# Samaritans, Jews and Philosophers

Berel Dov Lerner

*The Expository Times* 2002 113: 152
DOI: 10.1177/001452460211300503

# Samaritans, Jews and Philosophers

By DR BEREL DOV LERNER
*Western Galilee College, Akko, Israel*

Nothing leads to the arcane more surely than a disagreement about the apparently obvious. My own experience of reading the late philosopher Peter Winch's essay on the parable of the Good Samaritan, 'Who is My Neighbour', and its further discussion by D. Z. Phillips and Lars Hertzberg,[1] offers a perhaps edifying example of such a disagreement. Winch uses the parable as the textual foundation for an analysis of what is involved in one person's identifying another as a fellow human being. While Phillips criticizes Winch on several points and Hertzberg tries to mediate their disagreement, all parties accept certain interpretive assumptions that strike me as problematic. Before I discuss those assumptions, it would be wise to first make explicit the complications of our hermeneutic predicament.

We are confronted with something like a Russian doll of repeatedly embedded contexts. How does Winch know of the Good Samaritan? Well, he has read Luke's report of a conversation in which Jesus relates the parable. Embedded in this conversation is yet another contextual layer; for Jesus is explaining a verse from Leviticus 19:18, 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. Each of these layers brings its own interpretive context, Leviticus and biblical Judaism, Jesus speaking to a first-century Rabbinic Jew, Luke writing for his largely gentile audience,[2] Winch reading with the sensibilities of a twentieth-century philosopher belonging to a predominantly Christian culture. Now I come along, an Orthodox Jew with some training in philosophy.

I have no intention of unravelling this intertextual tangle. I shall not trace the roots of Winch's thought through Wittgenstein and beyond, nor am I capable of figuring out what Jesus did or did not say or of assigning the verse from Leviticus its proper place in the alphabet soup of biblical criticism. Furthermore, I shall not attempt to relate the parable to other sections of Luke which touch upon Jews, Samaritans, or love. Winch did not concern himself with these things; he naïvely read the parable as a 'well-formulated example' of the kind conducive to philosophical discussion. The use of such literary examples is commonplace in philosophy. *Middlemarch* and *Gulliver's Travels* are both deployed alongside Luke in Winch's essay. My point is that Winch is not involved in doing biblical criticism or theology, but rather in exegesis of a literary-philosophical nature. As is any exegesis, Winch's reading is informed by a particular cultural background. As Winch himself wrote, 'Unless the reader brings with him a great deal of knowledge and skill to the text, in an important sense there is no text for him to consider.'[3] My suspicion is that the background assumptions of Winch's reading derive in large part from Christian as well as from philosophical sources. Therefore, Winch's exegesis can be characterized as naïve (untroubled by textual criticism, etc.), literary-philosophical and Christian. I also propose to offer a naïve literary-philosophical reading of the Good Samaritan; but one based on premises stemming from my own Jewish background. Luke tells us that Jesus spoke to a first-century Jew. I take him at his word, read the text as if it appeared in the Talmud, and relate it to different philosophical concerns.[4] These concerns, although philosophical and ethical, involve issues which are to some extent internal to Rabbinic Judaism. My translation of their import to terms readily understandable to a broader audience will

[1] Peter Winch, 'Who is my neighbour?' in his *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 154–166; D. Z. Phillips, 'My Neighbour and My Neighbours', *Philosophical Investigations*, 12:112–133 (April 1989); Lars Hertzberg, 'On Being Neighbourly' in John Whittaker (ed.), *The Possibilities of Sense: Essays In Honour Of D. Z. Phillips* (Macmillan, forthcoming). My thanks to Professor Hertzberg for making his paper available to me before publication.

[2] See chapter 2 of Philip Francis Esler's *Community and Gospel in Luke–Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) for a detailed discussion of the ethnic composition of Luke's community.

[3] Page 20 of Winch's 'Text and Context', pp. 18–32 of *Trying to Make Sense*.

[4] I also chalk up to my self-proclaimed naïvete the assumption that canonical Rabbinical literature gives us an accurate picture of first-century Judaism.

be partial at best. Even so, and despite the admitted naïvete of my interpretation, I think it might make Winch's readers less sanguine about his exegetical assumptions.

Now for the promised critique of Winch & co. Winch is sure that the proper gloss of the term 'neighbour' in the injunction 'love your neighbour as yourself' is 'fellow human being', and that 'the law which gives rise to the question ("thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself") ... is clearly to be taken as applicable to all human beings'.[5] I shall call this the universalist interpretation. The universalist interpretation creates a deep anomaly at the heart of Winch's understanding of the parable's frame story. The Torah scholar (the term 'lawyer' brings to mind anachronistic images of corporate merger negotiations and malpractice suits) asks Jesus, 'who is my neighbour?' What is the meaning of his question, and what kind of reply does he expect to receive? True to the universalist interpretation, Winch understands the scholar's question as meaning 'something like: "How do I recognize someone else as my fellow",' and further explains that 'the lawyer ... obviously expected an answer in terms of some general defining characteristics of the sorts of beings who constitute fellow human beings'.[6] Even if we assume that the scholar is meant to be a spiritual misfit and the villain of the piece, why would he try to trip up Jesus with such an out-of-place and frankly bizarre question? Winch tries to make sense of this by comparing the scholar's obtuseness with that of 'the philosophers whom Kierkegaard so witheringly attacked'.[7] Here, precisely, is the problem. For Winch the question 'Who is my neighbour?' parodies philosophical thought, while it is in fact asked by a scholar who belongs to the completely different intellectual discipline of Rabbinic law. Although it is hardly difficult to satirize the arguments of the Rabbis, Winch attributes a land of abstraction to the scholar's question which I find quite alien even to a caricature of Rabbinic discourse. His exegesis has taken a wrong turn. In the first footnote to his essay 'On Being Neighbourly', Lars Hertzberg *almost* takes notice of the weakness of the universalist interpretation and mentions that,

> It may also be of some importance to note that the word 'neighbour' in the parable corresponds to an Old Testament word meaning 'kinsman'. So in effect Jesus is getting the lawyer to admit that only the Samaritan proved himself a true kinsman to the robbed Jew.

Indeed, the standard Rabbinic understanding of the Hebrew *re'a* ('neighbour'), or, more precisely, *re'ekha* ('your neighbour', addressed to a presumably Israelite audience) in Leviticus 19:18, is 'fellow Israelite'. This may be called the *particularist* interpretation. There are strong textual foundations for such a reading. Deuteronomy 15:2–3 explicitly contrasts obligations due a *re'a* to those due a *nokhri* ('stranger'). In his remarkable essay, 'The Neighbour (*Re'a*) Whom We Shall Love', the Israeli Bible scholar Uriel (Ernst) Simon is so tortured by his inability to dismiss the particularist interpretation of *re'a* that he finally concedes the 'feeling of morally sensitive men that the Halakha [Jewish law] is not sufficient to meet all our needs'.[8] Leaving aside Simon's moral compunctions for the moment, it is clear that he would have adopted the universalist interpretation of *re'a* in the Hebrew Scriptures and Talmud if it had been honestly available to him. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that when the early Rabbis wished to address more universal ethical concerns, they turned to other scriptural passages. When the great second-century sage Rabbi Akiva proclaimed that '"Love your neighbour as yourself" is the fundamental principle of the Torah', his contemporary Ben Azai countered with the more universalistic claim that the creation of human beings (and not merely of Israelites) in God's image 'is a greater principle than this'.[9] Personally speaking, I

[5] Winch, 'Who is my neighbour?' p. 155.
[6] Loc. cit.
[7] Loc. cit.

[8] In Marvin Fox (ed.), *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), pp. 29–56, quotation from p. 51. It would seem that Leviticus 19:34, 'You shall love him [the stranger] as yourself', neutralizes the particularist interpretation of Leviticus 19:18. However, the 'stranger' in question has traditionally been understood to be a convert to Judaism, see *Sifra, Kedoshim* 83.

[9] *Sifra, Kedoshim* 45. Ben Azai may also wish to neutralize the arguments of a radical misanthrope who loves his neighbours just as little as he loves himself. Ben Azai requires the misanthrope to love himself as well as his fellow humans in recognition of their common resemblance to Divinity. Interestingly, Akiva has an additional point of contact with the parable. When asked by Jesus what the Torah requires of those seeking eternal life, before mentioning love of neigh-

favour Ben Azai, but my present purpose is to understand the words of Jesus, who in this case stands together with Akiva.

Let us now return to the parable armed with this new knowledge. Jesus is talking to a Torah scholar about the range of application of the injunction to 'love one's *re'a*'. The scholar appears to be asking Jesus for a ruling regarding membership in the Jewish People. In effect they are pondering an issue which continues to dog contemporary Israeli politics, i.e. the long-debated question, 'who is a Jew?'

At this point it might seem that Jesus is determined to demolish the underlying particularist foundations of the scholar's question. The scholar is only concerned with Jews, while Jesus forces him to open his eyes to the universal love deserved by all human beings. However, another bit of Jewish context makes this interpretation unlikely. Jesus does not tell the scholar a story about a 'Good Human Being', but rather, specifically, about a 'Good *Samaritan*' who comes to the aid of an injured man on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. Winch finds historical importance in this detail, and compares the encounter between Samaritan and Jew with that between 'a Palestinian Arab and an Israeli'.[10] Similarly, Phillips describes the situation as one in which, 'A member of one race comes across a member of another race between whom bitter enmity and hatred existed.'[11] Neither of these descriptions reflects sensitivity to the peculiar historical relationship existing between Jews and Samaritans.

Far from constituting clearly distinct 'races', nations or religious communities, each group, the Jews and the Samaritans, identifies itself as constituting the most legitimate spiritual and historical continuation of biblical Israel. More importantly, each party grudgingly recognizes the partial legitimacy of the other's claims. The Samaritan Chronicle II has it that there were three divisions in Israel, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the 'Righteous, who were the Samaritan Israelite community that lived around ... Mount Gerizim.' Samaritans expect the Jewish people to return to the correct path 'on the day of vengeance and compromise.'[12] Jewish attitudes towards the Samaritans were mixed. The minor Talmudic tractate *Kuttim* opens with the words, 'the Samaritans are in some ways like idolaters and in others like Israelites, and in most like Israelites'. The ambiguity surrounding their status is rooted in the rabbinical assumption that the Samaritans were descendants of converts to Judaism. While some sages upheld the full validity of that conversion, others considered it incomplete.[13] The complexity of these issues allows for the Talmudic discussion of seemingly paradoxical cases, such as that of a Samaritan *haver* (Pharisee).[14] One recent historian writes:

> The process of drawing apart [of Samaritans from Jews] was certainly a very gradual one ... In spite of some nasty name calling from both sides and some violent action on part of the Hasmonean rulers, the responsible Jewish halakhic authorities continued to regard the Samaritans from certain points of view still as Jews till late into the second century AD ... Jews still joined the Samaritans in one of their last uprisings against the Byzantine government in AD 556. Thus the process of estrangement was a very slow one, spread over many centuries and completed only a millennium after it had started.[15]

These esoteric details must be recalled in order to make clear a point which is obvious to anyone conversant with Talmudic literature. A Jewish writer would never mention a Samaritan as an example of a gentile or generic human being. It is true Jews and Samaritans had their differences and conflicts. So did the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of biblical Israel. The relationship of Jews and Samaritans to each other was quite dissimilar to that holding between Palestinians and Israelis. A better (yet still

bours, the scholar quotes (a variant reading of) the *Shema* (Deut. 6:5), 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.' It is related in the Talmud (*b. Berakhot* 61b) that while being tortured to death by the Romans, Akiva recited the *Shema*. His students asked him, 'Our master, even unto this?' He told them 'All of my days I have been troubled by the verse "with all your soul" [that is to say] even if he takes your soul. I said, "When will my opportunity come that I might fulfill it?" Now that the opportunity has arrived shall I not fulfil it?'

[10] Winch, 'Who is my neighbour?', p. 156. It is worth noting that everyone (the present author included) I have mentioned assumes that the injured man is Jew, but Jesus identifies him merely as a 'man'.

[11] Phillips, op. cit., p. 131.

[12] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. 'Samaritans'.

[13] See *b. Kidushin* 75b, *b. Sanhedrin* 85b.

[14] *b. Berakhot* 47b.

[15] Nathan Schur, *History of the Samaritans* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 32–33.

obviously imperfect) historical analogy might be to the relationship between Anglicans and the Church of Rome.

If Jesus had intended to overthrow the particularity of Leviticus, he made a poor choice in speaking of a 'Good Samaritan'. If only Jesus had spoken of a good Greek or idolater! Then it would be reasonable to speculate that he meant, in this particular story, to call for a universal ethic of love.[16]

Given the context provided above (seemingly esoteric but completely ordinary from a traditional Jewish standpoint) what is left of Jesus' message? Jesus is saying that the Samaritan should be counted as a *re'a*, as a fellow Jew. Very well, there is nothing surprising about a first-century rabbi voicing a perfectly legitimate ruling on a well-known legal controversy. Ironically, Rabbi Akiva, the revered sage best known for claiming that 'Love your neighbour as yourself' is the fundamental principle of the Torah, is cited by the Talmud as granting the Samaritans the status of full converts to Judaism.[17] It is noteworthy that only Luke, the gospel author most distant from Jewish concerns, includes the parable of the Good Samaritan in his book. Perhaps the others understood the parable's Jewish context and saw no point to including it in their own writings. But here I risk losing my own claim to naïvete! In any case, it would be unreasonable to say that the *whole* point of Jesus' parable is merely that a Samaritan may be recognized as a full Jew.

In real life, people rarely deal with each other as generic human beings and their relationships are almost never regulated by purely universal duties and obligations. Children must treat their parents as *their* parents, and parents must treat their children as *their* children. Friends can expect more of each other than they would of strangers. Even enemies share a special relationship. Their need for reconciliation creates a moral urgency not present in a chance meeting of strangers. Internal to Judaism itself there is the notion of someone's being Jewish. It would be far beyond my abilities and the scope of this essay to explain in full the religious, legal and ethnic meaning of this concept in its Rabbinic context.[18] In order to proceed, let us engage in gross over-simplification and say that being Jewish has to do with belonging to a particular human community, the Jewish community. Clearly, fellow members of a single community may have claims on each other that go beyond the universal ethical considerations holding between just *any* two human beings. Granted my simplification, one can say that Judaism has traditionally understood Leviticus 19:18 as regulating relationships within the Jewish community, At first blush this may seem small-minded, but I think such criticism does not take seriously the verse's claim upon the Jewish reader. The verse 'Love your neighbour as yourself' is not a slogan or proverb; it is a *law* which requires Jews to be as concerned for the welfare of their fellow Jew as they are for their own. If I were injured and needed a place to sleep, I would hire myself a room in an inn and pay a doctor to treat me. In principle, Leviticus 19:18 requires that I do this for any fellow Jew in similar circumstances. Obviously, the expectation that Jews *always* and not merely in the occasional moment of moral heroism, treat each other as the Samaritan treated the wounded man, is itself an impossibly utopian hope. Indeed, Phillips' insistence on the unusualness of the Samaritan's behaviour serves as the exegetical lynchpin of his critique of Winch. People may recognize each other's humanity without automatically displaying what Phillips (borrowing from Simone Weil) calls the Good Samaritan's 'supernatural virtue'.[19] Actually, Jesus' parable does not fully express the moral radicalism of Leviticus 19:18. The Samaritan found himself facing an unusually pressing situation. Only by arranging food, shelter and medical attention could the Samaritan ensure the injured man's survival. Anything less would have been tantamount to leaving him to die. It is certainly commendable, but not really unheard of, for people to rise to the occasion of such life and death situations. The callousness of the priest and

[16] Unfortunately, even authoritative scholars have missed this point. R. Alan Culpepper writes in his commentary on Luke in the *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), vol. 9, p. 229: 'By depicting a Samaritan as the hero of the story, therefore, Jesus demolished all boundary expectations. Social position – race, religion, or region – count for nothing.'

[17] See *b. Kidushin* 75b and *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. 'Akiva'.

[18] The philosopher Avi Sagi has, together with Zvi Zohar, attempted such an analysis in their *Conversion to Judaism and the Meaning of Jewish Identity* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994), soon to be translated into English.

[19] Phillips, op. cit., p. 132.

Levite are no less striking than the Samaritan's magnanimity. However, the commandment 'love your neighbour as yourself' equally applies to less extreme circumstances. Suppose I was travelling on the road and found myself suffering from a splitting headache. I could continue my journey, but prefer to seek medical help and rest up in a nearby inn. In principle, Leviticus 19:18 requires that I arrange medical help and lodgings for any fellow Jew in a similar situation. The demand that the scope of such utopian legislation should be extended to include people outside of the community, to non-members of the social contract would completely undermine any expectation of its actual observance.[20]

So – Jesus is not talking about universal ethical duties, but rather about duties between members of a common community. The first question which must be asked about such a community is who is to be counted among its members. This is no small matter. If some readers may feel that my interpretation trivializes the message of Jesus' parable, I invite them to reflect upon the difficulties of immigrants and guest workers trying to gain recognition of their membership in contemporary Western societies. For an actual living person, being recognized as belonging to a particular community may be no less crucial than being recognized as belonging to the human race.

If a Greek were to have taken in the Jew, paid his hotel bill, and so forth, this would have been a great and praiseworthy act of magnanimity, but it would have had nothing to do with community membership. For all his philanthropy, the Greek makes no claim to membership in the Jewish community. The Jewish community, for its part, might celebrate the Greek as a 'righteous gentile' and honoured guest but there would be no point to unilaterally proclaiming his Jewishness. Jesus, however, does not speak of a righteous Greek, but rather of a 'Good Samaritan', someone who *already* enjoys partial Jewish status. Jesus wants to say something about what it means to belong to a community. Community membership may be determined by many considerations, including those of common ancestry. For instance, the fact that a child was born to parents who are citizens of a particular country is usually sufficient to establish the child's own citizenship. Even in the United States, a 'nation of immigrants', some people make a great point of their being 'Daughters of the American Revolution' or descendants of the original passengers of the *Mayflower*, as if this made them especially American. In the Jewish community, priestly or Levitical descents are especially respectable pedigrees. In the eyes of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries, the Samaritans possessed a rather questionable Jewish derivation. Jesus wished to emphasize the role of other factors in the determination of community membership. True, the Samaritan lacked the distinguished pedigree of a priest or Levite. However, he more than makes up for this by demonstrating outstanding diligence in fulfilling his obligations towards fellow members of the community. The priest and Levite, for their part, denied their Jewish identity by refusing to help a fellow Jew. They did not act as true *re'im* towards the injured man. We are meant to understand that concern for fellow community members is itself the foremost (but not exclusive) sign of genuine membership in the community. In a way, the scholar was already partially aware of this. After all, it was he who had first said that neighbourly love was one of the two conditions for inheritance of eternal life. When a Jew explains how he may inherit eternal life, he is also explaining how to be a good Jew. What then is Jesus' message? Jesus is saying that instead of arguing about the range of membership in the Jewish people, the scholar had best attend to the establishment of his own Jewish credentials, and that the principle way for him to do this is through the diligent fulfilment of ethical duties towards fellow Jews.[21]

[20] This is essentially the line taken by Harold Fisch in his 'Response to Ernst Simon' in Fox, op. cit., pp. 57–61. I should point out that the particularist interpretation does not imply that Jewish law does not value or require acts of kindness towards gentiles, but merely that the scriptural basis for such kindness must be found elsewhere than Leviticus 19:18.

[21] My thanks to the Rev. Dr James Francis for his encouragement and guidance in Christian scholarship, and to John Goldingay, Molly and Graham Harvey, Lars Hertzberg, Menachem Kellner, Moshe Kohen, and Sue and Joseph Lerner, who all read and commented on earlier drafts of this paper. All errors and misunderstandings herein are, of course, of my own invention.