



TO LOOK INTENTLY AND NOT THE OTHER WAY: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PORTRAYALS OF THE PRIEST AND LEVITE IN LK 10:29–37

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The representations of the priest and Levite in the parable of the Compassionate Samaritan found in Lk 10:29–37 are frequently undervalued due to their brief descriptions within the narrative. Although the Samaritan is the focal point of the parable, the inclusion of the priest and Levite by Luke serves to impart particular lessons to the audience. An examination of their roles through the lens of narrative criticism reveals that these figures act as foil characters, creating a narrative gap and a temporal delay for the other characters. A thorough analysis indicates that their identities, actions, silence, and the evaluation made by the lawyer and Jesus illustrate that they are not merely peripheral figures. Rather, Luke has strategically positioned them to communicate an ironic message: the imperative to refrain from turning a blind eye, or looking the other way. This also provides an alternative way of reading their characterizations, which are not solely revolved around their covert motivations. Contemporary Christian readers can draw valuable lessons from the exhortatory portrayals of the priest and Levite, encouraging them to engage more attentively with others in a society that often promotes indifference; they teach the Christians in a concrete, ironical way to avoid looking the other way when faced with a similar situation in life.

Keywords: Priest, Levite, Parable of the Compassionate Samaritan, Looking the Other Way

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How to cite this article:

Wangge, A. (2025). To Look Intently and Not the Other Way: The Significance of the Portrayals of the Priest and Levite in Lk 10:29–37. *Scientia - The International Journal on the Liberal Arts*, 14(2), 32–46. <https://doi.org/10.57106/scientia.v14i2.204>

Dates:

Received: March 27, 2025

Revised: July 22, 2025

Accepted: August 8, 2025

Published(Online): Sept 30, 2025

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INTRODUCTION

The quest to unravel Luke's portrayals of the priest and Levite as a pair of passersby in the narrative of the Compassionate Samaritan has proven to be a complex enterprise, largely due to the diverse interpretive lenses available. Nevertheless, this study advocates for the application of narrative criticism to reinterpret the text and elucidate Luke's deliberate positioning of these figures within the pericope. This approach also allows for a deeper understanding of how their characterizations connect to the context of modern audience.¹

In the subsequent section, a detailed exploration of all the characters within the parable will be presented. The analysis commences with the two passersby, the priest and Levite; each subsection will focus on these individuals from both textual and historical data. This examination is followed by the perusal of the relations among the characters, particularly using the priest and Levite as the common denominator. This aims to uncover the dynamics of Luke's portrayals of the priest and Levite in contrast and parallel to the other figures, namely the victim, the robbers, the Samaritan, the innkeeper, and notably, the lawyer engaged in dialogue with Jesus.

The aim of this research, then, is to discover how Luke depicts the priest and Levite in the narrative alongside the other characters; this also encompasses several other aspects of Lukan literary style that contribute to the

¹ Heavily influenced by English literary analytical methods, narrative criticism exhibits an approach that is apparent in popular literary analysis as well, taking into account all of the elements of a narrative: characters, rhetoric, style, syntax, plot, imagery, setting, point of view, narrators, and many more. For further information regarding narrative criticism, see David Rhoads, "Narrative Criticism in the Gospel of Mark," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50 (1982): 411–434; cited by James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005); Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean?" in *Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).

overall meaning of the narrative. While the detailed analysis helps provide the evaluation, it is expected that the inseparability of the priest's and Levite's portrayals from the textual reading of the narrative is correctly formulated. Within the context of the parable, the priest and Levite serve as literary characters that embody Luke's intention of conveying an ironic message; they act as a reminder to the audience to act otherwise. This approach suggests that they should not be viewed merely as secondary characters, but rather as those with a deliberate literary function that Luke has skillfully crafted to communicate a profound, yet ironical, message to the readers.

Below is the text of the parable.²

²⁹But because he wished to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰Jesus replied, "A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half-dead. ³¹A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. ³²Likewise a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. ³³But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. ³⁴He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn and cared for him. ³⁵The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, 'Take care of him. If you spend more than what I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back.' ³⁶Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?" ³⁷He answered, "The one who treated him with mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

LUKE'S COMPOSITION OF THE PARABLE IN VERSES 30–35 AND ITS LITERARY FEATURE

As far as the parable proper is concerned, vv. 30–35 contains the entire depiction of each parable character, starting with a man who fell into the

² Biblical excerpts in this research are cited from New American Bible Revised Edition, abbreviated NABRE hereafter.



robbers in v. 30, the priest who just passes by on the opposite side in v. 31, followed by a Levite in v. 32, and the Samaritan in v. 33–34. Another character appears in v. 35, an innkeeper who the Samaritan has trusted with the care of the dying man. A detailed layout of this unit may be seen as follows, with italicized words representing the characters and spaces distinguishing scenes.

A man fell victim to *robbers*
as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho.

They stripped and beat him
and went off leaving him half-dead. (v. 30)

A priest happened to be going down that road,
but when he saw him,
he passed by on the opposite side. (v. 31)
Likewise *a Levite* came to the place,
and when he saw him,
he passed by on the opposite side. (v. 32)

But *a Samaritan traveler* who came upon him
was moved with compassion at the sight. (v. 33)

He approached the victim,
poured oil and wine over his wounds and
bandaged them.

Then he lifted him up on his own animal,
took him to an inn and cared for him. (v. 34)

The next day he took out two silver coins
and gave them to the *innkeeper* with the
instruction,
‘Take care of him.
If you spend more than what I have given you,
I shall repay you on my way back.’ (v. 35)

This narrative commences with the introduction of a man, devoid of any specific characteristics. Luke merely indicates that he is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho and becomes a victim of robbers (v. 30). This serves as the foundation for the entire narrative, which unfolds through a series of dynamic scenes. The first scene depicts the robbers who strip him, assault him, and leave him in a state of near death (v. 30). The second

scene introduces a priest who is traveling along the same path; upon encountering the injured man, he chooses to pass by on the opposite side (v. 31). A similar action is observed in the third scene with a Levite, who, despite noticing the man, also opts to bypass him (v. 32). The fourth scene introduces a Samaritan, who, unlike the previous two characters, takes notice of the man. In the fifth scene, the Samaritan’s response sets him apart from the priest and Levite, as he is moved with compassion. The sixth scene illustrates his actions as he tends to the man’s wounds, places him on his own animal, and transports him to an inn (vv. 33–34). Finally, in the seventh scene, he instructs the innkeeper to care for the injured man and assures him that he will cover any additional expenses incurred (v. 35).

When rearranged for a more structured unit, these scenes appear to form a chiasmic structure.

Introduction of a man (v. 30a)

Robbers steal and injure (v. 30b)	a
Priest sees and passes by, doing nothing (v. 31)	b
Levite sees and passes by, doing nothing (v. 32)	
Samaritan sees and shows compassion (v. 33)	c
Samaritan treats the wounds (v. 34a)	b'
Samaritan transports the man (v. 34b)	
Samaritan spends money on the man, the innkeeper continues the care (v. 35)	a'

With this chiasmic structure, the thrust of the narrative may be seen easily, and the central verse, v. 33, reveals the core of the message. The compassion of the Samaritan in v. 33 (c) serves as the hinge that connects all the other verses upward and downward. Not only does it connect, but it also sheds light on the contrast of the actions of those above and below. The robbers mentioned in v. 30b (a) are juxtaposed with the Samaritan’s actions in v. 35 (a’); while the robbers inflict harm and theft, the Samaritan responds



by providing financial support for the injured man's care, in collaboration with the innkeeper. In v. 31, the priest merely observes the situation and chooses to pass by on the opposite side (b), in contrast to the Samaritan who actively assists the man in v. 34b (b'), an action that a traveling priest could also undertake. Similarly, the Levite in v. 32 exhibits the same behavior as the priest (b), opting to bypass the scene, while the Samaritan in v. 34a (b') tends to the man's wounds and lifts him onto his animal, a task within the capabilities of a Levite. Ultimately, v. 33 (c) underscores the significance of the Samaritan's compassion toward the dying man, a quality conspicuously absent in the actions of both the priest and the Levite.³

Another thing to consider is that Luke arranges this with a specific literary device, the chiasm, not only to highlight the central figure, which is obviously the Samaritan, but also to give space for the priest and Levite to be evaluated based on their parallel characters and scenes. Detailed analyses of these characters are given below. Furthermore, vv. 29, 36–37, help readers reposition the chiastic reading of this narrative within the framework of the lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?"

1. THE PRIEST

*A priest happened to be going down that road,
but when he saw him,
he passed by on the opposite side.*

Κατὰ συγκυρίαν δὲ ἱερεὺς τις κατέβαινε
ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ ἐκεῖνῃ, καὶ ἰδὼν αὐτὸν
ἀντιπαρήλθεν.⁴

³ The structure is based on that of Kenneth E. Bailey with some modifications; Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 252.

⁴ All of the Greek texts provided in this research are taken from *The Greek New Testament*, SBL Edition, ed. Michael W. Holmes (Atlanta, GA, and Bellingham, WA: Society of Biblical Literature and Logos Bible Software, 2010), abbreviated SBLGNT hereafter; Martin M. Culy,

This scene starts with a hapax legomenon, συγκυρίαν, which is attached to κατὰ. The term συγκυρίαν refers to "an unexpected conjunction of events" or "coincidence," and along with κατὰ, it produces the meaning "by chance," which, especially in oral narrative, hits the same tantalizingly positive note as "fortunately."⁵ With this nuance of the word, Luke's readers would probably imagine that the story should end by now because of the opportune presence of the priest, but it could have been the other way round for the lawyer listening to Jesus.

Ἰερεὺς τις is the nominative subject of the next verb κατέβαινε. The indefinite pronoun, τις, serves to introduce an unspecified priest, much like an indefinite article would be used in English. Κατέβαινε, an imperfect active indicative third person singular from καταβαίνω, means "was going down" with the locative ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ ἐκεῖνῃ, on that road.⁶ His first action toward the man uses the word ἰδὼν, which is an aorist active participle masculine nominative singular of ὁράω, translated as having seen. The second word is ἀντιπαρήλθεν, another hapax legomenon, which is aorist active indicative third singular for ἀντιπαρέρχομαι; the latter understood as "to pass by on the other side."⁷ Καὶ ἰδὼν αὐτὸν ἀντιπαρήλθεν can literally be translated as "and having seen him, he passed by on the opposite side."⁸

Considering the historical aspect of this character, it is noteworthy that the temple in Jerusalem was attended by three distinct groups: the first

Mikeal C. Parsons, and Joshua J. Stigall, *Luke: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament, ed. Martin M. Culy (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010); whereas explanations on individual words are synthesized from James Strong, *The New Strong's Complete Dictionary of Bible Words* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1996), Lk 10:31 SBLGNT.

⁵ Culy, *Luke*, 364; cf. *The New Strong's Complete Dictionary of Bible Words*, s.v. "Κατὰ" and "Συγκυρία." NABRE uses the phrase "happened," referring to the happenstance of the scene.

⁶ Culy, *Luke*, 364; cf. *The New Strong's Complete Dictionary of Bible Words*, s.v. "Καταβαίνω."

⁷ *The New Strong's Complete Dictionary of Bible Words*, s.v. "ὁράω" and "Ἀντιπαρέρχομαι."

⁸ Lk 10:31 SBLGNT.



group consisted of priests, the second included the Levites, and the third comprised laypersons who assisted with various temple functions. Each of these groups plays a significant role in the narrative. A priest was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, a journey common for many priests residing in Jericho during the first century. These priests typically ascended to Jerusalem for a two-week service period before returning to their residences in Jericho.⁹

Priests were a hereditary guild¹⁰ and were known to be wealthy.¹¹ As a person of means, the priest would not be hiking seventeen miles down the hill when he could easily afford to ride. A Middle Eastern listener of the story would assume that the rich priest was riding. He could well have transported the man to help, and yet he chose to just pass by the opposite side of the road. Luke particularly does not provide any speech to this passerby, following the victim as well as the robbers.¹² However, the action may speak volumes to the entire characterization and meaning of the narrative. By good fortune, the priest comes along; the injured man is expected to be saved, or so for a moment. Luke may have created the drama by adding this figure; the priest comes to raise hope and then to dash it. The needy man's situation has now measurably

worsened, and nobody else would come to the site soon but the Levite.

2. THE LEVITE

Likewise a *Levite* came to the place,
and when he saw him,
he passed by on the opposite side.

Ὅμοίως δὲ καὶ Λευίτης κατὰ τὸν τόπον
ἔλθων καὶ ἰδὼν ἀντιπαρήλθεν.¹³

The literary device one may readily recognize in this scene is clausal repetition, καὶ ἰδὼν (αὐτὸν in v. 31) ἀντιπαρήλθεν; when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. Λευίτης here serves as the nominative subject of ἀντιπαρήλθεν. Other texts, however, have the word γενόμενος after Λευίτης, the aorist middle participle masculine nominative singular for γίνομαι, which to some extent would render the Levite more dramatic than the priest because he “came up to him quite close, saw, and passed on.” The full text of the translation may be rendered: “Likewise a Levite, who happened upon that place, after going and looking (at the man), passed by on the opposite side.”¹⁴

Κατὰ τὸν τόπον ἔλθων signifies “to the spot,” with ἔλθων as the aorist active participle masculine nominative singular for ἔρχομαι. The verb ἰδὼν, as used in the scene of the priest, does not only imply the act of seeing but also perceiving or even attending to. This includes the cognitive activity of being aware and discerning, which probably may best represent what the priest and Levite do upon encountering the man. They probably assess the man first before leaving him behind.¹⁵

⁹ Many priests lived outside Jerusalem, including a large number at Jericho, and traveled in when they were on duty. At these times they could share the sacred portions that could be eaten only by priests and their families in a state of cultic purity. These included portions of offerings made in the temple and the “heave offerings” that consisted of about one-twenty-fourth of all produce grown in the country; David Instone-Brewer, “Temple and Priesthood,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 210; Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 253.

¹⁰ Priests were descended from the family of Aaron, which was part of the tribe of Levi. At some point, probably during the reign of David, the Zadokite family became a particularly important family for the high priesthood, and their genealogy may have been changed when this happened. Priests were divided into twenty-four courses, as specified in 1 Chron 24:1–19 that were still recognized in Qumran and early rabbinic literature. Instone-Brewer, “Temple and Priesthood,” 201.

¹¹ Johann Maier, “Self-Definition, Prestige, and Status of Priests toward the End of the Second Temple Period,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 23, no. 4 (November, 1993): 142; the sacrificial activities were manifold, and the priestly revenues stemming from them were of substantial economic importance.

¹² Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 253–254.

¹³ Lk 10:32 SBLGNT.

¹⁴ The term “γενόμενος” appears in P45A C D Θ Ψ f13 33 Å al., but seems redundant in light of the close proximity of ἔλθων. Cf. *The New Strong's Complete Dictionary of Bible Words*, s.v. “Γίνομαι.” Culy, *Luke*, 364.

¹⁵ In this verse κατὰ τὸν τόπον, “to the place” may be a Lukan touch;



The term “Levite” initially referred to an individual belonging to the tribe of Levi, which is descended from Jacob’s third son (Gen 29:34). In the OT, the designation “Levite” was frequently applied to those descendants who were not part of the Aaronic lineage but were assigned minor roles associated with the temple worship and rituals. Throughout the OT period, their status fluctuated, particularly as the number of priestly families increased. A relatively small number of Levites returned following the Babylonian Exile (Ez 2:36–43), yet they soon attained a status that allowed them to receive tithes for their priestly duties (Neh 10:37–38).¹⁶ The repetition amplifies the impact, resulting in the listener experiencing diminished surprise upon the second occurrence. This subtle reduction in dramatic intensity is illustrated by the order of mention, first “priest” and then “Levite,” as Levites held a subordinate position to priests within the context of Jewish religious hierarchy, leading to the expectation of a somewhat lesser response.¹⁷

THE TRIADS OF CHARACTERS

Having read through the brief analysis of the priest and Levite, it is now suitable to explore the textual representation of all the characters through a triadic framework. In the following discussion, the characters in the parable are organized into triads, with the priest and Levite serving as the foundational denominator. This approach aims to elucidate the relationships between these two figures and the other characters within the text, as well as their connection to the lawyer, who engages in dialogue with Jesus.

cf. Acts 27:2, 29, and Luke’s many uses of κατά + accusative phrases in connection with locations, cf. John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, John D. W. Watts, Ralph P. Martin, vol. 35b (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1908), 594; Culy, *Luke*, 364.

The New Strong’s Complete Dictionary of Bible Words, s.v. “Οράω.”

¹⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV*, The Anchor Bible, ed. W. F. Albright and David Noel Freedman, vol. 28A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 887.

¹⁷ Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, 594.

1. THE PRIEST, THE LEVITE, AND THE WOUNDED MAN

This initial triad likely represents the most pivotal moment in the entire narrative of the parable. If the priest had attended to the wounded man, the subsequent involvement of the Levite and the Samaritan would have been rendered unnecessary. The priest not only shapes the entire context but also acts as the precursor to the responses of those who encounter the injured man, excluding the robbers, who have already played their part in the unfolding events.

It has been shown before that the priest and Levite happen to be going down that road. Luke uses the same verbs to describe both figures, κατέβαινε, even to the man who has fallen victim to the robbers. This word speaks of their action, going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The man, who has fallen victim to the robbers, is now left behind, stripped of his clothes, beaten, and even Luke describes in detail, half-dead. The priest, the first passerby, is pictured to see the man but decides to pass by on the opposite side. What is interesting is that Luke uses a similar phrasing of the action of both the priest and Levite; they see the man and they pass by on the opposite side.

The word used to describe the action of having seen, ἰδὼν, comes from the root verb, which connotes the cognitive activity of being aware and discerning and not only merely seeing. This gives some room for readers to picture the motivations of the priest and Levite. Nonetheless, the most important thing in seeing the relationship between these figures with the victim is that they see but do nothing. They do not bother to come close to the man, even though Luke uses another detail, γενόμενος, for the Levite, which implies that he comes quite close to the man and assesses the situation before leaving him behind.



As simple as that can be understood, these two figures have no contact with the injured man, and they become the only two characters who have no physical contact with him. They do not take anything from the man nor give him something as assistance. They simply pass by, leaving him behind, and to this, Luke does not give any detail as to why they make that decision. The silence of both of these officials and the man, along with their actions, significantly conveys their enigmatic representation by Luke.

The absence of dialogue from the priest and Levite introduces a literary gap, fostering a sense of ambiguity within the narrative. In this scenario, the storyteller, Jesus, intentionally omits certain elements, compelling the audience—specifically the lawyer, as the immediate listener, and the readers of Luke—to fill in the gaps with their own interpretations. Moreover, the complete silence of both the priest and Levite, in conjunction with the victim, creates a narratorial delay that ultimately paves the way for the arrival of the Samaritan traveler, who provides assistance to the injured man. The roles of the priest and Levite are crucial, as they guide the audience's attention toward the Samaritan and the innkeeper, rendering these two officials as significant as the Samaritan himself, who ultimately offers aid.¹⁸

2. THE PRIEST, THE LEVITE, AND THE ROBBERS

A better way to read this triad is by placing them as parallels to the central figure, the injured man. Luke introduces the robbers in v. 30, using four verbs that describe their action

¹⁸ Studies regarding silence in Lk and its relationship with the portrayal of the characters Luke uses in most of his narratives, especially those in the travel narrative, can be explored in Michael Beth Dinkler, *Silent Statements: Narrative Representations of Speech and Silence in the Gospel of Luke*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, ed. James D. G. Dunn, Carl R. Holladay, Matthias Conradt, Hermann Lichtenberger, Jens Schröter, Gregory E. Sterling, vol. 191 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 132–164.

toward the man who travels from Jerusalem to Jericho. These robbers stripped, beat, went off, and left (in particular, the Greek verbs are ἐκδύσαντες, ἐπιθέντες, ἀπῆλθον, and ἀφέντες).¹⁹ Compared to the priest and Levite, these robbers take something from the man; they take his belongings and even his clothes. When read profoundly, they have almost taken the life of the man. Given the background of the place, as analyzed before, the priest and Levite could have an amount of knowledge regarding the site; that this is a good retreat for robbers. The action of taking away on the part of the robbers is now paralleled with the action of mere seeing by the priest and Levite. However, both of these groups, the priest and Levite, as well as the robbers, do have something in common: they leave the man behind. The robbers, having taken all of his belongings, now leave him half dead, whereas the priest and Levite, having seen him on the road, leave him untouched.

3. THE PRIEST, THE LEVITE, AND THE SAMARITAN

The structure of this parable, as previously outlined, illustrates that the actions of the priest and Levite can be put in comparison with those of the Samaritan. While Luke only describes the first two figures with three verbs—going down the road, having seen, and passing by on the opposite side—he uses more than four verbs to describe what the Samaritan does to the injured man. In v. 33, it is evident that the Samaritan is on a journey, and upon noticing the injured man, he approaches him and is filled with compassion. Luke selects a particular term to convey the Samaritan's internal emotional response, even in the absence of spoken dialogue at this juncture.

¹⁹ *The New Strong's Complete Dictionary of Bible Words*, s.v. “Ἐκδύω,” “Ἐπιτίθημι,” “Ἀπέρχομαι,” and “Ἀφίημι.”



The audience is acutely aware of the Samaritan's impending actions.

If the priest and Levite only pass by on the other side, the Samaritan bothers himself to pour oil and wine on the wounds, bandage them, put the man on his animal, take him to an inn, and care for him before he continues his journey. Luke does not give any detail about his destination, but the Samaritan is told to promise to reimburse the innkeeper once he comes back to the inn. The Samaritan's actions toward the injured man imply physical contact with him, one thing not obvious on the part of the priest and Levite. If the priest and Levite only see him, but choose to look away and leave him behind, the Samaritan sees him and chooses to stay. If the priest and Levite, having seen him, leave him half-dead, the Samaritan, having seen him, attends to him in order for him to retain his life. If the priest and Levite do nothing to that man, the Samaritan gives something to him that comes out of his compassion, and this preserves the life of the man. This something, the wine, oil, animal, money, time, and energy, is not ascribed by Luke to the priest and Levite.

Moreover, the Samaritan is the only character in the narrative that Luke attributes speech to. He is depicted to say words to the innkeeper in order for him to continue the care of the injured man. This is contrasted to the silence of the priest and Levite, and one may see that Luke purposefully inserts this dynamic of silence and speech into these characters. If the priest and Levite are silent, and their silence still conveys something about their portrayals, how much more the Samaritan, who speaks to the other character.

4. THE PRIEST, THE LEVITE, AND THE INNKEEPER

The innkeeper is the last character presented, appearing in v. 35, with an interaction with the Samaritan who has taken the dying man. From the speech of the Samaritan, it may be inferred that he trusts the innkeeper to continue the care once he is absent. In addition, he also gives some money if the innkeeper spends more than given him. This implied action of the innkeeper is inseparable from the Samaritan's commitment to caring for the dying man. What one may observe is the implied agreement between the Samaritan and the innkeeper. The innkeeper may not have been expected to act with such selfless commitment toward the injured man. While the innkeeper's expenses are guaranteed by the Samaritan—two denarii down payment plus an assurance of the balance on his return (v. 35)—the innkeeper is required to attend to the man in addition to his regular employment. And, he needs to exhibit trust that the Samaritan will honor his word and return to make good any subsequent expenses.²⁰

The actions of the innkeeper, although motivated by compensation, stand in stark contrast to the inaction exhibited by the priest and Levite toward the dying man. While the innkeeper engages in the care initiated by the Samaritan, the priest and Levite remain passive, opting to bypass the man in need. Thus, despite the innkeeper's financial incentive, his involvement signifies a commitment to the well-being of the injured man, in direct opposition to the neglect demonstrated by the other two figures.

²⁰ Maurice Ryan, "Revisiting the Parable of the Good Samaritan," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 16, no. 1 (2021): 11.





5. THE PRIEST, THE LEVITE, AND THE LAWYER

This parable is situated within the broader dialogue between the lawyer and Jesus, specifically in the second segment of their exchange, spanning vv. 25–37. Initially, the lawyer poses a question regarding the commandment of love in vv. 25–28, framed within the context of inheriting eternal life. Jesus provides an answer but compels the lawyer to reflect on his own inquiry. The conversation progresses with another question in v. 29, where the lawyer seeks to understand how Jesus interprets the notion of “neighbor.” Armed with the parable, Jesus subsequently reframes his question: which of the three individuals is the neighbor to the robbers’ victim? The lawyer responds by identifying the one who demonstrates mercy.

Textually speaking, the lawyer is given a good portion of speech since he is the interlocutor of Jesus, and he is the one that plays the role in the whole discourse. The priest and Levite, however, are two figures constrained only within the parable. They are present somewhere else outside of the parable, but in this context, they are depicted as the passersby. While this may escape one’s observation, it is worth noting that Luke could have purposefully retained the temple figures in the parable because of the dialogue of Jesus with the lawyer. It has been shown before that Luke uses “lawyers,” “teachers of the law,” and “scribes” interchangeably, and the fact that priests functioned as experts on the law when not performing their priestly duties at the temple adds more to the drama.²¹

Jesus likely anticipated that the lawyer would grasp the internal conflict experienced by the priest and Levite, and it is plausible that the lawyer could empathize with their perspective.

²¹ E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1992), 170–171.

The lawyer must have been aware of the thoughts that crossed their minds upon encountering the wounded man. Luke appears to intentionally highlight the relationship among these individuals to emphasize the central message of the parable. This is where the literary gap emerges; the lawyer is compelled to reflect on the reasons behind the priest’s and Levite’s decision to avoid the man by crossing to the opposite side of the road. It would not be surprising if he was well-acquainted with these figures, and despite numerous scholarly efforts to unravel this conundrum, a definitive resolution remains elusive.

While the lawyer is given a portion of speech, and indeed, a dialogue with Jesus, he is left with a decision on his own to take a consequential action after listening to Jesus’ parable in order for him to inherit eternal life. Luke attributes to him speech but no readily action. On the contrary, the priest and Levite are silent characters who perform seemingly inactive actions. Their coming to the dying man, seeing him, and passing by on the other side of the road are not accompanied with utterances. In other words, they are given space by Luke to perform without any portion of speech. If the lawyer can speak and is left with a decision to act, the priest and Levite are depicted with no speech but have taken actions toward another character in the parable, even if their actions convey their inactivity toward that character.

These contrasting depictions of the figures are a literary play demonstrated by Luke to draw a line between them; the lawyer may have been able to identify himself with these two religious figures. To put it another way, one may see that even the choice of the priest and Levite as two passersby by Luke reverberates with the readily in-conversation figure of the lawyer. At the end of the parable, he is forced to acknowledge the





Samaritan's role in showing mercy to the dying man and not to the people he may have identified himself with. That is to say that even though at the beginning of the parable the lawyer may find himself familiar with the priest and Levite, he is forced to emulate only the third person, the Samaritan, in order for him to really integrate the meaning of neighbor and the love command in his life.

All these triads facilitate a deeper comprehension of the roles played by the priest and Levite within the parable, extending beyond a mere focus on the Samaritan, who undeniably serves as the narrative's central figure. By examining the Lukan perspective of the priest and Levite, particularly in relation to the victim, the robbers, the Samaritan, the innkeeper, and the lawyer, one may now discern how Luke strategically positions these characters within the parable. While it is important to consider their motivations, which are not readily presented in the text, it is even more crucial to analyze them through Luke's literary lens reflected within the scope of the text. Consequently, the analysis shall advance to the subsequent section to explore key points of the Lukan literary representations of the priest and Levite.

KEY POINTS OF THE LUKAN PORTRAYALS OF THE PRIEST AND LEVITE IN THE PARABLE

Having set the detailed analysis of the parable's text as well as all the characters of it, especially the priest and Levite, it is appropriate to outline some of the key points of the Lukan literary presentation of the latter characters. This presentation encompasses their portrayals as a pair of characters within the scope of the text based on the literary devices and details embedded in it.

Luke introduces the priest and Levite as the initial witnesses to the dying man on the road, dedicating vv. 31–32 to their portrayals without any dialogue. It is important to analyze Luke's depiction of these figures through four distinct aspects: 1) their identification by Luke, 2) their actions, 3) and their silence in the story, as well as 4) their assessment within the discourse between Jesus and the lawyer in vv. 36–37.

Luke employs the identities of the priest and Levite as the first means to depict their characters. This choice may stem from sociological considerations, suggesting that Luke draws inspiration from a source that mirrors the hierarchical structure of Palestinian society during that era. If this interpretation holds, the inclusion of the Samaritan introduces an element of surprise, as one might typically anticipate the involvement of a lay Israelite instead.²²

Nevertheless, the narrative actually imbues all characters, including the lawyer who poses a question to Jesus, with a similar surprise effect. The priest and Levite, appearing together solely in this parable within the entire gospel, initially astonish readers. Prior texts, especially in the first few sections of the gospel, generally present the priest favorably, yet in this instance, both figures emerge as silent and seemingly indifferent to the plight of the dying man. While the Samaritan's role is often recognized for its unexpectedness, the innkeeper also contributes to this surprise; he is uniquely featured in this parable throughout the NT and is portrayed as cooperative with the Samaritan, despite Luke's open-ended assessment of his character at the parable's conclusion. In short, Luke's readers may notice that the surprise effect applies to all of the characters in the narrative, not only to the

²² Michel Gourgues, "The Priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan Revisited: A Critical Note on Luke 10:31–35," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117, no. 4 (1998): 710–713.





Samaritan. What is more, the identity of the priest and Levite may contribute to that effect, especially with their depicted actions toward the dying man.

The actions of the priest and Levite are limited to coming, seeing, and then passing by on the other side of the road. The deliberate repetition of this phrasing suggests a purposeful choice on Luke's part, indicating that the latter may have emulated the former. When comparing these two figures with the Samaritan, it becomes evident that the decisions of the priest and Levite stand in stark opposition to those of the Samaritan. Furthermore, the actions of the priest, Levite, and the robbers sharply diverge from the compassionate deeds of the Samaritan and the innkeeper. This juxtaposition serves to emphasize the roles of the priest, Levite, and Samaritan as foil characters to each other.

A foil is literally a contrasting background, such as a sheet of shiny metal that is placed under jewels to increase their brilliance.²³ In literature, the term is applied to any person who, through contrast, underscores the distinctive characteristics of another.²⁴ The foil provides what Walter J. Harvey calls "perspectives of depth." He or she "may focus the protagonist's dilemma more clearly" or may "illuminate the protagonist's blindness and folly."²⁵ A foil may also illuminate the deficient or the magnificent qualities of groups of characters.

In the parable, the priest and Levite become the foil characters for the Samaritan and the innkeeper, who collaborate in taking care of the wounded man. The priest and Levite highlight the work of compassion of the Samaritan.

²³ James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 124.

²⁴ William Harmon and C. Hugh Colman, *A Handbook of Literature* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), 216.

²⁵ Walter J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1916), 63.

However, when seeing the priest and Levite as the main spotlight in the parable, as is the case of this research, the Samaritan and the innkeeper may indeed in turn become the foils for them; the Samaritan and the innkeeper highlight the inactivity, the choice of looking the other way, of the priest and Levite when faced with a neglected wounded man on the road regardless of their motivations to pass by.

What is more, the inactivity of the priest and Levite is done in silence as far as the text is concerned, and no reasons are provided by Luke as to why they just pass by. The silence creates a literary gap; since Luke leaves the motivations of the priest and Levite unsaid, the readers are required to supply the missing information or interpretation themselves. Not only is the silence related to their motivations, but also to their entire movement. When they approach the dying man, take a look at him, and choose to bypass him, they say no words at all to him. This is contrasted with the Samaritan who, even though does not say any words to the dying man, is imparted with a sentence when talking to the innkeeper.

Luke seemingly utilizes all of these narratorial devices to depict a dramatic scene that prepares for the coming of the Samaritan. In other words, the priest and Levite also serve as the narratorial delay to the presence of the Samaritan. The hearers of the parable and the readers of this narrative of Luke are made to wait until the Samaritan comes to the scene since the priest and Levite choose not to help the dying man. From this observation, one may really see that Luke purposefully places the priest and Levite in the beginning of the story to delay the drama and to prepare for the coming of the Samaritan as well as the innkeeper.





The last element that Luke alludes to in the dialogue of Jesus and the lawyer in vv. 36–37 is the evaluation of the characters based on the term “neighbor.” Since Jesus asks the lawyer who has become the neighbor to the victim of the robbery, and the answer provided by the lawyer is the one showing mercy, Luke reveals that the first two characters, the priest and Levite, do not qualify this assessment; the priest and Levite have walked out of the role to become neighbors to the dying man. Instead, Luke depicts them to be seemingly in full awareness, choosing to step away from that identification, albeit with no clear justification.

Furthermore, the criterion of becoming a neighbor is rooted in the word “mercy,” as is shown in the scene of the Samaritan. The priest and Levite, on the other hand, are not depicted as having moved with compassion when seeing the wounded man. Their action of passing by on the other side of the road proves to be the evidence, at least textually obvious for the readers, for the two figures to not have been moved with compassion. Luke eventually uses these two interconnected elements, mercy and neighbor, to depict not only the Samaritan, but also the priest and Levite, who are in contrast to him. It may be seen as a negative identification of the characters; the priest and Levite are identified and evaluated by what they do not do or have as characters in the narrative.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PORTRAYALS OF THE PRIEST AND LEVITE

Although the priest and Levite serve as foil characters for the compassionate Samaritan—whose quality has been taken by the lawyer as the standard to define the neighbor to the dying man and thus disqualify these passersby from the definition—they are displayed suggestively by

Luke to represent a real situation wherein human beings are afforded a wide array of possibilities to choose from, including taking actions that are not in favor of those who are needy. Luke has made them exhortatory characters in front of the audience by depicting them as delivering ironic, negative examples—they show examples through what they are not attributed to and warn the readers to refrain from what they have done. These characters are so much more relevant to the readers than merely being perceived as representations of scrupulous religious officials, even though the latter may hold verity.

The series of actions that Luke employs to depict the priest and Levite are almost identical: coming to the site, seeing the wounded man, and passing by on the opposite side of the road. They come and take a look at the man on the road but then choose to leave him behind. Luke leaves no space for these characters to speak; not even the inner feelings are shown. The readers may have at that time thought of a couple of reasons for their motivations. Whatever it is, Luke has placed the priest and Levite at the line of evaluation based on their inaction to the dying man, which is in just a matter of time stated by the lawyer. What is important here is that the priest and Levite, despite seeing the wounded man, choose on their own to look away. They see, but do not really see. Instead of looking intently and taking action, they look the other way and leave him behind.

Considering Luke’s intentional portrayals of the priest and Levite, their characterization should be interpreted as a form of exhortation. While their abandonment of the injured man may suggest a lack of compassion, for the audience of Luke, their actions serve as both an ironic commentary and a cautionary example; it illustrates that individuals may encounter similar circumstances and yet choose to respond in a





manner akin to that of the priest and Levite, regardless of their motivations. Furthermore, although Luke has cautioned readers through the lawyer's assessment that the priest and Levite are inherently excluded from the definition of a neighbor, it is plausible that some readers may still emulate their behavior. This serves purely as a reflection of a certain reality.

In light of this, it is essential to reevaluate the portrayals of the priest and Levite, moving beyond the conventional view of them as mere symbols of heartless religious authorities. Instead, they should be recognized as pivotal figures whose ironic inaction towards the dying man realistically resonates with readers. Their characterization should not be confined solely to the context of meticulous religious observances or concerns about purity, although such interpretations hold merit. Rather, it is crucial to consider them within the framework of Lukan literary style, which endows them with a significant narrative function that communicates meaning to the audience. This study suggests that an alternative interpretation of how these two characters are depicted offers a more impactful and instructive message to readers, simultaneously encouraging them to act in accordance with both implicit and explicit messages of the narrative.

THE MODERN CULTURE OF LOOKING THE OTHER WAY

One may note, without delving deeply into a sociological analysis, that contemporary individuals, including Christians, find themselves in a society that often chooses to avert its gaze rather than engage with others meaningfully. Pope Francis has eloquently articulated this sentiment, highlighting that despite the advancement humanity has achieved, there remains a significant deficiency in the

collective consciousness regarding the need to accompany, care for, and support the most fragile and vulnerable members of society. People have grown accustomed to looking the other way, passing by, and ignoring the situations.²⁶

Ruben Zimmermann articulated that a philosopher, Sloterdijk, has posited that the ethos of assistance is not only outdated and irrelevant in contemporary society but should also be critically examined as fundamentally flawed. This observation highlights a troubling trend among individuals today, who often prefer to avert their gaze rather than engage with those in need of help. Several factors may contribute to this behavior, including the diffusion of responsibility, which occurs when multiple individuals are present during an emergency, leading to a diminished likelihood of any one person taking action as they anticipate that someone else will intervene.

Additionally, pluralistic ignorance, akin to the concept above, is evident in the bystander effect, where individuals wait for someone else to take the initiative to help. Furthermore, the fear of negative evaluation may deter potential helpers, as they worry about appearing foolish or doubt their own competence to provide assistance. Various sociological theories further elucidate the infrequency with which modern individuals offer genuine help to others. The intricate situations that may arise beneath the surface often lead individuals to abstain from offering assistance, resulting in a more individualistic society. The notion of altruism is currently facing a legitimacy crisis, as articulated by G. Theissen. Contemporary society can be fundamentally described as one that fosters a culture of indifference toward others.²⁷

²⁶ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican: Vatican Press, 2020), sec. 64.

²⁷ Ruben Zimmermann, "The Etho-Poietic of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37): The Ethics of Seeing in a Culture of Looking the Other way," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 29, no. 1 (2008): 269-272.





The analysis of the portrayals of the priest and Levite, indeed, delivers the message to the readers to avoid looking the other way. These figures have come and seen the dying man but chosen to just pass by on the other side of the road. Their ironic example presented by Luke affirms the great positive act of the Samaritan who eventually looks intently on the wounded man and provides help for him. The priest and Levite, thus, are placed to remind the readers of another choice of action that faithfully reflects how to show compassion and act on it. To look the other way means to deprive oneself of the chance to perform that virtue. If modern people are found to be so rare with an act of help or an act of compassion toward others, then where have the love and compassion gone?

This question prompts every Christian reader to simply meditate on the parable so as to be able to rediscover their true identity rooted in compassionate and navigate themselves toward a new direction that is away from merely looking the other way when faced with real-life situations involving others in need.

CONCLUSION

The configuration of character triads, particularly focusing on the priest and Levite, demonstrates that these individuals are not mere peripheral figures devoid of importance. When analyzed as central components, it becomes evident that the roles of the priest and Levite within the narrative can be understood in relation to other characters. They can be interpreted as either contrasting or parallel figures when compared to the victim, the robbers, the Samaritan, the innkeeper, and even the lawyer engaged in discourse with Jesus. Each examination of these triads allows for a consideration of the significant aspects of their representation by Luke, which revolves around

their identities, actions, silence, and the evaluation presented in the final dialogue between Jesus and the lawyer.

The actions of these figures are fundamentally limited to approaching the dying man, observing him, and then continuing on their way without offering assistance. This brief interaction is devoid of any physical contact and can be contrasted with the actions of the Samaritan, the innkeeper, and the robbers. While the robbers take from the man, and both the Samaritan and the innkeeper provide aid, the priest and Levite occupy a neutral position, neither taking nor giving. Positioned centrally in the narrative, Luke intentionally portrays them as silent figures, creating a narratorial gap that invites readers to speculate on their motivations. The silence of the priest and Levite also serves to delay the introduction of the Samaritan and the innkeeper, who are depicted as actively engaging in dialogue. The significance of their portrayals is further underscored in the concluding exchange; for the lawyer, the individual who exemplifies the true meaning of “neighbor” is the one who demonstrates mercy, and this only becomes the evidence that the priest and Levite do not qualify for that because of their choice of passing by on the other side of the road. They have chosen to look the other way instead of looking intently into the situation of the wounded man. This choice of passing by renders that priest and Levite an evaluation of what is not literally attributed to them.

These findings help reshape the reading of the priest and Levite before the context of the modern audience. Based on the exhortatory undertone of their depictions, the priest and Levite are placed by Luke to deliver an ironic message, which is to avoid looking the other way. These two figures remind the Christian readers to do what is not reflected in their actions amidst the realities where people in need of help are inevitable.





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