women also observed that if the son really felt himself to be a slave, he would not have been able to express his views to his father. For the women, the parable offered a mirror of family dynamics, not an allegory about God, Christians, and Jews.⁷⁶

Before we leave these verses, one final point on their irony. The son spoke of working like a slave. It is possible that there were slaves in the father's household, because it is the slaves who accessorized the prodigal and prepared the feast (Luke 15.22). To a real slave, the comment, "I have been working like a slave for you," on the lips of the elder son and heir, does not quite ring true.

And he said to him, "Child, you always with me are, and everything that is mine is yours. But it remains necessary to cheer and to rejoice, because your brother, this one, was dead, and lived to life, and being lost, even he was found."
(Luke 15.31-32)

Although most English versions begin the father's response with "Son," in the Greek the father's address to his elder son is *teknon*, better translated "child." It is the same address Mary uses when she and Joseph, after desperately searching for their lost son, find him in the Temple: "Child (*teknon*), . . . your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety" (Luke 2.48).

The endearment "Child" begins the father's attempt to reconcile with his older son. In stating, "You are always with me, and everything that is mine is yours," the father makes both an emotional and a technical appeal. Emotionally, the point is correct: in the father's view, the son had never been lost; he has "always been with" the father. But what the father felt and what the son felt were two different reactions. Technically, the father had divided his property between his sons. It is going too far, however, to suggest that the fatted calf, ring, robe, and sandals presently belonged to the older brother, and that the father was dipping into the brother's inheritance to equip the prodigal. The older brother says nothing about to whom the items given to the prodigal belong. Indeed, he would not have been a good son, had he

taken control of his "share." He complains not that Dad took his property, but that Dad showed affection to the prodigal that he had never shown to him.

Perhaps the father's love for the elder son can also be seen in his language. Although Dad has welcomed the prodigal home, kissed him, and restored him to his prior status as "son," he never actually speaks to him. Perhaps there is nothing needed to be said; here, words are all the father has, and he uses them wisely.

The specifics of his response should, in turn, give pause to those who follow Luke's contextualization regarding the father as the Father and the elder son as "the Pharisees" or, by extension, "the Jews." The father speaks to his elder son both of their ongoing relationship and of sharing: "Everything I have is yours." As far back as the second century, Tertullian realized that the allegory could not hold, albeit for less than benevolent reasons. Surely, he thought, God would never have made such a claim about a connection with the Jews and, surely as well, those Jews could not have claimed perfect obedience, never violating any commandment.⁷⁷ Tertullian was no fan of Jewish practice, but his rejection of the allegory has merit.

After assuring his elder son of their perpetual bond, the father then attempts to restore, or create, a relationship between the two children. Correcting the elder's phrase "your son, this one" to "your brother, this one," the father reminds his child that the relationship exists between the two of them. Were either brother to be missing, the family would not be whole.

Finally, the father repeats his resurrection language. The missing brother has been restored; he is home; celebration is warranted.

Reconciliations

"It remains necessary to cheer and to rejoice," insists the father, but he and his elder son are still in the field. Now what? Without Luke's allegory of repentance and forgiveness and without the easy equating

of the elder son with those grumbling Jews, the parable has no easy or comfortable interpretation.

What would we do, were we the older son? Do we attend the party? What will happen to this family when the father dies and the elder son obtains his inheritance? Will he keep Junior in the restored position to which the father elevated him or will he send him to the stables, to be treated as one of the "hired laborers"? This might be a legally acceptable move, but it is one without honor, mercy, or concern for the father's wishes. When personal resentment overrides familial and cultural values, we all lose.

What do we do if we identify with the father and find our own children are lost? Is repeated pleading sufficient? What would be? What does a parent do to show a love that the child never felt? The parable shows us that indulgence does not buy love, but withholding can stifle it. And so we search, desperately, because our family is not whole. Sheep and coins are easy; children less so.

What are we to make of that younger son? It is neat and tidy to see him as shattered by grace and fully repentant, but I doubt first-century readers would have. I neither like nor trust the younger son. I do not see him doing anything other than what he has always done—take advantage of his father's love. It's hard to get much work done when one is filled with fatted calf. And yet his father loves him, and he is a member of the family. Therefore, he cannot be ignored, and to dismiss him would be to dismiss the father as well.

If the younger son is seen as truly humble, repentant, and recognizing his dependence on the generosity of his family, how will he act now? What can he do to gain back the respect that his adventures have cost him? The father has provided him an initial act of reconciliation, but at some point he will need to prove his own responsibility.

The parable might even be read as resisting Luke's easy interpretations of repentance and forgiveness. In this household, no one has expressed sorrow at hurting another, and no one has expressed forgiveness. When it comes to families, there are factors other than repentance and forgiveness that hold us together. Here the first two parables provide a helpful guide. The sheep and the coin did not repent, but

the celebration occurred nonetheless, because the man and the woman were able to rejoice at the finding of the lost and the restoring of the collection to wholeness.

If we hold in abeyance, at least for the moment, the rush to read repenting and forgiving into the parable, then it does something more profound than repeat well-known messages. It provokes us with simple exhortations. Recognize that the one you have lost may be right in your own household. Do whatever it takes to find the lost and then celebrate with others, both so that you can share the joy and so that the others will help prevent the recovered from ever being lost again. Don't wait until you receive an apology; you may never get one. Don't wait until you can muster the ability to forgive; you may never find it. Don't stew in your sense of being ignored, for there is nothing that can be done to retrieve the past.

Instead, go have lunch. Go celebrate, and invite others to join you. If the repenting and the forgiving come later, so much the better. And if not, you still will have done what is necessary. You will have begun a process that might lead to reconciliation. You will have opened a second chance for wholeness. Take advantage of resurrection—it is unlikely to happen twice.

What counts for the family also counts for the world. A father had two sons—Cain and Abel—and so we realize that to kill an individual is not only to kill a brother; it is to kill a quarter of the world's population. We may have written off Cain, but he not only survives; he thrives. We may judge him only as guilty, but even he has a story to tell. Cain committed fratricide, but that is not the sum total of who he is. The mark of Cain is a mark of divine protection; if God can protect him, surely we can as well. Can we find it in our hearts to reconcile him to the human family?

A father had two sons—Isaac and Ishmael—if either is sacrificed, then both are. Today some of the children of Isaac and Ishmael can find themselves at odds or at war, as the Middle East shows us. Yet these two sons reunite at Abraham's death, and together they bury him. Ishmael's hand was to be against his brother's, but Ishmael here

proves the prediction wrong. If Ishmael and Isaac can reconcile, perhaps their children can do the same.

A father had two sons—Jacob and Esau—one who stole birthright and blessing and one who vowed murder in revenge. And yet, when Jacob, wounded from his wrestling at the Jabbok River, encounters Esau, the two reconcile.

A father had two sons . . . The details can be filled in, and filled, by any among us. The scriptures of Israel give us hope for the sons in Luke's parable. They should give us hope for our own reconciliations, from the personal to the international. We need to take count not only of our blessings, but also of those in our families, and in our communities. And once we count, we need to act. Finding the lost, whether they are sheep, coins, or people, takes work. It also requires our efforts, and from those efforts there is the potential for wholeness and joy.

CHAPTER 2

The Good Samaritan

And look, some lawyer stood up; testing Jesus, he says, "Teacher, (by) doing what eternal life will I inherit?"

And he said to him, "In the Law, what is written? How do you read?"

And answering, he said, "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind/intention, and your neighbor as yourself."

And he said to him, "Rightly you answered. This do, and you will live."

But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Replying, Jesus said, "Some person was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who, stripping him, even placed blows, going away, leaving him half dead.

"And by coincidence, some priest was going down that road, and seeing him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, coming to the place, even seeing, passed by on the other side.

"But some Samaritan, traveling, came near him and seeing, had compassion. And coming toward (him), he bound up his wounds, pouring oil and wine (on them), and having set him upon his own animal, he brought him to an inn and cared for him.

"And upon the next day, taking out, he gave two denarii to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him, and whatever you might spend, I, upon my return, will give back to you.'

"Which of these three a neighbor—does it seem to you—was to the one who fell among the robbers?"

And he said, "The one doing mercy for him."

And said to him Jesus, "Go and you do likewise."

Luke 10.25-37

Throughout the English-speaking world the term "good Samaritan" is synonymous with charitable do-gooders. Hospitals with the name "Samaritan" appear throughout the United States, from Medstar Good Samaritan Hospital in Baltimore to Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles. The "Samaritans" is "a national charity and the co-ordinating body for the 201 Samaritans branches in the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, the Channel Islands, and the Isle of Man";¹ this organization, which also has branches in the United States, is dedicated to suicide prevention. Samaritan's Purse is "a non-denominational evangelical Christian organization providing spiritual and physical aid to hurting people around the world. Since 1970, Samaritan's Purse has helped meet needs of people who are victims of war, poverty, natural disasters, disease, and famine with the purpose of sharing God's love through His Son, Jesus Christ."² Australia has the GSDS, the Good Samaritan Donkey Sanctuary,³ which does exactly what its name suggests.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is so well known for its message of aiding the stranger that it has become a staple of political discourse. Former U.S. president George W. Bush invoked the parable in his first inaugural address: "I can pledge our nation to a goal: when we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side."⁴ Bush's presumption was that the U.S. population—who, in the minds of some of our politicians, are all Christians—would immedi-

ately pick up the reference: "wounded traveler" and "road to Jericho" are images from the parable.

I checked with a Jewish friend of mine—a naturalized U.S. citizen who pays more attention to national and local politics than most people I know. She thought the reference might have been to an accident in New York, since she knew there was a Jericho on Long Island. When I noted that the reference was biblical, she wondered if the president was thinking of Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho who aided the spies sent into the land by Joshua.

For President Bush, the parable is about taking care of nations in distress. Nor is he the only politician to invoke the parable in speaking about public policy. Queen Elizabeth II remarked in her 2004 Christmas message that the parable, which tells how a mugging victim is helped by a "despised foreigner," is about "tolerance and respecting others." She summarizes: "Everyone is our neighbour, no matter what race, creed or colour. The need to look after a fellow human being is far more important than any cultural or religious differences."⁵ More recently, in the spring of 2013, one of Mrs. Thatcher's successors, Tony Blair, offered his own appropriation. At the opening of a new Baptist Center in Jordan—the Jordan in the Middle East, not on Long Island—Mr. Blair, speaking on behalf of the Faith Foundation, also took the parable again in the direction of aid. In his description, Jesus "extols the virtue of the Good Samaritan, the stranger, over those who were supposedly devout believers."⁶

In the 1970s, I heard a citizen of Sierra Leone interpret the parable as proclaiming that one should take aid from whoever would offer it, even the enemy, and thus Jesus gave warrant for his country's acceptance of aid from the Soviet Union. Although I do not think that this reading is quite the original import of the parable, it at least highlights two important points. It recognizes the role of the Samaritan as enemy and suggests the possibility of interpreter identification with the wounded man rather than the Samaritan who gives aid. The standard reading is the one in which "we" are the Samaritans; "we Samaritans" help "them," the sick, the poor, foreign nationals, and so on.

The parable of the Good Samaritan has come to mean whatever we want it to mean. In one respect, this inevitable appropriation is to be appreciated. Texts should always take on new meaning as they are encountered by new readers from new cultural contexts. However, texts also have their own original context.

The various appropriations and interpretations of the parable heard today are generally good news. What's not to like about helping the stranger and being charitable toward others? But those are not the messages a first-century Jewish audience would have heard. They didn't need a parable to tell them to care for others; they were already commanded to love both the neighbor and the stranger. Those Jews in antiquity would not be thinking of governmental resources or foreign aid; the Samaritan would not have reminded them of a secretary of state or a prime minister. Nor would they have thought of Samaritans as "strangers." To the contrary, they were the all too familiar neighbors and all too hated enemies.

The parable for them would not have been about looking after a fellow human being, and the parable is not, finally, an answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" It is more provocative than that. And if we readers identify with the Samaritan—as the politicians and charitable organizations do—we have missed the deeper implications of the parable as well. Worse, the standard identification we readers have today with the Samaritan leads to the standard anti-Jewish interpretations that have infected much of New Testament study. In many Christian contexts, the Samaritan comes to represent the Christian who has learned to care for others or to break free of prejudice, whereas the priest and the Levite represent Judaism, understood to be xenophobic, promoting ritual purity over compassion, proclaiming self-interest over love of neighbor, and otherwise being something that needs to be rejected.

To get an initial hint of the distance between the mind-set of parable's original audience and our own twenty-first-century perspectives, we might begin by reflecting briefly on the term "good Samaritan." Today, we use the term as if it were not peculiar. Yet as far as I am aware, there are no "Good Catholic" or "Good Baptist" hospitals;

there are no social service organizations called "Good Episcopalian" or "Good Mexican" or "Good Arab." To label the Samaritan, any Samaritan, a "good Samaritan" should be, in today's climate, seen as offensive. It is tantamount to saying, "He's a good Muslim" (as opposed to all those others who, in this configuration, would be terrorists) or "She's a good immigrant" (as opposed to all those others who, in this same configuration, are here to take our jobs or scam our welfare system), or, as Heinrich Himmler put it to a gathering of SS officers, every German "has his decent Jew"—that is, knows one good Jew—and as far as Himmler was concerned, even one was too many, because that might create sympathy.⁷ The problem with the labeling is not simply a lack of sensitivity toward the Samaritan people—yes, there are still Samaritans. It is also a lack of awareness of how odd the expression "good Samaritan" would have seemed to Jesus's Jewish contemporaries.

What happens when we strip away two thousand years of usually benevolent and well-intended domestication and hear the parable as a first-century short story spoken by a Jew to other Jews?

The Malevolent Lawyer

Jesus's recounting of the parable of the Good Samaritan to a lawyer may have been an actual incident. Similarly, it is possible that Jesus told the parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Sons to a combined gathering of sinners and tax collectors, scribes and Pharisees. But given how these contexts so neatly fit Luke's agenda and how the other Gospels locate similar sayings in different contexts, it is just as likely that Luke has repackaged traditional material. Luke tells us that the parables of the lost are about repenting and forgiving; that message would not be clear from any of the three parables themselves. Luke tells us that the parable about the unjust judge and the importuning widow is about constant prayer. Again, that's unlikely to be what Jesus's original audience heard.

Nevertheless, the encounter between Jesus and the lawyer that forms the context for the parable neatly fits what we can take to be Jesus's own

agenda. Here Luke may have developed the context, but it is a context that helps bring the parable's own implications into sharper focus.

And look, some lawyer stood up; testing Jesus, he says,
"Teacher, (by) doing what eternal life will I inherit?"

(Luke 10.25)

Four points, all of which betray Luke's antipathy toward this lawyer and his associates, follow from this single line. The first clue concerns Luke's depiction of lawyers, for Luke's Gospel, anticipating Dick the Butcher, who in Shakespeare's *Henry VI* memorably planned, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers," holds no affection for those in the profession. According to Luke 7.30, "the Pharisees and the lawyers" reject John the Baptist and so reject "God's purposes for themselves." In Luke 11.45, after Jesus insults his Pharisaic hosts at a dinner party by calling them "unmarked graves," a lawyer in attendance protests: "Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us too." That was Jesus's intent. Jesus, who is not the most polite of dinner guests, responds by accusing him and his fellow lawyers of loading the people with impossible burdens and not lifting a finger to help, of approving of the killing of God's prophets, and of taking away from the people "the key of knowledge." Luke's readers will know that the lawyer in chapter 10 is not among the righteous.

For Jesus's Jewish audience, lawyers would likely have been positive figures and their connection to the Torah a good thing. There is no immediate Hebrew equivalent for the Greek term *nomikos*, translated "lawyer." In the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, the term for "lawyer," *nomikos*, appears just once, but not in a translation from any Hebrew text. It occurs in 4 Maccabees, a Jewish text likely contemporaneous with Luke's Gospel and today included in the canons of some Eastern Orthodox communions. The

nomikos, which has the connotation of "learned in the Law," is a priest named Eliezer, who serves as a leader for the people.

Fourth Maccabees describes the program of forced assimilation begun by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid king who took control of the Jewish homeland in the mid-second century BCE. Jews who refused to sacrifice to the Greek gods or who insisted on retaining their traditions of circumcision and dietary regulations were tortured and then killed for their fidelity. The king, showing a slithery combination of compassion and cruelty, tells Eliezer the lawyer, "Before I begin to torture you, old man, I would advise you to save yourself by eating pork" (5.6). Despite the king's argument that eschewing pork makes no philosophical sense, the lawyer responds that Torah has invaluable merit: it "teaches us self-control, so that we master all pleasures and desires, and it also trains us in courage, so that we endure any suffering willingly; it instructs us in justice, so that in all our dealings we act impartially, and it teaches us piety, so that with proper reverence we worship the only living God" (5.23–24).

This positive view of lawyers continues elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, the Letter of Titus includes the exhortation, "Make every effort to send Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way, and see that they lack nothing" (3.13). Here the role of lawyer overlaps with that of missionary.

Luke's second clue regarding the lawyer's negative characterization is his address to Jesus, "Teacher." Today, there are few more honorable callings than "teacher," and as a "teacher" myself I want to provide the term with every positive connotation. However, for Luke's narrative, calling Jesus "teacher" usually suggests that the interlocutor does not fully understand or respect who, for Luke, Jesus really is. Just a few examples. At the dinner party where Simon the host silently objects to Jesus's allowing a woman known to be a sinner to anoint Jesus's feet and then kiss them, Jesus says, "Simon, I have something to say to you." Simon replies, "Teacher, . . . speak" (7.40). When Jesus arrives at the home of a distraught father whose daughter has just died, "someone came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the teacher any longer'" (8.49). Jesus is not being "bothered" by raising the

dead child. Although the request of a "man from the crowd" who calls out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child" (9.38) sounds respectful, Jesus responds by identifying the man and his associates as a "faithless and perverse generation" (9.41). We've already noted the lawyer at the banquet who addresses Jesus as "Teacher" and then accuses him of insulting those present (11.45). The same pattern of the title coupled with misunderstanding or a lack of respect occurs in Luke 12.13; 18.18; 19.39; 20.21; 20.28; and 21.7. For Luke, the better address to Jesus is not "Teacher," but "Lord" (Gk. *Kyrios*).

The third clue to the lawyer's negative depiction is his rationale for engaging Jesus in conversation. He asks his question not to gain knowledge, but to "test." In Matthew 22, a similar scene is repeated: a *nomikos* (the only use of the term in the Gospels outside Luke) also "stands" to "test" Jesus (22.35), and his intentions are not good either.

The term "test" (Gk. *ekpeiradzon*) is exactly what Jesus's followers pray to avoid: "Lead us not into temptation"; the line, familiar from the Lord's Prayer, is literally, "Do not bring us to the test" (Luke 11.4, just a few verses after the parable of the Good Samaritan). By testing Jesus, the lawyer takes the Devil's role, for it was Satan who had "tested" Jesus in the wilderness. Jesus shuts the Devil up by telling him, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (4.12).

The lawyer's question itself is the fourth negative. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (NRSV) is the wrong question. The verb "do" is an aorist participle (*poiesas*), a tense that suggests a single, limited action. The lawyer is thinking of something to check off his to-do list: recite a prayer, offer a sacrifice, drop off a box of macaroni for a food drive, put a twenty in the collection plate. If he's efficient, he can inherit eternal life before lunch. He should be thinking of living a life of righteousness, much like the lawyer in 4 Maccabees. But he's a lawyer, and this is Luke's Gospel, so righteousness is not going to be his concern.

Indeed, the question "What must I do to inherit eternal life," when asked by someone seeking to "test," is similar to the other trick questions Jesus's opponents pose.⁸ The trick question is a generic form that cannot be answered yes or no. In the Gospels, "Is it lawful for us to pay

taxes to the emperor?" (Luke 20.22) is a trick question. To respond "yes" invites the accusation that one is a collaborator; to respond "no," that one is a revolutionary. The Sadducees ask another trick question. In the case of a woman married to seven brothers, whose wife is she in the resurrection (20.29–32)? Because the Sadducees do not believe in resurrection, the question is merely hypothetical. Here the lawyer asks a question that cannot be answered: one does not "do" anything to "inherit" eternal life.

The question presumes eternal life is a commodity to be inherited or purchased on the basis of a particular action rather than a gift freely given. As far as our sources, including the New Testament, indicate, most first-century Jews already believed in resurrection, or eternal life. The Gospels and Acts speak of a group of Jews called the Sadducees, sometimes glossed with the description, "who say there is no resurrection" (Matt. 22.23; Mark 12.18; Luke 20.27; Acts 23.8). That marker distinguishes them from other Jewish groups. (As we are wont to say in the biblical studies business, the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, and that is what made them "sad, you see.")

In the account of the raising of Lazarus, Jesus tells the dead man's distraught sister Martha, "Your brother will rise again." Martha, reflecting the predominant Jewish view, responds, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (John 11.23–24). The point is confirmed in the Mishnah. *Sanhedrin* 10.1 insists, "All Israel has a share in the world to come." Granted the Mishnah then lists the exceptions who do not receive the soteriological benefits of community membership: apostates, those who deny that resurrection is proclaimed in Torah, and Epicureans, who live a life of complete pleasure in the present.

In Luke 18.18–25, a ruler (Gk. *archon*) asks Jesus the same question that the lawyer posed, but his attitude is different. The ruler begins, "Good Teacher," whereas the lawyer simply said, "Teacher." The ruler has the more respectful address, even if it is still limited. His question, however, is just as misguided. Given that Jesus offers a number of parables that begin "There was a rich man who . . ." and then detail the unfortunate fates of the rich, and given that Jesus states, "There is no one

who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life" (18.29–30), the ruler may well have been concerned about his future. He wants assurances.

Jesus confirms what the ruler already knows. Just as the lawyer in the lead-in to our parable cites Torah in response to Jesus's question, so here Jesus cites Torah to the ruler: "You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother'" (18.20). His point is not that following the commandments "earns" the ruler a spot in heaven. Jews followed Torah not to earn eternal life; this was already part of the covenant. They followed Torah in response to the gracious gift of the covenant that God gave them, because to do so prevented sin and because to do so showed how love of God and love of neighbor were to be manifested.

The ruler replies, "I have kept all these since my youth" (18.21). It is likely he had. Not murdering, stealing, or bearing false witness along with the positive act of honoring parents are relatively easy laws to follow (avoiding greed, envy, and lust; loving the neighbor and the stranger; and caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the alien are the more difficult ones). Jesus does not give him the answer or the assurance he wants, and his desire for personal confirmation has not abated.

He wants Jesus to acknowledge that he is fully righteous, despite the fact that he is "a rich man who . . ." Jesus advises: "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the ruler hears Jesus's counsel, "he became sad; for he was very rich" (18.22–23). Like that of the lawyer in our parable, the ruler's focus on eternal life leads nowhere; a focus on caring for others might offer a better path.

How far off base is our lawyer? He thinks in terms of a single action rather than a life of righteousness. He thinks of "eternal life" as a commodity to be inherited or acquired rather than a gift freely given. He focuses on eternal life—his own salvation—when he should be,

as Judaism teaches, focused on loving God and neighbor, honoring parents, eschewing stealing, and so on. Finally, he is asking obnoxious questions to which he already knows the answers.

Jesus does not directly answer his question. Instead, he uses what is sometimes called the "Socratic method" but which, I think, Jews invented or at least perfected. In typical Jewish fashion, he answers a question with a question.

And he said to him, "In the Law, what is written?
How do you read?" (Luke 10.26)

By turning the question back on the lawyer, Jesus evades the trick. He may also be appealing to the lawyer's ego: "Surely sir, you know the answer; after all, you are the trained professional." Jesus provides the lawyer an opportunity to display his knowledge to the public.

Mention of the "Law" refers to the Torah, and specifically the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, or, as Jesus would have said, Bereshit, Shemot, Vayikra, Bamidbar, and Devarim, the Hebrew designations), or simply the Books of Moses. Actually, the Torah is not much interested in eternal life or life after death. It is much more interested in how to live in the present. Moses exhorts: "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you and length of days" (Deut. 30.19–20).

Jesus does not merely ask, "What is written in the Torah?" He glosses that question with the more specific: "How do you read?" The double focus on literacy—what is *written* and how it is *read*—is usually ignored, but to do so misses the historical point. The lawyer is literate, a quality not shared by the majority of the population in antiquity. According to Luke, John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, can read and write. Because he had been struck mute by an angel, he asks for a writ-

ing tablet in order to announce his son's name (1.63). Luke also presents Jesus as literate, in that he can locate his synagogue reading in the scroll of Isaiah (4.17). These may be exceptional cases. The claim by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus that the principal care of Jews is to educate our children well⁹ cannot be used to determine that all Jewish children were literate.

Most people in antiquity did not own books; there were no lending libraries in Nazareth or Capernaum. Nor did most people have a need to read; there were scribes and lawyers who had the skill. The focus on literacy will return in a few verses. For now, we find that the lawyer's response does not, at least initially, require literacy skills.

And answering, he said, "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind/intention, and your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10.27)

The lawyer's response is a combination of two verses of the Torah known to all practicing Jews then and now. The first is Deuteronomy 6.5, which is part of Judaism's daily liturgy. The Hebrew *V'ahavta et adonai elohecha, b'chal l'vovcha, u'v'chal nafshecha, u'v'chal meodecha* means, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul [your *nefesh*, your very being] and with all your might (or strength)." Luke's text includes a fourth element, "all your mind." The point of both versions is the same: love of God is the ground of one's being and the guide for one's life.

The second verse the lawyer cites is inextricably connected to the first: love of God has to be manifested; to love means to act. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" is Leviticus 19.18. This too was a well-known verse in early Judaism. According to the great Rabbi Akiva, who was martyred by the Romans about a century after Jesus, "You

shall love your neighbor as yourself" is the greatest teaching of the Torah.¹⁰

The lawyer was right to combine Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19, but he was not original; the two had already been combined in Jewish thought. The ancient text known as the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* pairs the verses in the *Testaments* of both *Issachar* (5.2) and *Dan* (5.3). The same combination of love of God and love of neighbor appears in different contexts in Matthew 22.37 and Mark 12.29–31, where Jesus summarizes the two verses as the "Great Commandment" and insists: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets [the Torah and the Prophets]." Although the combined verses command love of God and love of neighbor, they do not mean, "Just do some good loving, but forget about dietary regulations, circumcision, Sabbath observance, or Temple sacrifice." They mean that the love commandments become the touchstone by which all other actions are assessed.

The importance of extending these two verses into the rest of Torah is signaled by their contexts. In antiquity, as today, single verses come with contexts. When scripture was read in the synagogue—in the *parashah ha-shavuah*, the "portion of the week" (comparable to the Revised Common Lectionary)—whole chapters were read. Deuteronomy 6.5, which insists on loving God, is preceded by Israel's essential theological proclamation, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone." Following the love command are mandates to teach Torah to one's children, to inscribe God's words upon the doorpost of the house (the *mezuzah*, which can be found on the doors of Jewish homes to this day), and to speak of them at all times.

To cite Leviticus 19.18 also invoked the rest of the chapter. Leviticus 19 begins with God telling Moses, "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.'" It continues with statutes ranging from those commanding reverence for parents and keeping the Sabbath to those forbidding idolatry, stealing, swearing falsely or lying, profaning the divine name, and engaging in improper sexual relations (a list that resembles the Ten Commandments). It also mandates care for the poor, the blind, and the deaf. Thus love must manifest itself in action.

The lawyer knew the commandments, and he would have known the context. Whether he fully understood them is another question.

And he said to him, "Rightly you answered. This do, and you will live." (Luke 10.28)

The lawyer got the right answer; good for him. However, he did not quite get the right question, so Jesus changes it for him. Whereas the lawyer asked about "eternal life," Jesus reframes what is at stake by exhorting, "Do this, and you will live." The imperative "do" focuses not on a single action, but on an ongoing relationship. Leviticus 18.5, like Deuteronomy 30, makes the same point: "Do this and live." The point is to "live now" and not be focused on "eternal life."

Were the lawyer wise, he would have thanked Jesus and gone off to show his love. But he's a lawyer in Luke's Gospel, so we know that a humble, compassionate response is unlikely. Instead, he proves his malevolent intent toward Jesus by posing another, even more inappropriate question.

But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10.29)

"Wanting to justify himself"—that is, wanting to make himself look "right" (as in "justified margins") in the eyes of anyone listening in—the lawyer asks another question. His concern for self-justification is something Luke's Jesus despises. Later in this Gospel, Jesus condemns the Pharisees, whom Luke portrays, contrary to all other sources, as

"lovers of money," with the accusation: "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God" (16.15). The lawyer, like the Pharisees according to Luke, is interested in self-aggrandizement, when he should be interested in love of God and neighbor.

His question, "Who is my neighbor?" is on the technical level not a bad one. The Hebrew term usually translated "neighbor" (*rea'*), the term that appears in Leviticus 19.18, has several connotations. In Genesis 11.3, it means "fellow" or "the other guy"; the NRSV renders this verse, which concerns the building of the tower of Babel, "And they said to one another," rather than, literally, "And said a man to his neighbor." Exodus 33.11 uses "neighbor" to describe an intimate friendship between God and Moses. Again, the NRSV misses the technical term by translating, "The LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend"; the term translated "friend" is *rea'*, "neighbor." Deuteronomy 19.14 (also 27.17) defines *rea'* as a person with whom one shares a common border: "You must not move your neighbor's boundary marker." Jeremiah 9.4–5 warns against trusting "neighbors" as well as trusting relatives; here the connotation is others in the community.

The term *rea'* can also mean "lover." Hosea 3.1 reads, "Go love a woman who has a lover"; the Hebrew says, literally, "Go love a woman, the lover of a neighbor." Song of Songs 5.16 is, "This is my beloved and this is my friend"; the term translated "friend" is, of course, *rea'*. The *rea'* in Proverbs 3.29 is someone who "lives trustingly beside you" and therefore against whom no harm should be planned.

The context of Leviticus 19.18 suggests that the "neighbor" is to be distinguished from the "stranger" (KJV) or the "resident alien" (NRSV). The chapter goes on to state, "When an alien (Heb. *ger*) resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (19.33–34). The point is developed by Ezekiel, who puts the resident alien on

the same footing, and on the same land, as the fellow Israelite. The prophet states that, in the allotment of the land following the return from exile, the inheritance shall not only be for the people Israel, but also "for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord GOD" (47.22–23). Thus the alien is necessarily a neighbor, a fellow.¹¹

On the home front, I wonder if those folks who want to impose "biblical values" on America today have considered Leviticus 19 in debates over immigration reform. On the international scene, I wonder why those people ranging from some right-wing Jews to some Christian Zionists do not consider Ezekiel 47 in discussions on the Middle East. But those questions require another book.

In the Septuagint, the Hebrew *ger* ("alien") in Leviticus 19 becomes *proselytos*, "proselyte." But the term does not have today's meaning of "convert" in the context of Leviticus. It could not, because the Israelites were not "proselytes" in the land of Egypt; they did not worship Egypt's gods. The "proselyte" is the one who "comes forward" (the literal meaning of the term) by choosing to live among a different people and so to share their lives, their joys and concerns.

Thus, the general meaning of "neighbor," at least for Hebrew speakers, is a person in intimate or legal relationship. Not everyone fits into this category. Leviticus is designed as Israel's Law code; it is not for universal application. Relations with people inside the community will be different from those with people outside the community, just as throughout the world today citizens of a nation or state have certain rights and responsibilities that noncitizens do not.

The lawyer's question has legal merit. One needs to know who are neighbors, and so under the same legal system, and who are not. But in the context of love, his question is not relevant. According to Leviticus, love has to extend beyond the people in one's group. Leviticus 19 insists on loving the stranger as well. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, agrees. In his *Against Apion*, a text likely contemporaneous

with Luke's Gospel, he asserts, "For I think it will become clear that we possess laws that are extremely well designed, with a view toward piety, fellowship with one another (Gk. *koinonia*), and universal benevolence (*philanthropia*) as well as justice (*dikaioσύνη*), endurance in labors, and contempt for death."¹²

For our parable, the lawyer's question is again misguided. To ask "Who is my neighbor" is a polite way of asking, "Who is *not* my neighbor?" or "Who does not deserve my love?" or "Whose lack of food or shelter can I ignore?" or "Whom I can hate?" The answer Jesus gives is, "No one." Everyone deserves that love—local or alien, Jews or gentile, terrorist or rapist, everyone.

The lawyer had not been attending to Jesus's other teachings. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus states, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy'" (Matt. 5.43). The Torah includes no commandment to hate one's enemy; perhaps Jesus is reflecting a saying known from the sectarian group responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls. The *Rule of the Community* does state: "You shall love all the sons of light . . . and hate all the sons of darkness" (IQS 1.9–11). Enemies are, conventionally, people we hate. If we did not hate them, they would not be enemies, at least from our perspective. And that may be the point. Jesus continues, "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt. 5.44–45). Love cannot be restricted. Luke made the same point: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them" (6.32). The lawyer had not been listening.

According to Jewish law, the lawyer is responsible for loving those like him, and those who are not like him but who live in proximity to him although they are not part of his people, the "children of Israel" as he defined the term. Leviticus does not explicitly require him to love his "enemy" who lives across the border, outside the boundaries of the community. In Jewish thought, one could not mistreat the enemy, but love was not mandated. Proverbs 25.21 insists, "If your enemies are

hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink" (Paul cites Prov. 25.21–22 in Rom. 12.20). Only Jesus insists on loving the enemy: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." He may be the only person in antiquity to have given this instruction.

Given this concern for loving the enemy, the focus on literacy in the lead-in to our parable provokes another possible reading. In Hebrew the words "neighbor" and "evil" share the same consonants (*resh ayin*);¹³ they differ only in the vowels—but ancient Hebrew texts do not have vowels (if this sounds odd, think of text-messaging). Both words are written identically.

When Jesus asks the lawyer, "How do you *read*?" he is therefore asking, "Dear sir, are you able to see, in the very words of the Torah, the equation of enemy with neighbor and thus the command to love both?" The lawyer has read the words in the Hebrew, but he cannot see their full meaning.

Not only does our lawyer fail to interpret the Law in its fullest meaning; he is about to become the recipient of a parable. We know, from the parables told by Jotham and Nathan, that if a parable is directed to a particular individual, the individual is likely to come to an unwelcome realization. The lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" In response, Jesus is about to bring him to the test.

Replying, Jesus said, "Some person was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who, stripping him, even placed blows, going away, leaving him half dead." (Luke 10.30)

The opening of the parable efficiently sets the scene. The person (Gk. *anthropos*) lacks identification; he could be rich or poor, free or slave, priest or lay, nice or naughty. He may have been coming home from

offering sacrifice in the Temple; he may be a healer on his way to a sick person in Jericho; he may be a tourist. His profession is irrelevant. The man is "some man" or everyone. Jesus's listeners would have had no trouble identifying with the victim; they may have been victims of attack themselves.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was an eighteen-mile rocky path that descended from about 2,500 feet above sea level to Jericho's 825 feet below. The Romans paved the road in the late 60s CE so that the Tenth Legion could move its siege engines toward the doomed Jerusalem. Even those who had never traveled the road, were they biblically knowledgeable, knew about its dangers, and its possibilities. It was on this road that David fled from his rebellious son Absalom (2 Sam. 15.23–16.14); it was here that King Zedekiah escaped his Chaldean pursuers (2 Kings 25.4).

And it is here that the commentators leave the road for detours into imagination. For some of the church fathers, who were engaging in an allegorical interpretation that would have mystified a first-century Jewish audience, the fellow in the ditch is a sinner in need of salvation. Predictably then, the priest and the Levite, representing the Law and the Prophets, are those who cannot save; the good Samaritan is Jesus himself; his two coins represent baptism and the Eucharist; and so on.¹⁴

Continuing this negative image of Judaism are modern commentators, whose interpretative key is not allegory, but sociology. Increasingly popular is the view that Jesus's audience would have had little sympathy for the man in the ditch. One scholar classifies the poor fellow as a "despised tradesman."¹⁵ Why Jews would "despise" people in trades is unclear; Pharisees, for example, typically held day jobs (e.g., Paul was a leather worker). Another adds: "Traders were notoriously dishonest, and their itinerant lifestyle and constant interaction with all sorts of people make it impossible for them to observe even the most basic laws concerning food preparation and purity. For that same reason, the wounded man would not have evoked the lawyer's empathy."¹⁶ Thus we get the impression that the Jewish audience would find the eating of a ham sandwich damning, but would not care about a violent physical attack.

I heard one explanation saying that the man was of the school of Shammai, since he was attacked by bandits. How does this follow? The Mishnah, *Berakhot* 1.3, presents a discussion of whether to stand up or lie down when reciting the Shema. The school of Shammai states, "In the evening everyone should recline in order to recite and in the morning they should stand, as it says, 'When you lie down and when you rise.'" The citation is from Deuteronomy 6.7, the same section that contains the love commandment. The Mishnah then quotes Rabbi Tarfon: "I was coming along the road in the evening and reclined to recite the Shema as required by the House of Shammai. And in doing so I placed myself in danger of being attacked by bandits." Aha, say commentators, he is mugged because he was praying at the wrong time.

The parable says nothing about the man's position at the time of attack. The fellow in the ditch is just a fellow, a victim of a violent crime, period.

Not only do some scholars engage in blaming the victim, and not only do they add gratuitous points about purity laws; they also sympathize with the robbers. Common today is the view that the robbers are Jewish Robin Hoods (picture *Men in Tights and Tzitzit*) who, displaced from family lands by overtaxation and urbanization, protest their socioeconomic disenfranchisement by taking from the rich and giving to the poor. Thus the robbers are "roving terrorists staging their own form of protest against various types of official and unofficial exploitation of the poor."¹⁷

The robbers are not merry men dropping off their gains with the "Good Samaritan Society" or the United Jewish Appeal. Nor is there reason to presume that the man waylaid by robbers was wealthy; were the man wealthy, his lack of bodyguards is inexplicable.

The reasons for rejecting the Robin Hood model are numerous, but I'll just note the reason that comes from a close reading of the ancient sources. The term the parable uses for the robbers, *lestai*, is used by Josephus over forty times; it appears fifteen times in the New Testament, and nine times in the Septuagint. The basic meaning is "member of an armed gang." As early as Homer, the term referred to both highwaymen and pirates who act without mercy. In 2 Corinthians

11.26, Paul speaks of his "frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits (*lestai*), danger from my own people, . . . danger in the wilderness," and so on; the *lestai* are not his friends either.

These negative connotations continue in the Gospels. Those who make the Temple "a den of robbers (*lestai*)" are not dispossessed peasants robbing from the rich (Mark 11.15–19). According to John 10.7–8, Jesus states: "I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves (*kleptai* [whence "kleptomaniac"]) and bandits (*lestai*); but the sheep did not listen to them." In John 18.40, Barabbas, the guilty one set free when the innocent Jesus goes to his death, is a *lestes*. In Mark 15.27 and Matthew 27.38–44, but not in Luke, the men crucified on Jesus's left and right are *lestai*. Yes, we could see the crucified men as freedom fighters executed by Rome; we could also see them as murderers, thieves, or, as Luke describes them, "criminals" or "evildoers" (Gk. *kakourgoi*, from *kakos* and *ergon*; 23.33).

So the robbers are the bad guys, as we note also from their violence. The traveler is stripped, beaten, and left half dead in a ditch. He is robbed not only of his possessions, but also of his dignity, his health, and almost his life. Luke describes him as having "wounds" (Gk. *traumata*, hence "trauma"). The lawyer had asked about eternal life—he should rather be worried about those left half dead. So should commentators.

And yet half dead is still alive; the man is, despite being naked (as would be a corpse before shrouding) and prostrate, alive. Listeners, identifying with him, can only hope that rescue will come. And because they identify with him, their question—and so our question—is: "Who will help *me*?"

And by coincidence, some priest was going down that road, and seeing him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, coming to the place, even seeing, passed by on the other side. (Luke 10.31–32)

Just as the fellow in the ditch is revictimized by being labeled a despised merchant or a bad Jew, so too the priest and the Levite receive their share of negative interpretations that go well beyond the justified critique of their failure to act. Again, stereotypes get in the way. Here are the two most common misreadings and why they are unhelpful.

First, a number of scholars talk about the peasant dislike of the "priestly elite."¹⁸ This view comes more from contemporary distaste for religious hierarchies than it does from Luke's text or Jesus's context. There is nothing that makes a priest and even less a Levite part of the "elite." Priests and Levites may have had neither wealth nor status. In Judaism, the priesthood is not a vocation; it is an inherited position. The priestly line descends from Aaron, the brother of Moses. One is a priest if one's father was a priest. Levites, who form a lesser category of priests, also receive their role according to their paternal line; they are descended from Aaron's ancestor Levi, the third son of Jacob. All other Jews, except Jews by choice, are descended from Jacob's other children; they are Israelites.

These lines continue in Judaism to this day. The term for "priest" in Hebrew is *kohen*, and Jews with the last name Cohen or Kane may well be from the priestly line. Similarly, Jews with the last name Levi, Levine (like me), or Lewis may well have levitical ancestry. But neither the name nor the priestly role says anything about wealth or community status.

Josephus, who was himself an elite priest, mentions other priests who were poverty-stricken. According to his *Antiquities*, the high priest Ananias, who served from about 47 to 52 and who, according to the book of Acts (22–23), tried Paul in Jerusalem, sent his servants to the Temple threshing floors, where they "took away the tithes that belonged to the priests by violence, and did not refrain from beating such as would not give these tithes to them . . . so that [some of the] priests that had previously been supported with those tithes died for lack of food."¹⁹ There are "priests," and then there are "high priests"; the social positions of the two groups should not be confused.

The priest in the parable enters Luke's Gospel with fine precedent. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, is a priest, and John's mother

is from a priestly family. It is Zechariah who recalls how God had promised "that we would be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us . . . to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1.71, 79). The man in the ditch and those who identify with him have reason to hope.

As for the distinction among the priestly ranks, Luke invariably describes the priests involved in Jesus's death as "*chief* priests" or the "*high* priest." Our priest is an ordinary priest who does what is all too ordinary: he fails to act when he should.

The second, more common, and just as misguided explanation for the priest's and Levite's failure to help is that they are following Jewish Law. From both classroom and pulpit comes the claim that the priest and the Levite pass by the man in the ditch, because they are afraid of contracting corpse contamination and so violating purity laws. A few examples demonstrate the pervasiveness of this view.

A 2005 book with the optimistic title *The Wide, Wide Circle of Divine Love: A Biblical Case for Religious Diversity* states: "If the traveler were already dead, or he died while they were attending him, then they would have become unclean, contaminated, because they touched a dead body. This would have made it necessary for them to seek ritual cleansing before they could resume their responsibilities."²⁰ What "ritual duties" the priest and the Levite would have had is unclear, since the parable explicitly notes that the priest is going "down" (*katabaino*) from Jerusalem, not up to the Temple. Why ritual cleansing is a problem is unstated.

The popularity of this view is confirmed by its appearance in *The HarperCollins Study Bible* for Luke 10.32. The annotator claims, "Both [Levite and the] priest may have been concerned about impurity from contact with a corpse (see Num. 5.2; 19.11–13)."²¹ Numbers 19.10b–13 states, "Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean seven days. They shall purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day. . . . All who touch a corpse, the body of a human being who has died, and do not purify themselves, defile the tabernacle of the LORD; such persons shall be cut off from Israel." There is nothing impure about touching a person

who is "half dead." Nor is there any sin involved in burying a corpse; to the contrary, the Torah expects corpses to be interred.

The better background for our priest is not Numbers 19, but Leviticus 21. This chapter, addressed to "the priests, the sons of Aaron," mandates, "No one shall defile himself for a dead person among his relatives, except for his nearest kin" (vv. 1–2). Yet even here, this is only half the story. To follow Torah, the priest should have checked to see if the man was alive and, finding him alive, should have helped him. Should he have discovered a corpse, he should have covered it and then immediately gone for help.

Walter Wink, in an article entitled "The Parable of the Compassionate Samaritan," offers the possibility that, were the priest to have come within four cubits to check on the man in the ditch and if it turned out that the man was dead, the priest "would be defiled and was liable to disciplinary flogging (*b. Sot.* 44a–44b)."²² The very late Talmudic passage states, "A dead body affects four cubits with respect to communicating defilement." There is nothing about flogging.

Biblical scholar Richard Bauckham proposes that the priest in the parable "cannot get close enough to tell without risking defilement from the corpse if that is what it turns out to be. This is because, in first-century Jewish thought about such matters, corpse-impurity travels vertically through the air. If any part of the priest's body were to be above any part of a corpse, he would contract impurity."²³ Had the parable only been about a priest, the argument would be more compelling.

The presence of the Levite makes the priestly concern irrelevant. This distinction between priests and Levites in observance of purity laws continues to this day. *Kohanim*, "priests," will remain outside the cemetery gates unless the funeral is for an immediate relative; Levites as well as other Jews will step onto the cemetery grounds. Further, Samaritans were also bound by laws concerning corpse contamination; just as the Samaritan found the question irrelevant, so should we in our attempt to understand the parable.

Even the parable itself undercuts the possibility that the motive of priest and Levite stems from purity regulations. Had the priest been going up to Jerusalem (one always goes "up" to Jerusalem; one could

be on the moon and still go "up" to Jerusalem), where he would be engaged in Temple activities, he may well have been concerned about purity. However, the parable obviates that explanation immediately; it tells us that the priest is going "down" from Jerusalem. Thus, he need not be in a ritually pure state.

The Law, rather, required that both men attend to the fellow in the ditch, whether alive or dead, for one is to "love the neighbor" and "love the stranger" both. Regarding corpses, Jewish Law requires that a dead body be treated with utmost respect. The point is perhaps best seen in the book of Tobit; the book's titular hero, a Jewish male Antigone, risks his life by attending to unburied corpses (1.16–20). Philo writes in his *Hypothetica* that among the precepts Jews follow are those that say, "No one shall keep anyone from performing funeral honors to the dead, but shall even throw upon them so much earth as if sufficient to protect them from impiety; that no one shall violate or move, in any manner or degree whatever, the graves, or tombs, or memorials of those who are dead."²⁴ Similarly, in his *Against Apion*, Josephus writes, "There are other things which our legislator ordained for us beforehand, which of necessity we ought to do in common to all men; as to afford fire, and water, and food to such as want it; to show them the roads; and not to let anyone lie unburied. He also would have us treat those that are esteemed our enemies with moderation."²⁵ The connection of this passage to Luke's parable and frame is remarkable. Josephus sees Jews as expected to attend to a corpse on the roadside, not to pass it by.

The Mishnah, *Nazir* 7.1, reads: "A high priest or a Nazirite [a person under a vow of utmost purity] may not contract uncleanness because of their dead [relatives], but they may contract uncleanness because of a neglected corpse." The Babylonian Talmud is even stronger: "As long as there are no other people to look after the burial of a corpse, the duty is incumbent on the first Jew that passes by, without exception, to perform the burial" (*Nazir* 43b; Jerusalem Talmud, *Nazir* 56a). Judaism still takes this mandate seriously. That is why Jews stood vigil at Ground Zero until every corpse was recovered. Burying the dead is one of the highest *mitzvot*, most important commandments in Ju-

daism, for it is one of the few acts that cannot be repaid by the person who benefits from it.

Finally—and one would hope that these numerous reasons are sufficient to put this focus to rest—Luke does not seem interested in purity concerns here, although such concerns surface elsewhere. When Luke wants to make a point about purity, Luke mentions Pharisees and scribes.²⁶ None appears in our parable.

Arguments that read the parable in terms of “uncleanness” or “purity” are made by modern Christians, not by Jesus or Luke. Neither gives the priest or Levite an excuse. Nor would any excuse be acceptable. Their responsibility was to save a life; they failed. Saving a life is so important that Jewish Law mandates that it override every other concern, including keeping the Sabbath (see, e.g., 1 Macc. 2.31–41; 2 Macc. 6.11; Mishnah, *Shabbat* 18.3). Their responsibility, should the man have died, was to bury the corpse. They failed here as well.

The best explanation I’ve heard for the refusal of the priest and the Levite to come to the aid of the man in the ditch comes from Martin Luther King Jr., who preached: “I’m going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It’s possible these men were afraid. . . . And so the first question that the priest [and] the Levite asked was, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ . . . But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’” King went on, “If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?”²⁷ King then went to Memphis, and it was there he was assassinated. There are bandits on the road.

Whatever the motives of the priest and the Levite, King is correct. They, like the lawyer, thought only about themselves, not about the man in the ditch.

So if the issue is not priestly purity, why did Jesus speak explicitly of a priest and Levite? The duo anticipate, in good folkloric fashion, the appearance of the third figure. We have already seen the “rule of three” in our study of the parables of the lost: the first two set up the third. For the Good Samaritan, the rule works even better, for in its usual function the first two figures fail and the third will succeed. Examples

include the decidedly nonkosher “Three Little Pigs” and the equally nonkosher suitors for Portia’s hand in the *Merchant of Venice*. Name two, and the third comes automatically. For a more modern analogy, to say in a church context, “Father, Son, and . . .” evokes the third, “Holy Spirit.” Or, for a less theological albeit Jewish example, “Larry and Moe” evokes “Curley.”

For Jesus’s audience, and for any synagogue congregation today, the third of the group is obvious. Mention a priest and a Levite, and anyone who knows anything about Judaism will know that the third person is an Israelite. Ezra 10.5 speaks of the “leading priest, the Levites, and all Israel”; Nehemiah 11.3 states that “in the towns of Judah all lived on their property in their towns: Israel, the priests, the Levites . . .” Both priest and Levite should have stopped to help. The audience, surprised at this lack of compassion, would have presumed both that the third person would be an Israelite and that he would help.

However, Jesus is telling a parable, and parables never go the way one expects. Instead of the anticipated Israelite, the person who stops to help is a Samaritan. In modern terms, this would be like going from Larry and Moe to Osama bin Laden.

But some Samaritan, traveling, came near him and seeing, had compassion. And coming toward (him), he bound up his wounds, pouring oil and wine (on them), and having set him upon his own animal, he brought him to an inn and cared for him. (Luke 10.33–34)

As the parable turns to the good Samaritan, its structure changes. As spare as the earlier descriptions of priest and Levite were, the text now lavishes attention on the Samaritan’s actions. The robbers steal and wound, while the Samaritan tends with his own goods. The bandits leave the man half dead, while the Samaritan returns him to life.

Whereas the priest and the Levite go out of their way to distance themselves from the victim, the Samaritan literally “goes up to him” and shows him “compassion.” Luke had already used the term, which carries the connotation of a visceral reaction (i.e., he felt it in his guts), to describe Jesus’s response to seeing the widow of Nain at her son’s funeral procession (7.13), and it describes the reaction of the father to the return of his prodigal son (15.20). In all three cases, the reaction is a response to a presumed death or loss; it signals the drive to restore wholeness.

The Samaritan’s compassion then becomes, for many of today’s interpreters, the hook by which the sermon functions. In a number of settings, the parable serves as a warning against prejudice; for example, the two who walk by are a pastor and a choir director, while the Samaritan is a gay man, an “illegal immigrant,” a person on parole, or any other victim of bigotry. The point in this reading is that “they” are really nice, that “we” sometimes fail in our obligations to help, and that “we” too should “have compassion” on those who are mistreated.

We even have so-called Good Samaritan laws designed to protect people who aid accident victims. Had the parable been set in New York rather than Judea, our lawyer likely would volunteer to represent the man in the ditch, sue the Samaritan for improper medical treatment, and take thirty pieces of silver for the settlement.

But to understand the parable as did its original audience, we need to think of Samaritans less as oppressed but benevolent figures and more as the enemy, as those who do the oppressing. From the perspective of the man in the ditch, Jewish listeners might balk at the idea of receiving Samaritan aid. They might have thought, “I’d rather die than acknowledge that one from that group saved me”; “I do not want to acknowledge that a rapist has a human face”; or “I do not want to recognize that a murderer will be the one to rescue me.”

According to the Bible, Samaria had an earlier name, Shechem. It was at Shechem that Jacob’s daughter Dinah was raped (readers of the novel *The Red Tent* would do well to read the original, Genesis 34). The second reference to Shechem/Samaria is Judges 8–9, the story of

the false judge Abimelech, who murders his rivals. It is to him and his supporters that Jotham tells his parable of the Trees. Thus, to Jesus’s Jewish audience as well as to Luke’s readers, the idea of a “good Samaritan” would make no more sense than the idea of a “good rapist” or a “good murderer.”

As the Bible recounts, the Samaritan people originated after the twelve-tribe United Monarchy ruled by David and then Solomon split into two independent states. The Southern Kingdom, Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem, retained a descendant of David on the throne; the Northern Kingdom, Israel, with its capital in Samaria, was ruled by a series of charismatic leaders (see 1 Kings 12). According to 1 Kings 16.32, Ahab, the husband of the infamous Jezebel, constructed an altar to the Canaanite god Baal in Samaria. Slightly later, the slightly more virtuous King Jehu turned Baal’s shrine into a latrine (2 Kings 10.18–27).

The Northern Kingdom, called both Israel and Ephraim (after Joseph’s son; see, e.g., Isa. 7.9; Jer. 31.9), was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BCE, and many of its citizens were carted off to places unknown (see 2 Kings 17.1–16, which attributes the destruction of Israel to the apostasy of its population). Assyrian records contain an inscription from Sargon II claiming that 27,290 were exiled, but political figures then, as now, are often inflated. The Assyrians then moved residents from other conquered nations into the region. According to 2 Kings 17.24: “The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities.” The resulting population took its name from the capital, and so the Samaritans as a nation were born.

During the next century, Babylon conquered Assyria and then in 587 BCE conquered the Southern Kingdom, Judah, and took the remaining Davidic king as well as many of the country’s leading citizens into exile in Babylon. In 538, Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon; one of his acts was to repatriate the Judahites to their homeland. Some stayed in Babylon; others returned, and they did so with plans to

rebuild not only their nation, but also their Temple. It was over the construction of the Temple that a new enmity between Jews who had returned from Babylon and Samaritans would develop.

According to Nehemiah 4.1–8 (see also Ezra 4.7–11):

When Sanballat [Samaria's governor] heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he mocked the Jews. He said in the presence of his associates and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish—and burned ones at that?" . . . But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and the gaps were beginning to be closed, they were very angry, and all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.

In the early fourth century (ca. 388), the Samaritans constructed their own temple on Mt. Gerizim, and following the conquests of Alexander the Great in 333 Samaria was rebuilt as a Greek city (*polis*). Enmity with the Jews in the south continued. The Jews who rebelled in 165 BCE against the assimilationist policies of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his allies in the priestly establishment resented the Samaritans for not coming to their aid. The Jewish king John Hyrcanus attacked Samaria in 128 BCE and burned down the Samaritan Temple on Mt. Gerizim.²⁸ It was rebuilt by Herod the Great, who also rebuilt the Jerusalem Temple.

From the Persian period in the late sixth century BCE to the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans remained at odds. Each claimed the true descent from Abraham, true understanding of Torah, the correct priesthood, and the right form of worship in the proper location.

To look at the Samaritans only through the perspective of the biblical tradition is to tell only half the story. The Samaritans' own self-designation is *Shamerim*, meaning "guardians" or "observers" of the

Law. Jewish readers may know the Hebrew equivalent, *shomer*, as in *shomer shabbas*, or "Sabbath observant." An alternate, external etymology is found in 1 Kings 16.24, which states that the name came from a fellow named Shemer, who originally owned the property on which the Samaritans lived.

Samaritans traditionally view themselves as descendants of Joseph, and thus of his sons Ephraim and Manasseh, and as possessing the correct interpretation of Torah, which had been promulgated at the Northern sanctuary in Shechem. As for the Jews, according to ancient Samaritan tradition, they got off track at the time of Samuel, when the priest Eli set up a heretical sanctuary at Shiloh. Errors continued, from Solomon, who, incorrectly in their view, erected a temple in Jerusalem; to Ezra, who in their view rewrote the Pentateuch with a Judean bias; to Rabbi Hillel, who corrupted the tradition with his innovations regarding the interpretation of the Torah. They further suggest that the Jews got off track by adding to the Pentateuch additional books, those texts today called the Prophets and the Writings.

The enmity between the two groups waxed and waned depending on the time, but for the most part relations were not warm. The Jewish king Herod the Great took a Samaritan woman named Malthace as one of his wives (he had nine, according to Josephus); she was the mother of Herod Antipas (the tetrarch responsible for the death of John the Baptist) and Herod Archelaus as well as of a daughter named Olympias.²⁹

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well (4.1–42). Biblical readers know the scene, because it recapitulates the meeting of Abraham's servant and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, and Moses and Zipporah. That Jesus had earlier been identified as a "bridegroom" (3.29) solidifies the convention: Jewish man meets a woman at a well, object matrimony. Although the Samaritan woman, married many times, is not the expected Jewish virgin, a wedding of a sort ensues, as through the woman the Samaritan village comes to accept Jesus's messianic claim.

In the course of the story, John makes clear how unexpected the relationship is. Jesus says to the woman, "Give me a drink," and she

responds, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" The evangelist secures the impression of enmity by adding, "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans" (4.7, 9). In that same chapter, the Johannine Jesus, unsympathetic to religious pluralism, responds to the woman's question about the location of true worship, "You worship what you do not know, we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (4.20–22).

The Fourth Gospel is not the only text to indicate problems between Jews and Samaritans. According to Matthew, Jesus enjoins his disciples, "Enter no town of the Samaritans" (10.5). Luke even ensures that readers unfamiliar with local politics understand the enmity. In the chapter preceding our parable (9.51–56), Luke recounts that a Samaritan village refused Jesus hospitality "because his face was set toward Jerusalem." The apostles James and John, at their apostolic best and recalling the prophet Elijah in 2 Kings 1.10, then propose to call down fire from heaven to destroy the village. Jesus has to explain that dropping bombs is not the proper response to a lack of hospitality.

Josephus, no friend of the Samaritans, confirms the enmity. Not only does he claim that Samaritans would affiliate with the Jews when it was politically advantageous, but declare themselves a distinct group when it was not;³⁰ he also describes direct Samaritan attacks on Jews. According to his *Antiquities*, at the time of the Roman governor Cumanus (ca. 48–50) it was the "custom of the Galileans" to travel through Samaria on their way to the pilgrimage festivals in Jerusalem. Samaritan residents in a village called Ginea attacked the Galileans and massacred a number of them. Other Galilean Jews sought the governor's help in punishing the murderers, but, as Josephus recounts, the Samaritans bribed Cumanus to do nothing. A number of Galileans, "much displeased," ignoring the warnings of saner voices, and opting for vigilante justice, "plundered many Samaritan villages." The Samaritan leaders accused the Jews not only of plunder, but also of setting their villages on fire. The political crisis, which arose in part because of both Jewish and Samaritan reaction to Roman rule, ultimately required the emperor Claudius's intervention.³¹

Rabbinic sources debate the status of Samaritans, given the ethnic, theological, and religious connections between Samaritans and Jews. Early Tannaitic texts (e.g., Babylonian Talmud, *Qiddushin* 75b; Jerusalem Talmud, *Ketubot* 3, 1, 27a; minor tractate *Kutim* 1.1) regard Samaritans as Jews. After the Bar Kokhba revolt (132–35 CE), later rabbinic sources begin to show anti-Samaritan ideas.³²

New Testament scholars tend to cite these negative statements as normative for the time of Jesus. A number of commentators note for this parable, and even more frequently for John's story of the Samaritan woman at the well, that "the Jews" considered "Samaritan women menstruants from the cradle and so perpetually unclean."³³ The reference, which is usually not given, is the Mishnah, *Niddah* 4.1: "The daughters of the Samaritans are [deemed unclean as] menstruants from their cradle." Missing from the discussion, almost invariably, is citation of the next passage: "The daughters of the Sadducees, if they follow after the ways of their fathers, are deemed like to the women of the Samaritans" (*Niddah* 4.2). Thus the Mishnah cannot possibly reflect the view of "all Jews."

Because the Mishnah goes on to describe how Samaritan women do observe the laws of family purity—the Samaritan Pentateuch replicates the menstrual injunctions in the Hebrew text—the rabbis wonder how could they be unclean (Babylonian Talmud, *Niddah* 31b). Finally, a third rabbinic text, the Tosefta (lit. "Additions," a volume that adds to Mishnaic teaching) states: "A Samaritan is like a non-Jew, according to the opinion of Rabbi [i.e., Judah ha-Nasi, the codifier of the Mishnah]. Rabbi Shimeon ben Gamliel [his father] says, 'A Samaritan is like Israel in all respects.'"³⁴ Selective citation of rabbinic literature in service of making Jesus look better than "Judaism" is not a helpful exegetical procedure.

On the American Bible Society's website dedicated to understanding this parable, one commentator notes: "Some scholars have cited a rabbinic tradition that says that Jews who accept aid from a Samaritan will delay the redemption of Israel. If, then, the wounded traveler was Jewish, the story becomes an open attack on first-century Jewish theology and piety. It seems to point out the foolishness of tying Israel's

redemption to such a bigoted idea.”³⁵ No rabbinic reference is given, and the Bible Society never contests the point; for it, the idea of Jewish xenophobia was a given. I contacted the author to ask about the source. He responded, “I found the reference in E. Juengel, *Paulus and Jesus*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen, 1967), p. 174, but he never cited the rabbinic tradition and I could not find it elsewhere in the book.”³⁶ Klyne Snodgrass solves the mystery of the citation. The claim is “based on the misuse of a late tradition in *b. Baba Batra* 10b and comments in Str-B 4/1, pp. 538 and 544.”³⁷ Str-B is the abbreviation for Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck’s 1922 *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash*, a compendium of connections the authors saw between the New Testament and all of rabbinic literature.

There is one more level of our investigation about how this incorrect citation made its way into New Testament studies. It apparently entered through the work of Walter Grundmann,³⁸ the director of the Nazi program entitled Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life (*Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben*).³⁹ Again, anti-Jewish material is repeated, because no one questions it.

Finally, with the rise of postcolonial and liberation-theological readings, negative stereotypes of Jewish-Samaritan relations coupled with negative stereotypes of Jewish purity laws combine. When biblical interpretation functions to enfranchise people, name systems of oppression, or inspire change for the better, this is all to the good. When, however, the means by which these concerns are facilitated include negative stereotyping, then the ends are compromised. For example, in his “Dalit Theology’ and the Parable of the Good Samaritan,” M. Gnanavaram maps the Dalit (untouchable) onto the Samaritan, and the priest and the Levite correspond to the “high-cast non-Dalits.” The Samaritan is the “outcast,” although the only person cast out in the Gospel in relation to Samaritan issues is Jesus, who was refused lodging in a Samaritan village (Luke 9:53); the Samaritan is “oppressed,” although according to the parable he has freedom of travel and economic resources.⁴⁰ Readers will need to determine if the end,

the passionate call for liberation, justifies the means, if the means turn out to be a negative caricature of Jewish culture.

Finding the Better Intertext

Rather than understand the parable through negative stereotype, we do better to understand it as, in part, a resurrection of an earlier biblical incident. Along with the accounts of Dinah and Shechem in Genesis 34, Jotham and Abimelech in Judges 9, and the fate of the Northern Kingdom, there is another biblical account of Samaria, one that presents a different form of relationship. According to 2 Chronicles 28.8–15, the Samaritans—here identified as “the people of Israel”—captured two hundred thousand Judean “women, sons, and daughters; they also took much booty . . . to Samaria.” A prophet named Oded then condemned the Samaritan army:

Because the LORD, the God of your ancestors, was angry with Judah, he gave them into your hand, but you have killed them in a rage that has reached up to heaven. Now you intend to subjugate the people of Judah and Jerusalem, male and female, as your slaves. But what have you except sins against the LORD your God? Now hear me, and send back the captives whom you have taken from your kindred, for the fierce wrath of the LORD is upon you.

A number of the Samaritan leaders, chastened, agreed with the prophet. Their actions anticipate the imagery found in the parable of the Good Samaritan:

Then those who were mentioned by name got up and took the captives, and with the booty they clothed all that were naked among them; they clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them; and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought

them to their kindred at Jericho, the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria.⁴¹

The cycle of violence can be broken.

For the person in the ditch or the listener who identifies with him, 2 Chronicles 28 offers a necessary lesson. Those who want to kill you may be the only ones who will save you.

And upon the next day, taking out, he gave two denarii to the innkeeper and said, "Take care of him, and whatever you might spend, I, upon my return, will give back to you."
(Luke 10.35)

In 1980, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher claimed: "Nobody would remember the Good Samaritan if he had only good intentions. He had money as well."⁴² Mrs. Thatcher overstates; the parable would still convey its basic message, had it stopped at the previous verse. Thus her comment at best serves to prompt another question: What does Luke 10.35 contribute to the parable?

First, the verse makes clear, despite numerous sermons to the contrary, that the Samaritan is not a social victim. He has money, freedom of travel, the ability to find lodging (more than what Jesus found in the Samaritan village), and some leverage with the innkeeper. The parable, in its original setting, is not about the type of prejudice that creates people on the margins; it is about hatred between groups who have similar resources.

Second, a benevolent reading of the Samaritan's final actions understands him as providing not one-time aid, but long-term care. Thus the sense of loving neighbor means continual action, not something to check off the to-do list. The Samaritan's offering the innkeeper what

amounts to a blank check fits within Jesus's overall concern for generosity. Moreover, his trusting the innkeeper to care for the wounded man echoes the trust the wounded man had to have had in him. By trusting the innkeeper, he provides confirmatory evidence that we make our neighbors; that trust is essential for life.⁴³

More cynical interpreters, aware of how Jesus's Jewish audience likely felt about this Samaritan hero, might see an ominous implication in the Samaritan's final actions. The Samaritan promises to return, and should he be displeased with the innkeeper's ministrations, he will repay in kind. The Samaritan made the choice to care for the man in the ditch; the innkeeper's motives to continue the care—benevolence, financial incentive, fear of retaliation—go unspoken. In the long run, at least as far as the victim is concerned, they may not matter. Of ultimate import is not our motive, but our action.

The parable proper ends here. But Jesus is not done with the lawyer, and neither are we.

"Which of these three a neighbor—does it seem to you—was to the one who fell among the robbers?" And he said, "The one doing mercy for him." And said to him Jesus, "Go and you do likewise." (Luke 10.36-37)

The lawyer asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus reframes the question. As Martin Luther King Jr. so eloquently revealed in his sermon, asking the right question is of utmost importance. The issue for Jesus is not the "who," but the "what," not the identity but the action. The lawyer is unable even to voice the hated name "Samaritan." He can only say, "The one doing mercy for him."

The parable spoke about compassion, but the lawyer read the action as one of mercy. His rephrasing the issue is apt: compassion can be

felt in the gut; mercy needs to be enacted with the body. The term may come from Luke, who uses it extensively, but only in the infancy materials, where mercy is an attribute of the divine: "His mercy is for those who fear him" (1.50); "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy" (1.54); "Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her" (1.58); "Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors" (1.72) and, finally, "by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us" (1.78).

For the lawyer, and for Luke's readers, the Samaritan does what God does. The divine is manifested only through our actions. Therefore, Jesus responds to the lawyer's observation not with a question and not with a parable, but with an imperative: "Go," he says, "and you do likewise." To speak of loving God and loving neighbor does not require theological precision; it does not ask for a particular location of worship (Gerizim, Jerusalem, Mecca, the Ganges, or Sogoréate . . .); it does not speak to a particular book (the Torah, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Christian Bible, the Qur'an, or the Book of Mormon . . .). Loving God and loving neighbor cannot exist in the abstract; they need to be enacted.

We do not know what the lawyer did following this parable. Nor do we know if the parable was actually spoken to a lawyer, or if Luke has provided both the opening and closing frame. All we can know is what we, upon hearing this parable in its narrative frame, will do.

The Parable in Today's World

For a final sense of the profundity of the parable, we need only look from ancient texts to present contexts. The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the few that makes an almost perfect translation to today's situation.

Samaria today has various names: the West Bank, Occupied Palestine, Greater Israel. To hear the parable today, we only need to update the identity of the figures. I am an Israeli Jew on my way from

Jerusalem to Jericho, and I am attacked by thieves, beaten, stripped, robbed, and left half dead in a ditch. Two people who should have stopped to help pass me by: the first, a Jewish medic from the Israel Defense Forces; the second, a member of the Israel/Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. But the person who takes compassion on me and shows me mercy is a Palestinian Muslim whose sympathies lie with Hamas, a political party whose charter not only anticipates Israel's destruction, but also depicts Jews as subhuman demons responsible for all the world's problems.

The parable of the "Good Hamas Member" might be difficult for people in support of Israel's existence. Were Jesus a Samaritan, we'd today have the parable of the "Good Jew," told in the streets of Ramallah. If people in the Middle East could picture this, we might have a better vision for choosing life.

Can we finally agree that it is better to acknowledge the humanity and the potential to do good in the enemy, rather than to choose death? Will we be able to care for our enemies, who are also our neighbors? Will we be able to bind up their wounds rather than blow up their cities? And can we imagine that they might do the same for us? Can we put into practice that inauguration promise of not leaving the wounded traveler on the road? The biblical text—and concern for humanity's future—tell us we must.