

English Language resources: Bible texts analysis – Luke 10: 25-37

A textual analysis of a passage from the Bible

The text is the *King James Bible* translation of Luke 10:25-37, known as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The analysis aims to demonstrate the way in which language has changed over time.

Audience

The original audience of the Gospel of Luke was Christian converts from Judaism and other pagan religions, dating from the late first century A.D. The Gospel of Luke originates from accounts of those who heard the stories Jesus told. This was part of the tradition in which the lessons of Jesus were passed on orally through talking and telling stories. The original audience was very familiar with this oral tradition.

The *KJB* audience (from the seventeenth century onwards) was a Christian society with limited access to the Bible until the *KJB* appeared. The translation maintains ceremony and tradition. It was used in church where the minister would read it aloud for the congregation, but increasingly families and individuals with growing literacy had access to the text. Owning a family Bible was a matter of prestige and made possible by the affordability of texts owing to the advent of the printing press. The lexical choices in the *KJB* were intended to suit a wide audience and most of the population would either read or hear the text.

Modern audiences of the text are widespread and multiple: the Gospels are regularly read and studied throughout the Christian Church, and have inspired works of art and numerous film plots.

Purpose

The primary purpose of the text is instruction. We see this in the use of the modal auxiliary verb 'shalt' in v.27

and the imperative verb 'Go' in v. 37. However, the instructional purpose is mainly conveyed through the allegory of the parable. The events and the way in which the people in the story behave is meant to show how life should be lived.

Further information is conveyed about Jesus' contemporary society, as the narrative mentions places and types of people familiar to Jesus' listeners e.g. 'Jerusalem', 'Jericho', 'Levite', 'Samaritan'.

The entertainment aspect of Jesus' storytelling is also important as it allows the message to be more easily accepted; a memorable story is easier to assimilate than a lecture about how to behave.

Content/genre

This is a sacred text, specifically from the New Testament of the Bible. This passage is a parable, which is a story that teaches a lesson. Jesus tells this story to answer a question that has been posed asking who our neighbours are.

At the beginning and end of the story is a conversation that Jesus has with the lawyer. Just as at the start the lawyer asks a question to test Jesus, so Jesus ends with a question to test what the lawyer has learnt. The parable itself describes a man who has been attacked and who is not helped by those whom society might have expected to involve themselves, but by a Samaritan (a despised person in first century Palestine). This is one of the most familiar stories from the Bible with the term 'good Samaritan' being widely used even where its original meaning is not entirely understood.

Discourse

There is the distinctive discourse marker, 'And, behold' at the beginning. This signals to the reader that a story will ensue, as well as commanding the audience to pay attention.

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There is the formality of structural repetition which forms a patterning in v.27, 'with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind'. The use of such a rhetorical device adds a poetic sense to the language. The repetition also adds emphasis to the message that readers should love with every part of themselves.

The whole text has a clear discourse structure. It begins with the lawyer's question to Jesus and ends with Jesus questioning the lawyer about the parable and giving him the answer to his original question.

The actual story of the Samaritan has a clear narrative structure of events in chronological order. The conjunction 'and' is used to connect the events and is a clear discourse marker giving a sense of time sequence.

Grammar

There are two long complex and sentences in v. 33-5 which sequence a chain of events:

³³ But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,
³⁴ And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.
³⁵ And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.

This lends formality to the text as a whole. The length of sentences and number of co-ordinating conjunctions like 'and' emphasise how many actions the Samaritan completed to help this stranger. These actions are narrated in

a straightforward and list like way, perhaps demonstrating that for him, it is the natural, generous sequence of actions to complete.

There are many examples of archaic grammatical formations. The syntax is often unfamiliar e.g. the word order in the following:

- ❖ 'how readest thou?' in v.26;
- ❖ 'there came down a certain priest' in v.31;
- ❖ 'do thou likewise' in v.37.

In all these examples the modern order of subject and verb is inverted.

The clearest example of a grammatical form no longer in use is the second person singular pronoun, where 'thou' indicates the subject of the sentence and 'thee' is the object. The Modern English 'you' form does not differentiate. However, where 'thy' demonstrates possession, it equates to the Modern English 'your'.

Lexis

The text has many marks of formality. There is the use of single verbs like 'departed' in v.30 rather than 'went away' which would be more likely in a modern text.

The verb 'journeyed' is used. Nowadays we would tend to use the verb travelled and the word journey is used more often as a noun than a verb.

There are examples of archaic lexis e.g. 'raiment' in v.30 and 'the morrow' in v.35.

However, the lexis is high frequency consisting largely of common nouns. There is little that is difficult to understand, with few abstract nouns. This helps to make the meaning of the allegory entirely clear.

Semantics

There has been some semantic change involving some of the lexis. In v.25 it says the 'lawyer ... tempted him'. The word 'tempted' would be used today in

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the sense of enticing someone to do wrong. This sense certainly also exists in the Bible, but here it seems to mean something more like 'tested'.

The word 'beast' in v.34 would be unlikely to be used today as it tends to mean a wild creature rather than a domesticated animal. There has been pejoration of the word beast as it can now be used to insult someone too. The need for a generic term for a beast has perhaps been removed as people nowadays are less likely to own animals for work purposes.

Spelling/orthography

The word 'shewed' is a variation on the standardised 'showed' that we use today. The rule of adding the inflexion of -ed to create the standard past tense is one which is commonly accepted now. When the text was created the process of standardisation was not yet complete and the earlier vowel was still sometimes being altered to indicate the past tense.

Concepts

The text has more formality than we would expect today with the discourse feature of rhetorical patterning and the use of long complex sentences. However, the high frequency lexis is less formal and reflects the need for clarity and transparency in the allegory for its intended audience.

There is also the frequent use of 'And' at the beginning of sentences. This would be seen today as a mark of informality. However, such an attitude results from the prescriptive rules for correct English that came in with eighteenth century grammarians like Bishop Lowth. The standardisation of

English began at that time. However, no such rules existed at the time of the *KJB*. The use of 'and' at the beginning of a sentence would not be a marker of informality.

Context

There are references to 'Levite' and 'Samaritan' in this text which would have particular cultural meanings at the time the text was written. Some aspects of this have passed into Christian culture and have endured down the centuries, but these terms are not specific to the culture of the seventeenth century when the *KJB* was produced.

A parable is intended to have a moral and to convey religious values. The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most famous in the Bible as it shows Jesus changing the cultural application of the Jewish faith. The wounded man is not helped by the priest or the Levite. They are people held in high esteem by the Jews. Instead he is helped by a Samaritan, who would be considered inferior. This is in answer to the question asked by the lawyer, 'And who is my neighbour?'

The strong message of the text is that it is the Samaritan who is a good neighbour, but when he is asked at the end, the lawyer seemingly cannot bring himself to name the Samaritan and replies, 'He that shewed mercy on him.' This is the only way he can acknowledge that the Samaritan behaved in a more compassionate way than the more respectable priest and Levite.

This message of social equality and judging people by their behaviour rather than their status is one that has endured down the centuries.

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²⁵ And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

²⁶ He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou?

²⁷ And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.

²⁸ And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.

²⁹ But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?

³⁰ And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

³¹ And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

³² And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.

³³ But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,

³⁴ And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

³⁵ And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.

³⁶ Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?

³⁷ And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.