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Editorial

"Love Your Neighbor as Yourself" (Lk. 10:27b): The Parable of the Good Samaritan in the Light of Regulatory Focus Theory

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Abstract

This article delineates a novel argument for interpreting the actions of the priest, Levite, and Samaritan in the good Samaritan parable (Lk. 10:25-37) from social-scientific ideas relating to regulatory focus theory and from the perspective of behavioral decision making under uncertainty. Based on an exegesis on their actions, the paper encompasses particularistic perspectives from history, theology, and psychology to cast doubt on the reasons why the priest and Levite do not help the wounded stranger, but the Samaritan helps him.

Keywords: *Empathy; Eternal Life; Morality; Helping Behavior*

Introduction

The parabolic sayings of the compassionate Samaritan (Lk. 10:30-37) in the Synoptic Gospels are exemplified when the narrative portrayal of Jesus' relationship with His disciples reaches its high point, but an expert in the law abruptly interrupts Jesus in order to test Him (Lk. 10:25). The expert's question is, "Who is my neighbor?" (Lk. 10:29b; New International Version and so subsequently). As the majority of rabbinic parables function exegetically to explain a scriptural text or narrative [1], Jesus employs the parable to elucidate the greatest commandment, namely "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18b, Lk. 10:27b), as well as a widely known Confucius' and Hellenistic "golden rule", namely "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others" (Analects 論語 15.24; see also Lk. 6:31) [2,3].

In the parable, Jesus describes that a priest and a Levite who are journeying away on the Jericho road from Jerusalem sequentially pass by a wounded man and do nothing for him. Nevertheless, to the audience's surprise, a despised Samaritan acting as an example of one who loves his neighbor comes to aid the victim, furthermore brings him to a place of shelter (cf., Lk. 9:58b, "The Son of Man has no place to lay his head"), and instructs the innkeeper to spare no expense in his treatment (cf., Lk. 2:7b, "There was no room for them in the inn"; see also [4] for a characteristic interpretation on the innkeeper). It is noteworthy that the wounded man looks seemingly like unconscious and unidentifiable since he is stripped by the robbers. As a consequence, the audience, being Jewish, could not recognize his nationality or religious commitment without his dialect or dress [5]. This paradigmatic parable serves to prove that the love of God has to be complemented by the love of the neighbor (for a striking resemblance to the parable, see 2 Chron. 28:15 and Deut. 10:18-19; Cf., [6] for a patristic explanation and [7,8] for a hermeneutic and hypertextual interpretation).

On the one hand, priests and Levites were supposed to distinguish between ritual cleanness and uncleanness (Lev. 10:10), insofar as they need to preserve the natural state and to avoid impurity, which is whatever related to the disintegration of the body. Impurity is a substandard status to the extent to which humans descend through bodily process and sin [9]. Impurity could be transferable by the dead, blood (menstruation), any discharge from sexual organs or privy parts (e.g., excrement, urine), sweat, or scale diseases (i.e., the so-called leper), and even to an extreme extent to which impurity could be transmitted through air from corpse contamination [10,11].

Nevertheless, human impurity is not a sin and is regarded as a natural phenomenon related often to the natural functioning of the body. However, if priests and Levites defile themselves (e.g., a contact with the dead), they cannot enter the Temple's territory (courtyards) or collect, distribute, and eat tithes. Especially the defilement that is caused by corpses was seen as the strongest impurity, although priests also had an obligation to bury a neglected corpse [12] (for an ethical perspective on priests and Levites, see [13]). Qumran records that dead corpse makes impure the whole inner space of the house, and whatever in the house and the family, servants in the house, and whoever enters the house shall be unclean for seven days (e.g., 11Q 19 XLIX.10; for a general review on the system of ritual purity in the Bible, see [14]).

On the other hand, according to the Bible (e.g., 2 Chron. 28, Ezra, 2 Kgs 17, Neh.), the Samaritans are not Israelites but descendants of people settled in the former kingdoms of the Northern Israel Land by the Assyrians in the time of Sargon [15]. A significant body of research from the Samaritan Pentateuch, papyri, inscriptions, and other archaeological discoveries shows that the Samaritans resembled a small-scale communal group with their locally bounded places of residence (e.g., the construction of the temple on Mount Gerizim) and their seemingly self-contained religious kinship systems (e.g., a surrogate form of worshiping venerated {yhwh, the God of Israel} [15-17].

Furthermore, the Cuthites/Samaritans are not classified either as Jews or idol worshipers according to Tanaitic sources: "The ways of the Cuthites are sometimes like idolaters, sometimes like Jews. Most of them are like Jews" (Tractate Cuthim 1,1). As a result, the Second Temple Jews imagined the Samaritans as an antithesis, albeit syncretistic, to these Israelites' collective identity, politics, and religious interests [18] (cf., Matt. 10:5; Jn. 4:9, 8:48, 9:51-56; with regards to a conjecture of the Samaritan's employment and a historical and social relevance in the Second Temple period, see [19]); nonetheless, they remain faithful servants of Israel's God. However, the Samaritans are sometimes suspicious of their strictness of abiding the laws of ritual impurity and purity mostly because of the lack of their knowledge on the precepts compared with Jews [20]. Notwithstanding the fact that there were many anti-Samaritan negations by the Jewish tradition in later antiquity (on the question of the historical conflicts between the Samaritans and Israelites, see [21], the New Testament shows its sympathetic points of view on the ostensibly "alien" Samaritans (e.g., Jn. 4:39-42).

Taken together, the present paper argues that the priest and Levite in the parable were heavily influenced by their religious restraints as well as their surrounding peers and people, whereas the Samaritan was much less influenced by his religious restriction to strictly abide by the similar law of injunctions against contact with the dead. Therefore, it is reasonable to justify that the priest and Levite regarded their defilement, especially when it could be caused by touching the corpse, as a cardinal suffering of shame and embarrassment. In sharp contrast, the Samaritan treated his defilement as a less important suffering, with respect to his irrelevantly profession relating to religious service.

A Psychological Look at the Parable

Contemporarily secular interpretations especially in the light of psychological studies also serve as an attempt to better understand the narrative of the parable. For example, [22] designed a simulated good Samaritan scenario for a group of male seminary participants. The results showed that these who were primed to think religious and ethical thoughts (i.e., a talk on the parable of the good Samaritan) is no more likely than the others who were primed to other topics (e.g., a talk instead on the jobs) to call for a helping response when in this social experiment they encountered a "victim." Nevertheless, [23] confirmed that both religious belief and helping behavior are all correlated with such Christian ethical virtues as "being a good Samaritan" and "having love and compassion for one's fellow man." Furthermore, the parable also relates to a debate on the association between religiosity and prosocial tendencies toward outgroups [24,25]. Although contemporary research from social psychology, behavioral economics, and anthropology has shown that religious prosociality is applied in limited conditions [26], the explicit expression of benevolence in the parable per se and other behavioral studies has been shown an effective moderation to mitigate some instances of discrimination [27].

From the perspective of behavior decision making, it is convincing to argue that the priest, Levite, and Samaritan choose their actions in a situation of "complete" uncertainty, where they know the set of possible outcomes (i.e., defilement or mercy) for each action, but has no information about the probabilities or likelihood ranking of these outcomes. Therefore, each action is associated with an uncertain expected value represented by the set of possible outcomes corresponding to that action. Furthermore, the decisions made by the priest, Levite, and Samaritan are inevitably influenced by, from the perspective of cognitive psychology, their underlying motivation and perception. Among the various theories of cognition (see [28] for an overview), one of prominent models, the regulatory focus theory, could also aid in dispelling the cloud of our understanding on their actions. How do the three correlated narrative characters make their choice when the situation of the assaulted man shows to them such a dilemma? Next, the present study provides such a novel historical critique on the parable in the light of the strategies of behavioral decision making and the regulatory focus theory.

The regulatory focus theory postulates that a person pursues an intention in a way that maintains the person's own personal beliefs and values [29]. There are two distinct self-regulatory foci coexisted in the literature: *prevention* and *promotion* [30-32]. Individuals whose self-regulation has a prevention focus prefer a defensive strategy which leads to errors and losses avoidance (safety), a high sensitivity to negative events, and the fulfillment of obligations. In contrast, when promotion focus is emphasized, individuals prefer an eager strategy which leads to seek for any specific goal (e.g., the pursuit of gains and aspiration toward ideals and hedonic pleasure) and a particular sensitivity to positive information [33-35]. A burgeoning literature has demonstrated the impact of these different motivational focuses on such phenomena as behavioral strategies [36,37] and risky information processing style [38,39].

Therefore, the present paper justifies that, in the context of the parable, the priest and Levite are concerned with safety, security, and vigilance. As a consequence, their self-regulation pursues goals with a strong prevention focus, which enlarges the situations that they perceive as potentially threatening. As a result, they make their decision to neglect the victim in order to avoid the risk of defilement. In contrast, the Samaritan has no goal to maintain ritual cleanness. As a consequence, his self-regulation is much less influenced by the focus of prevention, and his empathy could override the risk of defilement. In this sense, he could choose to help the victim.

Conclusion

Psychology and theology have never ceased to be in dialogue with each other. The modern extension of psychological research gained from over a century of experimentation has created abundant new attempts at interpreting ancient texts including therefore also the Bible. Since the Word of God has recorded into the Scriptures, it has rooted in the life of human behaviors and is believed to work in a way that is potentially influenced by the various Scripture writers' psychological conditions. By far, there has been more and more multidimensional research trying to incorporate those empirical evidence from, for example, psychological research on the qualities and potential reliability of collective and individual memories [40,41], corporate leadership [42], dreams and numerology meanings [43], and also from other human sciences such as sociological and anthropological approaches, into the biblical traditions. Consequently, the critical methodology of exegeses based on historiological studies has been jointly enriched in a large extent with the aid of the conscious part of human minds.

When incorporating the atheistic aspects of disciplines such as psychology and psychoanalysis into biblical exegeses, we should also bear in our mind a necessity to clarify the different disciplines' research boundaries. In another word, the responsibility of theology would be account for the reality of faith, sin, revelation, and salvation, whereas psychology and psychoanalysis are helpful to clarify the extent of human consciousness or unconsciousness, as reflected in Jesus' saying, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Lk. 20:25b). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that this secular approach is criticized heavily by theologians for deemphasizing and even losing the correct evangelical meanings.

The thrust of the current study also has its limitations, in that it applies modern social-scientific perspectives from psychology of the regulatory focus theory and behavioral decision making to the explication of a particular historical pericope and its initial recipients who were culturally far away from us, in a specific region of the Mediterranean and long ago. Hence, the possible value of the present analysis may fall beyond the traditional boundaries of psychology-theology integrative work; that is, stated broadly, the advancement of psycho-

logical science which requires the elucidation therefrom of perspectives, laws, or regularities that are more universal in their application. Nonetheless, the current research is an attempt to incorporate other appropriate methodologies as valid tools into biblical case studies besides traditional theological exegeses. Furthermore, we are heartened and encouraged to view that Philip Esler has also sought to relate modern psychological findings from social identity theory's understanding on intergroup conflict and its reduction directly to the parable of the good Samaritan as well as Paul's letter to Galatians [44,45]. It is hoped that this psychological research can contribute to a deeper understanding of certain aspects of Jesus' parables that has been rooted in hermeneutical exegesis.

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