

## The Narcissistic Reader and the Parable of the Good Samaritan

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### Abstract

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most well known stories in the New Testament. The traditional interpretation of this passage found only in Luke (10:25-37), insists that it is an example story that encourages its readers to practice altruism and selfless service on behalf of others. This understanding of the passage prevails despite logical inconsistencies. While some commentators have suggested that the text is better understood as a metaphorical illustration of the Christian understanding of the human situation, their interpretive attempts have made few converts. A literary reading of the passage, focusing on the reader's reception of the text and invoking Kohut's self psychology, explains why the usual interpretation prevails. Kohut's theories concerning narcissism and selfobject needs show that the predominant interpretation of the parable as an example story constitutes a healthy resistance to anxiety about the threat of fragmentation that the metaphorical understanding of the text provokes.

### Introduction

[1] The literary critic Frank Kermode wrote, "if we want to think about narratives that mean more and other than they seem to say, and mean different things to different people . . . we can hardly do better than consider the parables" (23). The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-37), however, appears to be an exception to this rule since the reception of this story has enjoyed enormous uniformity in the understanding of its meaning. Divorced from its original cultural context, the term "Good Samaritan" has become a cliché in English. Even if unfamiliar with the teachings of Jesus as found in the New Testament, "everybody" knows that a "Good Samaritan" is a loving, selfless, person who acts spontaneously and often at some personal cost, in the interests of those victimized by circumstance. Indeed most jurisdictions have what are dubbed "Good Samaritan" laws to protect such beneficent individuals from legal action should their assistance unwittingly do more harm than good. This vernacular meaning of the term "Good Samaritan" derives from traditional Christian interpretations of the original story that understand the actions of the Samaritan to exemplify Jesus' teaching about loving one's neighbor and illustrating a dominant theme in Western ethics having to do with the importance of altruism.

[2] A psychoanalytic reading of the parable that focuses on the affective response of readers helps explain the hegemony of the traditional understanding of the narrative, despite Kermode's sense that the parables can mean different things to different people. By considering the parable's reception in light of Kohut's theories about narcissism and transference, one can show that the traditional understanding of the parable defends against a much more disturbing, yet more logical way of understanding the passage. A Kohutian approach that concentrates on the narcissism of the reader explains not only the anomalies in the traditional interpretation that appear to resist what the text actually says, but explains also the fact that it has prevailed despite these interpretive inconsistencies.

## Psychoanalysis, Literary Criticism and the Bible

[3] Like Freud, Kohut was especially interested in seeing how psychoanalytic theory could have some purchase on the arts and humanities. As Kohut recognized, the pitfalls to such endeavors are many even if one does not run into the translation problems that rendered null some of Freud's conclusions on Da Vinci (Kohut 1960: 279-80). Although Kohut acknowledged that psychoanalysis was rejected by many as reductionistic and irrelevant he was hopeful that academics and humanists would come to see that the psychoanalytic psychology of the self might be of use in their research (Kohut 1978: 75-6). Before applying a Kohutian paradigm to the reception of the story of the Good Samaritan, however, a brief survey of the interpretive approaches that have led to the usual understanding of the text will justify the literary rather than the historical-critical paradigm observed in the following analysis.

[4] Although the historical-critical approach has prevailed in Biblical Studies for the past century or more, many scholars are beginning to acknowledge that the biblical books should (also) be read as literature. In the Bible, religion and literature intersect and make it an interesting object of psychoanalytic investigation especially given recent developments in the academic field of Biblical Studies. The historical-critical paradigm is gradually ceding ground to other kinds of approaches informed by the social sciences and literary criticism. To read the Bible as literature, rather than as ancient history or scripture, extends the horizon of interpretation and allows us to ask new questions of the text unimpeded by doctrinal orthodoxy or historical skepticism. Robert Culpepper's work on John and Robert Alter's work on the Hebrew Bible (1981, 1992) are examples of how a literary approach to the Bible can bear extraordinary fruit. The publication of *The Literary Guide to the Bible* in 1987 under the editorial direction of Alter and Kermode marked the fact that in the last third of the twentieth century literary criticism had come into its own in Biblical Studies. Although Alter and Kermode deliberately excluded various critical approaches including psychoanalytic criticism from that volume in their attempt "to make possible fuller readings of the text" (4-5), their work demonstrates the increasing validity literary approaches now enjoy in the field of Biblical Studies.

[5] As Terry Eagleton notes, "one might very roughly periodize the history of modern literary theory in three stages: a preoccupation with the author (romanticism and the nineteenth century); an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and a marked shift of attention to the reader over recent years" (64). Reader response criticism insists that the reader's interaction with the text is what gives the text meaning. The stance of the reader towards the text informs the impact the text has upon the reader. Recently, like others in the field of literary criticism, many psychoanalytically inclined scholars have shifted the focus to the reader and away from the text or the author. More and more attention has been paid to the unconscious desires and transferences of readers (real, implied, intended, and imagined) rather than of authors or characters. The relation between the reader and the text with the focus on the reader's affective experience has also become central in more recent literary uses of psychoanalytic theory. This trend has developed in two directions that cast the reader in the role of either analyst or analysand.

[6] In the first role, from a self psychological perspective, the reader is inherently empathic and reading is an instance of "vicarious introspection" that often focuses on responses to individual characters in the text. Reading can be understood as part of the process of developing "empathic matrices" (Lee and Martin: 167) with literary characters providing selfobject experiences. The concept of "selfobject" is of fundamental importance in Kohut's theory. A selfobject is an

individual who, rather than being experienced as an object differentiated from the self, temporarily *becomes* part of the self. The use of this concept has implications for the psychoanalytic understanding of transference and contributes to the emphasis one finds on empathy in self-psychological approaches. For example, based on Kohut's work, J. Brooks Bouson's notion of the "empathic reader" brings such issues of identification vis-à-vis the relations between readers and characters into a self-psychological paradigm: "While theorists may insistently reduce characters to the theme or narrative structure or language of the text, many critic/readers . . . just as insistently respond to the person-like qualities of literary characters" (Bouson: 29). While the characters that populate the gospel narratives are not portrayed in as much detail as the characters in a modern novel, we do learn something of their desires and fears. As Robert Alter points out with reference to the Hebrew Bible, characters are not merely types when examined from a literary standpoint (1981). The same can be said of the characters found in the parables. If their life situations are to speak to the audience they must resonate with the affective faculties of the reader. The tiny cameo roles in the parables are "fleshed out" by the readers' imaginative abilities so that they possess the capacity to understand the widow's joy at discovering the lost coin, the rich man's self-satisfaction thanks to his ignorance of his impending death. It is this capacity that has made the parables meaningful across the centuries even to those who have no confessional stake in the gospels themselves. Although Bouson focuses on academic critical reading which has its own vicissitudes and problems, the experience of reading in general necessarily involves empathy:

While the capacity to empathize varies from reader to reader, my assumption is that empathy is central to the reading experience and that, despite the wide variation in the ways critics theorize about literature and objectify the reading experience, texts can and do generate a range of similar, collective, and often unconscious responses in readers (25-26).

Ernest Wolf also emphasizes the centrality of empathy when self-psychological paradigms are translated into a literary context and notes, "literary material evokes introspected experiences akin to those that are empathically perceived in clinical psychoanalytic situations" (1976: 112; cf. Bouson: 27).

[7] In the second role, the reader is subject to a process akin to transference and is affected by the experience of reading in a more holistic fashion and participates in constructing the meaning of the text. For example, Peter Brooks has championed the notion of transference as a kind of template on which the experience of reading may be mapped and through which psychoanalytic literary criticism may take place (Brooks: 42; 70-72). By invoking such a model, Brooks emphasizes the dynamic nature of reading:

In the transference relation, there is a difficult, agonistic, and productive encounter. The same is true of the reading of texts, where we interpret, construct, building hypotheses of meaning that are themselves productive of meaning, seeking to understand narrative as both a story and the discourse that conveys it, seeking both to work on the text and to have the text work on us. Transference and construction suggest a properly dynamic model of narrative understanding . . . as the *movement of reference* that takes place in the transference of narrative from teller to listener, and back again. It is in this movement of reference that change is produced—that the textual reader, like the psychoanalytic patient, finds himself modified by the work of interpretation and construction, by the transference

dynamics to which he has submitted himself. In the movement between text and reader, the tale told makes a difference (72, emphasis his).

[8] Although Brooks writes of fiction proper, the biblical books are narrative accounts that are just as susceptible to psychoanalytic interpretation as a modern novel. Indeed, in the case of the biblical narrative the explicit aim of the text is often the transformation of the reader (e.g. Luke 1:1-5; John 20:30-31).

[9] As readers we can either accept or resist the gospel writers' attempts to transform us. In taking either stance we place ourselves "squarely within the Gospel narrative by emulating the perspective of specific characters therein" (Reinhartz: 27). Although Reinhartz speaks of her willingness or lack thereof to accept the christological position of the implied author of the gospel of John as represented by specific characters, her point can be broadened to embrace the experience of reading in general. In the case of the biblical literature, one necessarily identifies with those characters that most nearly reflect one's own experience or worldview, whether or not those characters promote or inhibit the agenda of the implied author. The affective response of the reader to the text can also be unconscious, however. As the reader responds to the text he or she draws on both conscious and unconscious elements so that the experience of reading itself can be understood in transference terms.

[10] Both Wolf and Bouson suggest that the reader is somehow analogous to the empathic analyst in the encounter with the text, but the observations of Brooks and Reinhartz demonstrate that the reader is necessarily implicated in the emergence of meaning and also occupies the position of the analysand, as Felman has noted (5-10). Indeed, we can consider the relationship between text and reader as contributing to the process that Kohut termed "transmuting internalization" (1971: 49-50) that necessarily takes place as the transference develops and is worked through in the course of an analysis. This process in which psychic structures develop thanks to the gradual narcissistic decaathesis of archaic objects while specific aspects of mature objects are depersonalized and introjected can be seen as analogous to reading. The reception of narrative corresponds to transmuting internalization because readers internalize specific features of a given story that have consequences for subsequent self-understanding. When the text at hand is as well-known as the Parable of the Good Samaritan we can see how the audience's unconscious responses might be at work in the empathic identification with characters as Bouson and Wolf suggest. More significantly we can determine how the construction of the text's meaning, its interpretation, betrays signs of a process akin to transmuting internalization involving narcissistic resistance to the ostensible point of the parable.

### **The Cultural Reception of the Parable as an Example Story**

[11] The story of the Good Samaritan has been almost universally assigned to the genre of "example story" by scholars and its cultural influence has exceeded its modest place in the Christian Bible. Although many of the stories about, and attributed to, Jesus are found in more than one of the four gospels, and while a version of the dialogue that frames the parable is found also in the gospels of Matthew (22:34-40) and Mark (12:28-31), the story or parable of the Good Samaritan itself is found only in the gospel of Luke as part of Jesus' response to an inquiry concerning love of God and neighbor. From an historical-critical perspective this confirms the view that the authors composed the gospels from traditional but largely unconnected elements and that traces of their redactional and creative activity can be seen in various logical inconsistencies scattered throughout the texts. In the case of the passage at hand, the significance

given such observations influences how any commentator evaluates and interprets the parable. Because the approach here is predominantly literary it is assumed that the frame narrative that introduces and concludes the parable is important in understanding the passage and that the author strove to present a coherent, consistent episode:

25) Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26) He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27) He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." 28) And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." 29) But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30) Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31) Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32) So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33) But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34) He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35) The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' 36) Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 37) He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:25-37, NRSV).

[12] The opening dialogue of this passage in Luke is similar in content to parallels in Mark and Matthew and questions about the greatest commandments. In Mark and Matthew, however, there is no parable connected with such discussion so "that the parable is not so intrinsically united with the previous unit as to be inseparable from it" (Crossan: 67). Nevertheless, Luke has reworked this part of the tradition(s) behind the gospels to introduce the parable and he apparently intends his audience to read the parable as the answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" After telling the parable, Jesus asks, "Who do you think was a neighbor to the man?" and the lawyer responds, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus then says "Go and do likewise." At this point the problem emerges. The one who shows mercy, i.e. the Good Samaritan, is acknowledged as the neighbor (by the lawyer and implicitly by Jesus) and therefore the one who should be loved as oneself. The command to "Go and do likewise" however is ambiguous: what precisely is the lawyer to "go and do?"

[13] Commentators are almost unanimous in insisting that the passage is to be read as recommending that the lawyer go and help those in need as the Samaritan did in the story. In other words, the reader, like the lawyer, whose curiosity concerning the identity of the neighbor at the introduction of the story has been satisfied, is now being told to go and emulate the altruism of the Samaritan in his or her daily life. F. W. Beare notes the parable "does not in fact answer the question: 'Who is my neighbor?' but rather, 'How does one prove himself a neighbor?'" (160) shifting the ostensible role of the parable from an illustration of the identity of one's neighbor to a depiction of one's responsibility to others. In other words, Beare, like most of the gospel's audience, insists that a shift occurs by the end of the passage and the parable does

not end up serving the purpose it has at the outset. Rather than identifying the neighbor, the parable serves to recommend altruism using the Samaritan as example.

[14] All of this is somewhat complicated by the fact that relations between Jews and Samaritans in the first century were not especially friendly. It is probably no accident that the lawyer cannot name the neighbor but circumlocutes with the phrase “the one who showed him kindness” (Fitzmyer: 883). Most interpreters are at pains to point out that at least in part the story is meant to repudiate social divisions:

When the story is read as one told to a Jewish audience by the Jewish Jesus it is impossible to avoid facing the good man not just as good but as Samaritan, and it seems very unlikely in its original historical context than any other meaning for Samaritan save the [sic] of socio-religious outcast would have come through. . . . Hence the internal dynamism of the story and the historical situation of Jesus’ day agree that the literal point of the story challenges the hearer to put together two impossible and contradictory words for the same person: Samaritan (10:33) and neighbor (10:36) (Crossan: 76).

[15] Crossan, then, resists the interpretation that this story is an example story that recommends the behavior of the Samaritan to the audience. He notes that using the Samaritan as an example would have been “inimical to the persuasive power of the story on a Jewish audience” (76). “It would have been far better, for such a purpose, to have made the wounded man a Samaritan and the helper a Jewish man” (76). Jesus’ words in 10:37, “Go and do likewise,” turn the passage into an example story and detract from the parable’s original, metaphorical meaning about the nature of the kingdom of God (71).

[16] For Crossan the addition of 10:37 in the final version of the story transforms its meaning. When we consider 10:25-37 as one episode in the teaching of Jesus - in other words when we read the gospel from a literary perspective rather than from an historical-critical one - we notice the anomaly that 10:37 seems to introduce. When the neighbor throughout the story has been presented as the Samaritan and the reader has identified with the victim throughout, what does it mean to “Go and do likewise”? In other words, has Luke been so clumsy as to require a shift in the readers’ empathy so that in the very last verse we should identify not with the victim but with the Samaritan?

### **The Interpretation of the Parable as Metaphorical**

[17] Robert Funk agrees with Crossan that the parable has lost its “original resonances” as a metaphor (33), since the chasm between the original auditors and modern readers yawns too wide. While not denying that the traditional interpretation of the parable as an example story may be legitimate (31), and while sensitive to the dramatic impact the juxtaposition of “good” and “Samaritan” must have had on the earliest audience, Funk argues that the reader/listener is not to emulate the Samaritan but can be cast in the role of the victim.

[18] At the outset of the passage, the reader identifies with the lawyer because his question is of critical importance to everyone even though his motives seem suspect since he sets out to test or tempt Jesus (Luke 10:25; Fitzmyer: 881). The lawyer’s response to Jesus’ command to love one’s neighbor is startling in some ways since one would expect the question “How?” rather than “Who?” The lawyer is more concerned about the identity of the neighbor than with the nature of love. (Apparently both he and the intended audience of the passage know what it means to love

oneself.) Nevertheless, the reader is interested in knowing what one must do to inherit eternal life even as the “ideal” reader disavows the lawyer’s hostility to Jesus. As the introductory dialogue continues the reader can affirm the lawyer’s appeal to scripture in his response to Jesus’ counter-question.

[19] The parable opens then with the audience anticipating the revelation of the identity of one’s neighbor. At the outset the reader identifies with “the man” setting out on an arduous journey. Even as he is victimized by the bandits and ignored by the priest and the Levite, he remains the “hero” and our sympathies, indeed our “readerly empathy” lie with him half-dead at the side of the road. It is the introduction of the Samaritan helper and his actions that bring uncertainty. But this is resolved with Jesus’ concluding question: “Which of these three, do you think, was neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” This is a clear signal alerting the reader that identification should remain with the victim not the Samaritan. Indeed, verse 30 and the overall structure of the parable leads the reader to identify most fully with the victim since at any point, at least until verse 33 and arguably throughout, the available options drive the reader back to the victim and not the robbers, nor the priest, nor the Levite, nor, therefore, for the sake of consistency, the Samaritan himself. At the outset, the reader, represented by the lawyer, inquires of Jesus, “Who is my neighbor [whom I should love as myself] ?” and upon answering the concluding question, the reader has to reply, “The Samaritan.” To “Go and do likewise” then is a command to be ready to love those whom one despises in those extraordinary circumstances when it is most difficult to do precisely that: when they bring help and love in one’s darkest hour.

[20] Funk sums up the difficulty for the reader:

The parable . . . therefore forces upon its hearers the question: who among you will permit himself or herself to be served by a Samaritan? In a general way it can be replied that only those who have nothing to lose by so doing can afford to do so. But note that the victim in the ditch is given only a passive role in the story. Permission to be served by the Samaritan is thus inability to resist. Put differently, all who are truly victims, truly disinherited, have no choice but to give themselves up to mercy. The despised half breed has become the instrument of grace (33).

For Funk, a consistent, metaphorical reading of the parable forces the reader into the role of a victim who is helpless to resist mercy and grace. Such a reading has the advantage of being logically consistent, far less banal than the usual reading but at the same time far more menacing for the reader, even the contemporary reader no longer aware perhaps of the first century animosity between Jews and Samaritans.

[21] Funk is not the only commentator to have reservations about the traditional interpretation that accords the Samaritan exemplary status. The French psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto speaks of how the sanctioned understanding of the parable is the inverse of her own (146). The text implies no judgment of the priest, Levite, or Samaritan. Rather, Christ insists that the wounded traveler love the Samaritan rescuer and to love him as himself (149). For Dolto the parable teaches us about the identity of our neighbor and that our neighbor is truly our neighbor in those times when without him or her our unconscious distress threatens our very survival (Dolto, 1977:152).

## The Reception of the Parable in Self-Psychological Terms

[22] Although Funk and Dolto's analyses have the advantage of not requiring a shift on the part of the reader in terms of identifying with the characters in the passage and of maintaining the logical consistency of the passage, such metaphorical interpretations have not eclipsed the trend to read the parable as a simple example story. Kohut's work can be of help in explaining why audiences have resisted seeing the parable as metaphorical.

[23] In classical psychoanalytic terms, reading the parable as an example story can be seen as contributing to the goal of moving the reader from narcissism to mature object love by affirming altruism. In explicitly self-psychological terms the Samaritan represents an idealized selfobject subject to what Kohut called "transmuting internalization" on the part of the reader so that he or she can achieve the Christian ethical ideal. As we have seen, however, the traditional reading obscures what the passage seems to require: persistent identification with the victim and, as Funk and Dolto insist, the capacity to accept help from and to love the neighbor who extends such help. The passage seems to require that the selfobject the reader should internalize is not the Samaritan but the victim. The ideal the reader should strive after is not the practice of unlimited altruism but first an awareness of his or her impotence and second the maturation of a capacity to receive mercy. From a self-psychological perspective, the fact that this interpretation has not prevailed reflects two phenomena that seem contradictory, but which highlight on the one hand both the tension between narcissism and altruism inherent in the Western tradition and on the other the challenge Kohut's theories present to Christian ethics. A self-psychological approach means that we have to take seriously the reader's narcissistic investment in the passage and his or her consequent identification with the characters so that we can explain this shift in identification from the victim to the Samaritan.

[24] First, and most simply, the usual interpretation of the parable as an example story requiring the emulation of the Good Samaritan reflects the hegemony of altruism in Western (Christian) ethics that Kohut believed had had a somewhat pernicious effect on healthy psychic development even to the extent of influencing psychoanalytic theory from the time of Freud. These altruistic value judgments of Western civilization largely derive from Christian ethical norms based on traditional interpretations of the teachings and example of Jesus as found in the New Testament. Exhortations to love one's enemy, to give expecting nothing in return, to turn the other cheek, to go the second mile, to willingly sacrifice oneself in the interest of others have long been espoused as the essence of Christian and - for most of the last two millennia - of Western teaching. The usual interpretation of the parable can then be attributed to the prevailing hegemony of altruism in our culture not to mention the fact that the New Testament as a whole recommends service to others throughout. Readers are "primed" to read all passages therein as recommending altruism and self-sacrifice. The traditional interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan merely reinforces this cultural disposition toward selflessness in ethics and morality.

[25] Kohut argues that psychoanalysis itself has not been able to transcend the hegemony of altruism in the West. In the fifth section of *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud insists that neighbor-love or the Christian love-commandment is ultimately unworkable as a guiding moral principle (1930: 109-15). Nevertheless, he also believed that the thwarting of narcissism, understood as a regression or defense, through the kindling of mature object-love was the highest of psychoanalytic goals (1925). His views on narcissism fostered the belief within psychoanalysis that beyond the primary narcissism of the infant, self absorption was pathological

and ideally was transformed into mature object love. When mature object love failed to emerge the resulting pathology was attributed to narcissism. From a strictly Freudian perspective, narcissism is problematic. "Classical theory instructs the therapist to regard narcissistic symptoms and behavior as a type of selfishness, or self-centeredness, that reflects a stubborn retention of an immature position, and that narcissism ultimately constitutes a defense against object-love" (Bacal and Newman: 247-48). Kohut was suspicious of altruism although he acknowledged that it was not always pathological (Kohut 1972: 127; 1974b: 146). Its hegemony as an ethical ideal however is virtually complete and this is illustrated in our persistent tendency to resist our empathic connection with the victim in the parable and the threat to our narcissism that that entails.

[26] As Kohut gradually became critical of the depreciation of narcissism he departed from Freud in at least two ways: first he extended to narcissism an independent importance in the psychic economy (e.g. 1975a: 277-78); and second, he did not seek to abolish the subject's narcissistic investment but to redirect it in healthier directions in order to transform its capacity to withstand narcissistic injury (1970: 556). He insisted that psychoanalytic therapy has been overly influenced by Western values that place a high premium on altruism:

Whatever the reasons for them, these value judgments exert a narrowing judgment on clinical practice. They tend to lead to a wish from the side of the therapist to replace the patient's narcissistic position with object love, while the often more appropriate goal of transformed narcissism (i.e., of a redistribution of the patient's narcissistic libido, and of the integration of the primitive psychological structures into the mature personality) is neglected (1966: 427-28).

[27] Like the audiences of any narrative, readers of the gospel of Luke to some degree or another have a libidinal investment in the text. The reader experiences a threat of fragmentation if identification with the victim is sustained. For readers to identify with the victim - to internalize his victimization and passivity as acceptable selfobject experience - risks the repudiation of their narcissistic needs. The traditional interpretation can be understood in terms of the vertical split in which the need for mirroring is acknowledged but rather than emerging as identification with the victim who accepts the help he needs - and presumably loves the one who provides it as he loves himself - it manifests itself as a desire to emulate the altruism of the Good Samaritan. Indeed, as Kohut notes, "the narcissistic self wants to be looked at and admired" (1966: 436). The Samaritan offers a selfobject experience more likely to achieve that goal in a Western/Christian context than the victim, especially once the distrust of Samaritans had faded into history. Better to champion the Samaritan as our ethical exemplar than to admit our vulnerability and need of grace to restore our capacity to continue a long and treacherous journey.

[28] The emphasis on altruism lamented by Kohut because it is so influential in Western culture has in fact inhibited the alternative reading of the parable that affirms our narcissistic wounds and acknowledges how difficult it is simply to be human. From a psychoanalytic perspective then, the text provokes narcissistic anxieties in the reader, and the reception of the parable as an example story constitutes a resistance to the author's apparent intent that readers identify with the victim. The turn to the Samaritan as exemplar is a way of coping with the challenge the parable presents. Kohut was aware that under certain circumstances threats to the narcissistic investment of a person and the consequent sense of vulnerability are manifested not so much through narcissistic rage or overwhelming merger transference but through withdrawal. As he says, "The mere submission to an analytic procedure is a narcissistic blow, and one doesn't have

to expect from the patient right away some kind of an enthusiastic commitment to this process” (1974a: 97; see also, 1975b: 322-24). The idealization of the Samaritan in the usual interpretation of the parable can be seen as akin to a selfobject transference that protects against such vulnerability.

[29] The prevalence of the traditional interpretation can be considered “healthy” from a Kohutian perspective, even as it champions altruism and betrays the apparent intent of the author. It fends off the threat of fragmentation by resisting what the Christian tradition teaches concerning the human dilemma in favor of internalizing the Samaritan as the ideal selfobject. The reception of the parable from a self-psychological perspective is, therefore, somewhat ironic. In the narcissistic resistance to the ostensible meaning of the text and the consequent shift to identification with the Samaritan, the reader embraces the extreme altruism which so unsettled Kohut.

[30] Finally, a self-psychological approach to the reception of the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the affirmation that the failure to identify with the victim is a manifestation of healthy narcissism even as it undermines the apparent meaning of the text, illustrates not only the value of a self-psychological approach to biblical narrative but also is another example of the fractious relationship between psychoanalysis and religion that has existed since Freud. As is well known, Kohut was interested in extending the impact and application of self psychology beyond the confines of the consulting room to the culture at large. His own work on the humanities has been developed by his successors, clinicians and academics alike. Freud’s well known but complicated aversion to religion and his conclusion that it was at best an illusion and at worst a delusion has been modified by his successors so that psychoanalysts today no longer consider religion the *bête-noire* it was assumed to be even thirty years ago. Despite his own complicated relationship with his religious background (see e.g., Strozier: 4-8, 38-40, 351), Kohut may be thanked for partaking in this transformation in relations between psychoanalysis and religion. He was able to recognize, in a way that Freud was not, the contribution religion can make to the healthy development of individuals in a given culture (see e.g. 1978: 83-84; 1981: 261-62). From a self-psychological perspective, however, the two possible interpretations of the parable of the Good Samaritan outlined above constitute a Catch-22 for the reader. To read the parable as an example story, however, is certainly the lesser of two evils.

[31] Kohut responded to the ultimate failure of Christian ideals and to Freud’s repudiation of narcissism by stating that human survival can depend neither on traditional religion nor on the goals of the Enlightenment that Freud inherited (1969-70: 70). Rather, Kohut speculated on the possibility of a new type of religion based on the existence of “heroic men . . . who have achieved a transformation of their narcissism into a contentless, inspiring personal religion” (1969-70: 70-71). Ultimately, one presumes that this new type of religion would be very different from both the call to altruism in the traditional interpretation and from Funk and Dolto’s reading of the parable as a metaphor. The helpless, dependent victim incapable of refusing help no matter what its source, appeals neither to Kohut nor to the parable’s readers. Nevertheless, in the trend to read the parable of the Good Samaritan as recommending altruism we see perhaps such a transformation of narcissism albeit in an embryonic form in an avowedly Christian context. This is a positive outcome from the perspective of self psychology akin to Kohut’s strategy of preventing disintegration “by stimulating and supporting the cohesion-producing activity of the patient’s reasoning function” (1977: 107). Whether the disavowal of the metaphorical interpretation of the parable is *spiritually* appropriate is a judgment that must be

left to Christian theologians. Kohut's view of the human situation is far more optimistic than either the classical psychoanalytic view and its preoccupation with aggression and the death drive or, more relevant here, the Christian understanding and its insistence that as human beings we are fundamentally sinful, alienated from God and unable to overcome that state independent of divine gratuity (1977: 114-5). To embrace the metaphorical reading of the parable is to acknowledge the unspeakable and dangerous possibility that the very presence of the neighbor whom we are called to love as ourselves marks our state of utter helplessness.

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