



Who Is My “Neighbor”?

By David E. Lanier

THE QUESTION WAS simple enough: “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29).¹ Jesus’ response was totally unexpected and ran contrary to traditional thinking.

In the Old Testament Era

The original meaning of neighbor was “associate” (Hebrew, *rea*). In Leviticus 19:18, the term clearly referred to a fellow Hebrew: “Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against members of your community, but love your neighbor as yourself; I am Yahweh.” Here the parallel for “your neighbor” is “members of your community.” The Israelites were to treat such persons fairly and kindly



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ (9/5/13)

and were not to cheat or rob them.² Further, they were to extend the same kindness to the foreigner dwelling among them: “When a foreigner lives with you in your land, you must not oppress him. You must regard the foreigner who lives with you as the native-born among you. You are to love him as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt; I am Yahweh your God” (Lev. 19:33).

How one treated a neighbor was important in determining righteousness in Israel. To refuse to treat one’s neighbor justly was a cause for national disintegration and invited God’s judgment (Isa. 3:5; Jer. 9:4-9; Mic. 7:5-6).³

The Old Testament almost always used the word “neighbor” to describe fellow Israelites—with few exceptions. For instance, Exodus 3:22 and 11:2 use the word to describe Egyptians living close by, from whom the Israelites were to ask gold and silver jewelry on the eve of the exodus. In Ezekiel 16:26, God reminded His people of their idolatry and spiritual adultery by using the term: “You engaged in promiscuous acts with Egyptian men, your well-endowed neighbors, and increased your prostitution to provoke Me to anger.”⁴

Although the Law demanded

Hebrews to be neighborly to one another and to foreigners dwelling among them, enemies were a different matter. The imprecatory psalms gave scriptural warrant to hate one’s enemies: “LORD, don’t I hate those who hate You, and detest those who rebel against You? I hate them with extreme hatred; I consider them my enemies” (Ps. 139:21-22; see Matt. 5:43, “You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy”).

In the New Testament Era

A narrower interpretation of “neighbor” arose, one the Qumran community and the Pharisees espoused. People living at Qumran defined “neighbor” as someone who was part of their separatist community. Everyone outside that community dwelled in darkness and was to be shunned in order to avoid spiritual contamination.⁵ Although the people at Qumran were to hate the “children of darkness,” or the “men of the pit,” they did not tolerate taking personal vengeance.⁶

Likewise the Pharisees separated themselves from contamination, which they believed non-observant Jews transmitted. When the temple police returned from

monitoring Jesus at the temple and praised His teaching, the Pharisees rebuked them: “Are you fooled too? Have any of the rulers or Pharisees believed in Him? But this crowd, which doesn’t know the law, is accursed!” (John 7:47-49). This separation applied to fellow Israelites. How much more would the Jews have shunned the hated Samaritans, a group that had no advocates among the Jewish people.

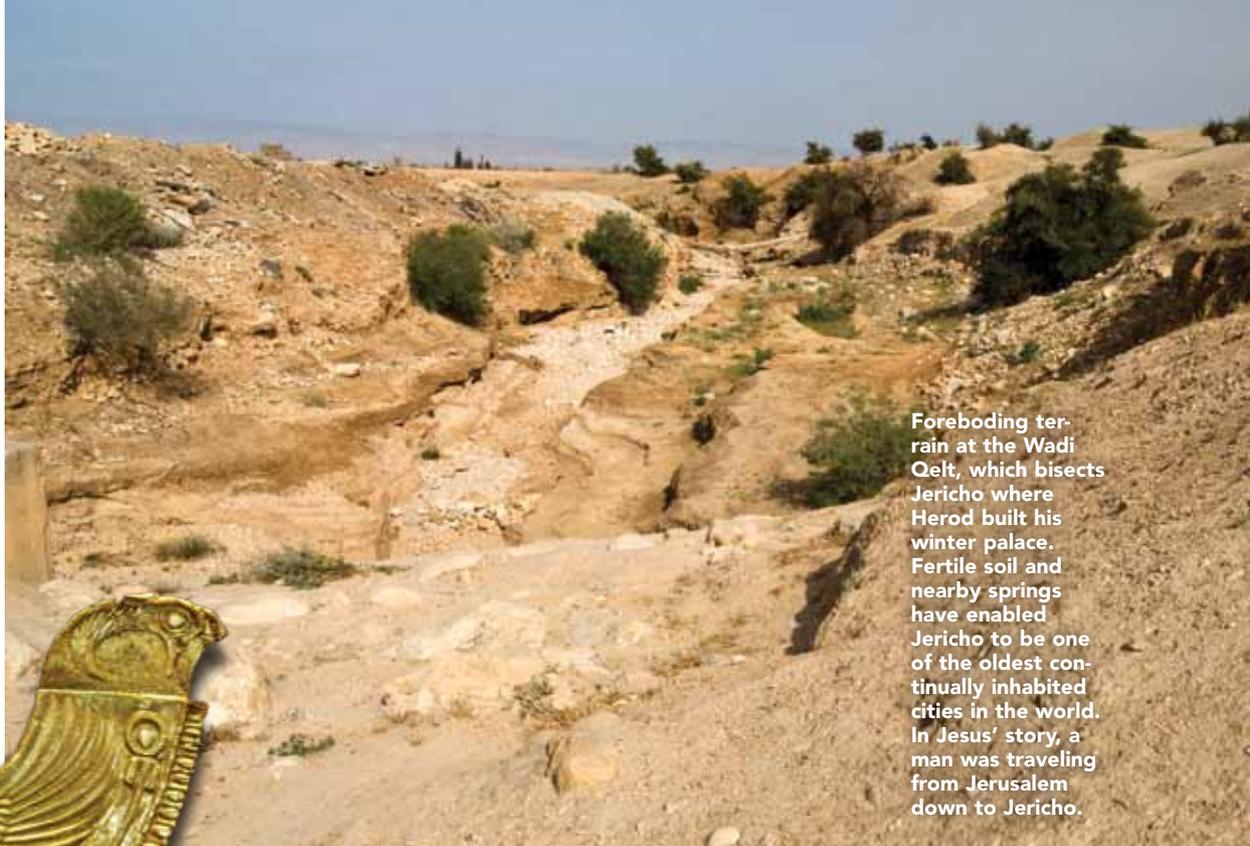
The Samaritans dated back to 722 B.C., when the hated Assyrians had exiled all but the poorest among the northern ten tribes of Israel. In their place were Elamites and Assyrians, who interbred with the poor Israelites left in the land, resulting in a half-breed race stigmatized with idolatry and uncleanness. They were called “enemies” in Ezra 4 when they attempted to help rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem.⁷ The hostility between the Jew and Samaritan was legendary. The Samaritans built their own temple on the slopes of Mount Gerizim. They had their own scriptures, the Samaritan Pentateuch, having rejected the writings and the prophets as authoritative. Samaritans showed hatred and hostility to Jews traveling to Jerusalem, so much so that many Jews preferred to bypass the region of Samaria entirely and to pass on the east side of the Jordan. Further, the Samaritans started false signal fires to throw off the Jewish pilgrims who were traveling from the Euphrates region to keep the Passover.⁸

The Jews responded by publicly cursing the Samaritans in synagogue services and refusing to accept their witness in court. When the Samaritans pleaded with Alexander the Great to release them from required tribute payments because they had let the land rest (as Moses commanded), Alexander refused their request after



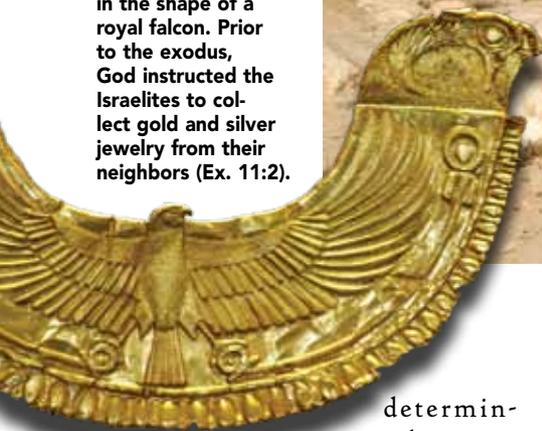
Left: Part of the ruins at Qumran. Those living at Qumran, the Essenes, defined a neighbor as someone who lived in their community.

Below: From Egypt's Middle Kingdom Period (2106–1786 B.C.), a gold pectoral decoration in the shape of a royal falcon. Prior to the exodus, God instructed the Israelites to collect gold and silver jewelry from their neighbors (Ex. 11:2).



Foreboding terrain at the Wadi Qelt, which bisects Jericho where Herod built his winter palace. Fertile soil and nearby springs have enabled Jericho to be one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world. In Jesus' story, a man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER (50/4468)



determining they were not true Jews. He afterward besieged and destroyed the capital city of Samaria.⁹ Even James and John, the “sons of thunder,” wanted to destroy a Samaritan village by fire (Luke 9:51-55). Jesus rebuked them.

The Good Samaritan

An “expert in the law” approached Jesus and asked what he should do to inherit eternal life (Luke 10:25). Jesus responded by asking him to summarize the law, which he did by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18—“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, . . . soul, . . . strength, and . . . mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (v. 27). Jesus told him that was correct and added, “Do this and you will live” (v. 28). The scribe then attempted to justify himself by asking, “And who is my neighbor?” (v. 29). This would have been key in the interpretation, for if a person omitted some group that God intended, he would have violated the Law.

The scribes prided themselves in defining relationships. They applied the Law of Moses to every conceivable situation involving individuals and groups. To them the lines were clear. The scribes’ rulings dictated to the Pharisees and to all observant Jews parameters for permissible relationships. This issue was foundational for the Jews’ self identity.¹⁰

Instead of answering the question directly, Jesus told the scribe how to be a neighbor to anyone in need. He used a hated Samaritan as the hero of the parable. Both a priest and Levite returning from Jerusalem had ignored a wounded Jew on the treacherous Jericho Road, thus preventing defilement and avoiding responsibility for a fellow Jew. A hated Samaritan put his life at risk by stopping, treating the Jew’s wounds, placing him on the Samaritan’s own animal, and taking him to a nearby inn. There he negotiated with the innkeeper for the man’s care, giving him two denarii (two days’ wage) and promised to pay more, if needed.

Jesus asked the scribe, “Which . . . proved to be a neighbor?” The scribe avoided the hated word

“Samaritan” and replied, “The one who showed mercy to him.” Jesus responded, “Go and do the same” (vv. 36, 37).

In this encounter, Jesus redefined “neighbor” broadly and inclusively, a violation of Jewish tradition and understanding. The term now included the least expected. The Samaritan had kept the Law as God intended by loving his “neighbor” as he loved himself. **B**

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

2. Merrill F. Unger, “Neighbor” in *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Unger’s), ed. R.K. Harrison, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 915.

3. R. L. Thomas, “Neighbor” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, gen. ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 4:408.

4. *Ibid.*

5. A. R. C. Leaney, *The Rule of Qumran and Its Meaning* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 121. This sentiment is especially evident in the *Manual of Discipline*. “Neighbor” refers exclusively to those within the Qumran community itself and appears in texts commanding proper behavior.

6. Heinrich Greeven, “πλησίον” (*plesion*, neighbor) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 316, n. 41.

7. “Samaritans” in Unger’s, 1118.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. Trent C. Butler, *Luke*, vol. 3 in *Holman New Testament Commentary* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2000), 172.

David E. Lanier is professor of New Testament at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina.