

Good Samaritan. II. Christianity

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From the second century CE onward, this parable has been interpreted as an allegory in which Jerusalem stands for paradise, Jericho for the world into which Adam or the human being has fallen through the agency of demons, and the Samaritan represents Christ the Savior. The first attestations of the allegorical interpretation are found with Irenaeus of Lyons and Clement of Alexandria. Origen quotes an anonymous presbyter who interpreted the robbers as the hostile powers, the priest as the Mosaic law, the Levite as the prophets, the wounds as disobedience, the beast as the Lord's body, the inn as the church, the two denarii as the Father and the Son, the innkeeper as the leader of the church, and the Samaritan's promise to return as Christ's second coming. The oil and wine have been omitted in this rendering. For Clement, the oil (ἔλαιον) represents compassion (ἔλεον) and the wine refers to the eucharist. Origen explains "Samaritan" as "custodian" and associates this with "the guardian (šōmēr) of Israel" (Ps. 121:4), interpreted as Christ.

The Greek-speaking church generally accepted the allegorical interpretation, but did not forget the ethical meaning of the parable. John Chrysostom applies it to the mercy to be bestowed on pagans, Jews, and Judaizing Christians who were not to be considered spiritually dead. Cyril of Alexandria expounds only its ethical meaning, yet after a fiercely anti-Jewish exposition on the lawyer. Ephrem the Syrian stresses the ethical relevance of the Samaritan helping a wounded Jew, but also applies the Samaritan's role to Jesus. On Orthodox icons the Samaritan is given a halo, which testifies to his identification with Christ.

In Western Christianity the allegorical interpretation of the parable has been widespread thanks to Ambrose and Augustine, but the ethical meaning is found there as well. Augustine adds a new element to its interpretation, when he explains that sin has robbed fallen man of his free will. Gottfried of Admont and Nicolas of Lyra interpret the Samaritan not only as Christ but also as the compassionate confessor. Odo of Chateauroux considers that the parable has been fulfilled by Francis of Assisi and his order. The Cathars have their own version of the allegorical interpretation, according to which Adam's spirit descended from heavenly Jerusalem to the material world, where demons robbed him of the light that was in him.

Martin Luther expounds both the Christological and the ethical interpretations of the parable, whereas John Calvin rejects the allegorical explanation. Among Protestant interpreters the ethical meaning of the parable prevails, although the identification of the Samaritan with Christ is sometimes accepted as well. It is defended by Karl Barth and Birger Gerhardsson.

Worldwide, hospitals and charitable organizations have been named after the Good Samaritan.

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