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Jonah and the Elder Son

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Short Comments

The Good Samaritan: Another View

Writing in this journal, Geoffrey Burn has offered an alternative interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.¹ Let me offer another. The parable is usually interpreted as an exhortation to Christians to have a proper concern for people in need, but that seems to overlook some significant features of the story. These, I suggest, are:

1. The parable is addressed, not to a crowd, but to a single individual – a Jewish lawyer, who would be highly intelligent and well used to the cut and thrust of rabbinic debate. We should expect, therefore, a battle of wits conducted at a sophisticated and subtle level.

2. According to the Torah (Num 19:11–13), any Jew coming in contact with a dead body would be rendered unclean. But the Oral Law, with which both the lawyer and Jesus would be familiar, had a modified version. When someone's life was in danger, attending to their needs took precedence over the purity laws. Similarly, if a dead body was encountered, the Oral Law required that it be buried. In the parable, therefore, the priest and Levite were quite wrong to ignore the man, whether he was injured or dead. Even the Jewish authority, Hyam Maccobi, is emphatic on this score; he writes, 'the priest and Levite, who should have known better, failed in their moral duty'.² So why did these two Jewish officials fail in their moral duty? Most likely it was fear. Knowing the reputation of the Jericho road, seeing this man's body would suggest there were desperate characters active in the area so that any delay to their journey might have been fatal.

3. The injured man is described as being 'half-dead' (*hēmithanēs*), a term which occurs nowhere else in the New Testament.³ The choice of such a rare word must surely have significance. I suggest it could legitimately be taken to mean the man was dead to all appearances.

4. Why does the parable have both a priest and a Levite? Leaving one out would not affect the popular interpretation. Having both, however, fulfils a technique of story telling known as 'the rule of end stress', by which the use of three characters indicates that the primary emphasis is on the third, i.e., in this case attention should

be concentrated on the Samaritan – it is he the story is mostly about.

5. The term 'Samaritan' was not only used to define a national grouping, it was also used as a term of abuse. According to John (8:48), even Jesus was once ridiculed in this way. I suggest that is the usage here.

6. With the lawyer's attention now directed firmly towards the Samaritan's self-sacrificial demonstration of compassion, Jesus was asking him, in effect, 'If you were the injured man, which of those three would you want as neighbour?' The lawyer is forced into the only possible answer, 'The one who had compassion'.

Putting all those considerations together, they seem to indicate that Jesus is really answering both the lawyer's questions, not least his first one, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' In the cut and thrust of debate, Jesus first takes the wind out of the lawyer's sails by agreeing with him that the way to life is by observing the Torah – a traditional Jewish belief. But observing the Torah in its entirety was virtually impossible – that's the problem. Jesus's answer in the parable is that his desire for life will be met by a neighbour – a neighbour whom he might despise as he might despise a Samaritan – but a neighbour who was prepared to make great sacrifices on the lawyer's behalf. Such a neighbour, of course, was Jesus, the one whose whole purpose was to bring life (cf. John 10:10). The Good Samaritan is a picture of Jesus. Just as the Samaritan expressed his compassion for the half-dead man by acts of selfless sacrifice, so Jesus would show his compassion for the people of a half-dead world by making the ultimate sacrifice on the Cross. 'Go and do likewise' – see your neighbour as the one who can offer you life through his sacrificial compassion. Such an interpretation enables the parable to sit more comfortably within the context Luke has given it.

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Jonah and the Elder Son

Both the prophet Jonah and the elder son in the parable of Jesus (Lk 15:11–32) get a 'bad press'. They are depicted as somewhat vindictive, mean and small minded, who would have rejoiced in their 'opponents' getting their 'come-uppance'. The purpose of this short enquiry is to ask whether that interpretation of their reaction to the events described in their respective stories is altogether fair. (e.g., typically, Richard Stamp, who describes Jonah as 'rather obnoxious, disobedient and bigoted',¹ and G. B. Caird, who says that 'The elder son displays an unattractive facet of his personality with every word he speaks'; 'he himself was the centre of his every

¹ ET 111, 1999–2000, 299–300.

² *Judaism in the First Century* (Sheldon Press, 1989), 103.

³ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (T&T Clark, 1937), gives only a single occurrence in the LXX, 4 Macc 4:11, and indicates it is not found in classical literature. Arndt-Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 1957) list only six references apart from 4 Macc 4:11, all from first century BC writers and papyri.

¹ 'Jonah: The Wayward Dove' (ET 111, 1999–2000), 80.

thought'.²) Is there a more significant explanation of their being categorized as they are in both stories other than the obvious deficiency of character?

The book of Jonah is generally thought to be post-exilic but shares with the pre-exilic Nahum a similar view about how God interacts with mankind. Namely that the righteous prosper and the wicked, especially God's enemies, are punished. That was the way of things and was not to be questioned but simply accepted as the way life was ordered. But of course some thinkers, meditating on and perplexed by the apparent discrepancy between this tenet of faith and actual experience, were questioning it.

Job, certainly, but also other contributors to what we call the Wisdom literature no longer found the received tradition satisfactory. Job's friends do not see, or do not want to see, the problem; it is always safer and less demanding to rely on generally accepted wisdom and in answer to his distress they fall back on the old thinking. 'Consider, now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?' (Job 4:7). And its corollary relevant to Jonah's situation, 'On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and sulphur; a scorching wind will be their lot' (Ps 11:6). In Nahum such a state of affairs is confirmed by his experience, and he can speak in brutal terms of the judgment passed by God on his enemies. God has been true to himself and the wise are vindicated and the foolish destroyed. Praise be to God! (thus Nah 3:1-3, 18-19). It is not suggested, however, that Nahum is obnoxious or bigoted, yet he expresses this received wisdom in much more graphic and vindictive terms.

The anger of Jonah may be perceived therefore not simply as personal pique, or even loss of face, but more significantly as a reaction to the apparent denial of all that he had been brought to believe. Not so much the consequence of deficiency in character, but of stubborn unquestioning adherence to a generally agreed tenet of faith. If we cannot commend his position at least we can commend his loyalty, in the same way as Jesus could commend the cleverness of the Unjust Steward. Douglas Stuart [Word Biblical Commentary] writes of Jonah that, 'His past and future are not essential to the book's development';³ but on the contrary it is his past, or at least his spiritual heritage, which is the key to understanding his reaction to the Ninevites' repentance and God's compassion. The Ninevites *par excellence* were the foolish unrighteous and according to the received wisdom deserved punishment. If God was true to himself, then that is the only consequence, but to Jonah's consternation God has changed his mind.

Again, despite the Wisdom thinkers, the common view in New Testament times remained much the same. 'Who has sinned, this man or his father, that he should have been born blind?' (Jn 9:2). Alan Richardson may fairly represent the commentators on this point: 'It is axiomatic in Jewish thinking that all suffering was divine punishment for sin . . . The criticism in the Book of Job of this simple-minded belief had not made much impression upon the popular mind.'⁴ So little impression that the spectators of the blind man's healing argued about his true identity, the leaders refused to believe that he had been healed and finally stubbornly held to the belief that he had been 'steeped in sin at birth'.

But in the story of the prodigal the wastrel foolish lad receives not punishment but a party and a celebration. Not a sign of judgment and disfavour but of welcome. This is unfair; it is unjust and above all it turns one's understanding of God's ways on end. The elder son's anger arises from his perplexity at least as much as it arises from his personal annoyance. Jeremias comments: 'The father is not speaking apologetically, "I had to make a feast", but reproachfully, "You ought to be glad and make merry, since it is *your* brother who has come home"'.⁵

But just as Jonah could not come to terms with his enemies' repentance the elder son was unable to value his familial relationship above his entrenched position. The younger son *was* a prodigal, a fool, and as such had forfeited his father's grace. 'There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death' (Prov 16:25). The elder son was doing no more than reiterate what most people believed.

If this way of thinking about these two characters has some merit, then part of the interpretation of their stories for the present age is to be found, not only in the stress on the reality of undeserved grace, but also in the challenge to entrenched theological positions and in the encouragement of an openness of mind to new truth, and in these days who can be sure which is the most necessary emphasis? Because it is easy to disassociate ourselves from the obvious meanness of spirit displayed by Jonah and the elder son and even, like the Pharisee at prayer, thank God that we are not like that, it becomes the easier to accept the closed mind and the hardness of heart in the light of new revelation.

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² *Saint Luke* (Pelican Gospel Commentaries, Penguin Books, 1963), 183, 182.

³ *Hosea-Jonah* (Word Biblical Commentary, Word Books, 1987), 431

⁴ *Saint John* (Torch Bible Paperbacks, SCM Press, 1963), 124.

⁵ *The Parables of Jesus* (SCM Press, 1963), 131.