

The Jericho affair: Luke 10:25-37

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [June 29, 2004](#) issue

Imagine that Congress has set up a committee to report on the disquieting events on the Jerusalem-Jericho road and their aftermath. Here are some excerpts from its findings:

“The Inquiry is satisfied that the priest acted in a thoroughly professional manner. We are aware that he is a man of high profile in Jerusalem society, and that his first priority is to conduct his temple duties in a proper manner. Getting involved in self-indulgent gestures of solidarity is not recommended: such projects are invariably underresourced, nonstrategic and open to media misinterpretation. Moreover, such involvement can have dangerous implications: if the wounded man had been found dead, the priest would have made himself unclean and thus been invalidated from conducting his core task for several days. On the other hand, the half-dead man could have been bait in a trap: the robbers might have been lurking nearby. We judge that the priest correctly valued his own security to be more significant than a pointless gesture. The committee is well aware that priests seldom take their full-leave entitlement, and we are impressed by this priest’s ability to disengage from his role while journeying for a few days’ well-earned break in Jericho. In a busy world, this priest is surely an example to his people of prioritizing and looking after one’s own needs.

“The Inquiry is similarly satisfied that the Levite did all that could have been expected of him. He showed commendable humility in following the example of his superior, the priest, and keeping to the policy of nonintervention in circumstances of profound emotional manipulation. It is understood that, unlike the priest, he probably had no pack animal at hand, and therefore could have given little practical help to the wounded man. Meanwhile, the Levite was subject to the same dangers that applied to the priest. All the best health and safety advice points to supporting the actions of the priest and Levite. Theirs is a model of interagency collaborative thinking.

“Turning to the actions of the third party, the Inquiry became suspicious on a number of grounds. First, the man should have shown the same humility as the

Levite and followed the example of the priest. We quickly realized we were dealing here with a person who felt society's norms could be flouted at will. Second, on the most generous reading, the man showed an unprofessional attitude by allowing his emotions to sway his judgment. Early signs were that he was not local to Jericho, and became embroiled in matters that had nothing to do with him.

"Third, the man seems to have developed a rather exalted understanding of his ill-advised intervention. By binding wounds and pouring on oil and wine he seems to have been carrying out a highly provocative sequence of actions. After all, he seems not to come from a people that treats the writings of the prophet Hosea with due reverence, but he nonetheless has chosen this moment to perform a symbolic version of the actions of God toward Israel as depicted in the sixth chapter. We take him to be some kind of a prankster, because his use of oil and wine seems to be a spoof of the actions of the priest in worship at the temple. This is not an appropriate context in which to make a legitimate criticism of temple practice.

"Fourth, the Inquiry was alarmed at the man's behavior in parading the half-dead man into Jericho on an animal. We could draw only two possible conclusions from this. Either this was some kind of effort to show off a misguided gesture before the townspeople, in some puffed-up maneuver designed to shame them, or—and we suspect the latter—it was a foreigner's attempt to humiliate the townspeople by displaying one of their number in a degraded condition. Local speculation had it that the man had carried out the beating himself, and was displaying the victim in an effort to intimidate the townspeople through a shameless feat of bravado.

"Fifth, the fact that the wounded man was left in the hands of an innkeeper appears to prove our suspicions. The Inquiry is aware of the low repute of such people in the region. Clearly, the intention was to humiliate the wounded man further by leaving him impossible debts at the hand of a merciless innkeeper.

"It has come to our attention that the man who performed this regrettable series of actions was a Samaritan. It is likely that he was a criminal who assaulted a Jew, paraded him through a town and left him with crippling debts.

"Another, more charitable interpretation, suggested to us by a rather excitable lawyer, is that the Samaritan came down from above, had compassion, raised a man up, rescued him at great personal cost, suffered as his servant, paid a debt when the man had no resources of his own and promised to return and address any

outstanding problems. The lawyer called this pattern 'Christlike.' We reject this interpretation as a totally unsustainable model of social involvement.

"We conclude that the Samaritan was either a dangerous criminal or a naïve fool. If everyone followed his example, we would all soon be half-dead and at the mercy of robbers. The only appropriate model of engagement with issues of social deprivation is that of the priest and Levite, who acted with dignity and forbearance. We honor people of their caliber who establish careful codes of conduct, respect the privacy of the individual, follow health and safety legislation to the letter, and do not take on tasks that conflict with their roles. They make society what it is today."