

# Who is My Neighbour: Interfaith Dialogue and Theological Formation

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**Abstract:** “Who is my neighbour?” is a good question for both the Bible and today, but it is a complicated one. In this paper, I will focus on unpacking the idea of “love of neighbour,” first in its Levitical context, then in certain New Testament passages, and finally in contrast to its relationship with the concept of “stranger.” The term “neighbour” (רֵעַ) has multiple meanings in a Hebrew Bible context, and similarly, there are distinct meanings of “neighbour” within the New Testament – specifically between the gospels and the Pauline letters. I argue that the common understanding of the “Good Samaritan” passage, that Jesus promotes accepting everyone as neighbour, is incorrect; instead, I suggest that the literature demonstrates how a non-neighbour reveals how real neighbours should behave. The scope of the article is to demonstrate how discussions about “neighbour” and “stranger” can be used to segue into questions to dialogue between Christians and Jews.

**Keywords:** Good Samaritan, strangers, neighbours, Interfaith dialogue

In the run-up to the parable of the Good Samaritan,<sup>1</sup> a lawyer asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbour?” The question first struck me as obnoxious. “Who is my neighbour?” seemed a polite way of asking “Who is not my neighbour?” with the implication, “Whom can I hate?” The question reminded me of attempts to prevent the construction of low-income housing or prisons near middle-class neighbourhoods; the acronym NIMBY, “not in my back yard,” has a place in English vocabulary.

Sometimes first impressions are correct. Other times, especially impressions about ancient texts produced in very different cultural contexts, are wrong. I was wrong. “Who is my neighbour?” is a good question for both the Bible and today. When we look at the question in light of biblical texts and our own lives, we find helpful insights in at least three contexts. First, it helps us assess what we mean by, and owe to, both “neighbours” and “strangers/resident aliens/immigrants/migrants/sojourners” (the translation of the Hebrew רֵעַ is unsettled); second, it provides clarity not only on what “neighbour” means in Leviticus 19:18, where we find the first iteration of the commandment, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” or “[...] who is like you,” but also how it prompts other questions related to the parable of the good Samaritan. Third, we realize how failing to do the historical work leads to anti-Jewish readings and how Jewish-Christian dialogue requires better knowledge of the reasons why Jews and Christians read Scripture differently.

To unpack these concerns for neighbour and stranger, parable and context, history, and dialogue, I will proceed in three steps. First is assessing what Leviticus 19:18 means by “neighbour.” For the author of Leviticus 19:18, “neighbour” means a member of the in-group. Since all groups need boundaries, all

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1. The conversation between Jesus and a lawyer that prompts the parable of the Good Samaritan appears in Luke 10:25–29; the parable is located in Luke 10:30–37. The lawyer’s question to Jesus, “Who is my neighbour?” is found in verse 29.

groups need to determine who holds the same rights and responsibilities (e.g., political options, ritual practice, endogamous relationships). “Who is my neighbour?” is a good question. It is also a complicated one.

Second, “love of neighbour” takes different meanings in the letters of Paul and the Gospels, including the famous parable known as the “Good Samaritan” which does not, contrary to popular teaching, answer the question, “who is my neighbour?”

Third, the category of “stranger” – alien, outsider, “not-us” – proves helpful for both ethical assessment and theological undertakings. The connection to ethics entails how communities choose to relate to strangers (e.g., sharing meals, sharing sacred space, sharing resources) as well as helps with responding to contemporary questions in so-called “inter-faith” or “interreligious” dialogue.

### Leviticus 19:18 – Who Is a Neighbour?

The Hebrew עֵרֵב, used in Leviticus 19:18 for “neighbour,” has several connotations. Here are three examples. First, it can mean “human being.” Genesis 11:3 states that at the construction of the Tower of Babel, “one man (שֵׁרָץ) said to his עֵרֵב (neighbour; LXX: πλησίον), ‘Come, let us make bricks.’” In this instance, a neighbour is a co-worker who speaks the same language and works in the same endeavours. The term עֵרֵב can also mean a friend, as in Exodus 33:11a, “And spoke YHWH to Moses face to face, as would speak a man (שֵׁרָץ) to his friend” (עֵרֵב; LXX: φίλος). Here, the neighbour is in both immediate proximity and in a personal relationship. Finally, עֵרֵב can be someone who lives nearby. Deuteronomy 19:14 and 27:17 speak about a neighbour (עֵרֵב; LXX: πλησίον) as a person whose lands share a boundary. Proverbs 3:29 similarly presumes living in proximity, “Do not plan against your neighbour (עֵרֵב; LXX: φίλος) evil, and he lives with (i.e., beside) you in security.” A neighbour is thus someone who lives nearby, who can be or at least should be trusted and trustworthy, and who shares common values, language, and culture.

Leviticus 19:18 implies all these connotations. “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” refers to a fellow Israelite and, by extension, a fellow Jew. Leviticus is an address to “all the congregation of the people of Israel: you shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2). The address is not to the world, and it deals primarily with internal relations.

Neighbour for Leviticus thus has ethnic/geographic, linguistic, and legal connotations. The kinship aspect, present in Leviticus 19:17–18a determines the emphasis of Leviticus 19:18b. Leviticus 19:17 stresses kinship, “Not shall you hate your brother (אָחִי; LXX: ἀδελφός) in your heart, you will certainly reprove your neighbour/relative (עֵרֵב; LXX: πλησίον) and not bear sin because of him (i.e., so you will not be found guilty of his sin).” Similarly, Leviticus 19:18a states, “Not will you take vengeance and not will you keep a grudge against the children of your people” (אָחִי עֵרֵב; LXX: τοῖς υἱοῖς τοῦ λαοῦ σου).

We can develop the import of these ethnic/geographic, linguistic, and legal concerns. First, Jews always retained an ethnic sense of identity. Traditionally, one is a Jew by descent, from Abraham and Sarah; proselytes, converts, or Jews-by-choice are understood as receiving a new ancestry. Second, Jews retain a linguistic connection by preserving Scripture in Hebrew, even when it was also translated into the vernacular. Hebrew (and in places Aramaic) is the *lashon ha-kodesh*, the holy tongue or language of holiness, the language of Scripture and prayer (extending m. Sota 7:1–2; b. Sotah 32a).

Third, “neighbours” in ancient Israel were, as the text constructs their identity, members of one of the tribes of Israel who inherited land as part of a patrimony. Such neighbours, fellow Israelites, had

rights and restrictions that were not binding on others, such as male circumcision on the eighth day, offering sacrifice, dietary practices, and Sabbath observance.<sup>2</sup>

Over time, changes in both community self-identity and land allotment shifted the connotations of neighbour. With the monarchy's centralized government replacing the charismatic leadership of interdependent tribes, concern for tribal land allotments yielded to concerns for national identity. Then, following the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE and the Babylonian exile in the sixth century, a general loss of tribal identification merged with a broadening in the prophetic imagination of the covenant community to include non-Israelites in eschatological contexts. Here are four of several examples.

Isaiah 2:3/Micah 4:2 anticipate the time when “many peoples (עַמִּים רַבִּים; LXX: ἔθνη πολλὰ) will come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of YHWH, to the house of the God of Jacob; and let him show us his ways and let us walk in his paths. For from Zion shall go forth instruction (תּוֹרָה; LXX: νόμος), and the word of YHWH from Jerusalem’” (this last verse is part of the synagogue liturgy, recited when the Torah is taken out of the ark). These gentiles acknowledge Israel's God, but they do not become Israel.

In some cases, the Septuagint removes the ethnic/geographic, linguistic, and legal connotation in favour of friendship language. Friendship can traverse ethnicity; Isaiah 56:6–7 anticipates that the בְּנֵי הַגֵּרִים, the “children of foreigners” (LXX: ἀλλογενής) will “join (לָקַח)/become attached (LXX: πρόσκειμαι) to YHWH, to serve him, to love the name of YHWH, and to be to him slaves/servants (LXX: δούλους καὶ δούλας<sup>3</sup>), all who keep the (LXX: my) sabbath, and do not profane, and hold fast (LXX: cling to) my covenant”; the divine plan is to bring these people to Zion and the Temple, and to receive their sacrifices, because “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (לְכָל־הָעַמִּים; LXX: πᾶσι τοῖς ἔθνεσιν). Again, this is affiliation, not incorporation. There cannot be a “house of prayer for *all peoples*” if there is only one people.

Ezekiel 47:22–23 describes land ownership following the Babylonian exile that will include an inheritance both for Israel and for the “strangers who reside among you (וְלִהְגָּרִים הַגֵּרִים בְּתוֹכְכֶם) and have born children among you (אֲשֶׁר־הוֹלְדוּ בְּנִים בְּתוֹכְכֶם). They are to be treated like a “native (i.e., native-born; אֲזִרָא) of the children of Israel” and so are to be given “an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. And it shall be in whatever tribe the stranger lives, there you shall assign him his inheritance.” These aliens are not Israel, but they look like Israel and, at some point, may become indistinguishable from Israel.

Fourth, according to Judith 14:10, the Ammonite general Achior, who adopts Jewish theology, became “circumcised, and was added to (or even “put into”; προστίθημι) the house of Israel, remaining so to this day.” Judith, from the second century BCE and preserved in Greek (questions of a Hebrew original remain unresolved), suggests full incorporation. The definition of neighbour thus changes from a focus on ethnicity, Hebrew, and land, to a focus on belief and practice. When “conversion” as opposed to “affiliation” becomes an option, community membership necessarily adapts. It is this adaptation that comes to influence the usage of neighbour language among the followers of Jesus.

2. At what time various laws were put into practice is a matter of scholarly debate. This paper focuses not on practice behind the text, or on whether the commandments are prescriptive or descriptive, but on the import of the text as preserved.

3. In Isaiah 56:6 (MT), the noun is in the masculine plural; the Septuagint has both the masculine and feminine plural nouns.

### “Love Your Neighbour” – Moving to the New Testament

Rabbi Akiva, put to death by the Romans about a century after Jesus, is reputed to have said, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעִי כְּאִתְּךָ) is the summation of Torah (Sifra, Qedoshim 2.2; see also Sifra, Qedoshim 4.12; Genesis Rabbah 24.27; j. Nedarim 9.4).<sup>4</sup> Jesus would agree. According to Mark 12:28, a scribe, impressed by Jesus’s teaching, asks him, “Which commandment (ἐντολή; the Hebrew would be מצוה) is the first of all?” That is, what is the most important of the traditionally numbered 613 commandments? Jesus, who typically does not answer a question directly, offers not one commandment but two: “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength’ (Mark 12:29–30). The quote is a variant of Deuteronomy 6:4–5. Jesus then adds: “The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour (πλησίον) as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31). The scribe approves the teaching, and Jesus then approves the scribe.

Matthew 22:34–40 rewrites the scene by replacing the scribe with a lawyer from the Pharisees and by attributing to the lawyer sent from the Pharisees the hostile intent of testing Jesus.

For Jesus and Akiva, the love command is the touchstone by which all other commandments are to be practiced.<sup>5</sup> They are what are known as “weightier commandments”; for Jesus and Akiva, those other 611 remain in place. Further, for both Jesus and Akiva, Leviticus 19:18 speaks about fellow Jews.<sup>6</sup>

The definition of neighbour and so the connotations of Leviticus 19:18 shift in the Pauline literature. In Galatians 5:14, Paul states, “For the whole law is summed up on a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour (πλησίον) as yourself.’” For Paul’s gentile congregations, the love commandment replaces the other *mitzvot*.<sup>7</sup> Why? For Jesus and Akiva, speaking as Jews to Jews, the Torah is the basis for how one lives. But Paul, a Jew speaking to *gentiles*, does not want these gentiles to ground practice in the 613 *mitzvot*. Were they to do so, they would be converts to Judaism, which Paul does not promote. Paul believed, as did many fellow Jews, that when the messianic age began – and Paul believes that it began with Jesus – gentiles turn from their gods to worship the God of Israel. But they remain gentiles and so show that the God of Israel is the God of all peoples. The use of *πλησίον* here

4. In the same discussion of the greatest or weightiest commandment, Ben Azzai counters Akiva with the citation of Genesis 5:1, that all people are descended from Adam.

5. Sifre Qedoshim 4.12, immediately before Akiva’s epitome, allows for vengeance and bearing a grudge against others who are not, in Goldstone’s words, part of the “in group.” See Matthew Goldstone, “Rebuke, Lending, and Love: An Early Exegetical Tradition on Leviticus 19:17–18,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136, no. 2 (2017): 307–321 (quote on 310).

6. While debates will remain about how much if at all material attributed to each figure is what that figure said, this claim is grounded on the best we can do regarding distinguishing tradition from redaction. For the purposes of this essay, unless noted otherwise, my references to Jesus regard “the historical Jesus.”

7. See Menahem Kister, “The Golden Rule and Ancient Jewish Biblical Exegesis: The Pluriformity of a Tradition,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 141, no. 4 (2022): 717–735. Goldstone, “Rebuke, Lending, and Love,” argues that Matthew 5:38–44/Luke 6:27–35 as well as Didache 1:3–5 invert and amplify the midrash in Sifra. In contrast, CD 9.2–8 and IQS 5:24–6.1 comment on Leviticus 19.17–18 regarding reproof but omit Leviticus 19.18b on love of neighbour. See Kengo Akiyama, “Reproof in CD 9:2–8 and IQS 5:24–6:1: A Note on a Curious Omission,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 24 (2017): 301–306. For an overview of the interpretation of Leviticus 19:18, see Kengo Akiyama, *The Love of Neighbour in Ancient Judaism: The Reception of Leviticus 19:18 in the Hebrew Bible, The Septuagint, the Book of Jubilees, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the New Testament* (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 105; Leiden: Brill, 2018). Akiyama notes that CD includes concern for the רֵעִי; for Jubilees and the DSS, the love command concerns internal matters.

reads the Levitical commandment in light of the eschatological visions of Micah, Isaiah, and to an extent Ezekiel. “Neighbor” is now defined apart from ethnicity. As Paula Fredriksen summarizes, “By undergoing *huiiothesia kata pneuma*, by establishing a specific pneumatic lineage through Christ to Abraham (Gal 3:6–29; cf. Rom 4:1–12), these gentiles, too, could now be legitimate heirs, along with ethnic Israel [...]. Their changed status was manifest in the (brief) here-and-now, not ethnically but *ethically*: new gentile *adelphoi*, enabled through spirit, and despite their old ‘nature’ – the ‘outer man’ (2 Cor 4:15? – could now fulfill God’s law (Gal 5:14; Rom 13:8).”<sup>8</sup>

Paul nuances the point in Romans 13:9–11: “The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’” Paul promotes for his gentile converts the second table of the Decalogue, which means he is not abrogating for gentiles the entire Torah. He does not, however, mention the Sabbath, which was a marker of Jewish identity, and it is not clear if he expected his gentile readers to honour the Sabbath.<sup>9</sup> For Paul, the Torah is – for gentiles – a moral but not a ritual guide.

James (the Greek is Ἰάκωβος, that is, Jacob) 2:8 follows the Pauline line. James states, “You do well if you fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbour (πλησίον) as yourself.’” Again, James speaks of a single guide.

For both Paul and James, “neighbour” means fellow Christ-confessor and each letter emphasizes community relations. Fellow community members, despite disagreements about practice (Romans) or distinctions of status (James), are to be equally loved. In what becomes early Christianity, people can live in proximity, speak the same language, and even share family ties, but if one does not confess Jesus as Lord, one is not a neighbour. One becomes a neighbour, in the Christian system broadly speaking, by being born again by water and spirit and, to paraphrase St. Cyprian, having God as one’s father and church as one’s mother.<sup>10</sup> The new homeland is the kingdom of heaven or the heavenly Jerusalem, not their earthly counterparts.

We can see how these different definitions of neighbour play out by returning to Luke 10, the lawyer, Jesus, and the parable of the Good Samaritan.<sup>11</sup>

The lawyer in Luke 10 replaces the lawyer in Matthew 22: both have evil intentions; both ask questions to test rather than to gain information. Luke does not repeat either the conversation between Jesus and the scribe in Mark 12, or the edited version in Matthew. However, that Luke 10:25–37 includes a lawyer, a discussion about major commandments, the double citation from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19, and an ending in which the interlocutor does not have the last word could indicate that Luke 10:25–37 is a rewriting of, or at least was influenced by, Matthew 22.

A lawyer, seeking to test Jesus, first asks him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). The Greek word for “to test,” πειράζω, is the same word for “to tempt” or “to ‘bring to trial’ as in

8. Paula Fredriksen, “‘Circumcision is Nothing’: A Non-Reformation Reading of Paul’s Letters,” in *Protestant Bible Scholarship: Antisemitism, Philosemitism and Anti-Judaism*, ed. Arjen F. Bakker, René Bloch, Yael Fisch, Paula Fredriksen, and Hindy Najman (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 200; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022); 79–105; quotation on 89.

9. For discussion of rabbinic views on the gentile use of the second part of the Decalogue, see Herbert W. Bassler, “The Neighbor You Love and the Decalogue: Speculations on Some Textual Evidence for Early Jewish Polemics,” in *Studies in Exegesis: Christian Critiques of Jewish Law and Rabbinic Responses 70-300 C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 51–106.

10. St. Cyprian, *De Ecclesiae Catholicae Unitate*, section 6.

11. See Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 77–116.

“Lead us not into temptation” (Matthew 6:13//Luke 11:4) or Satan’s testing of Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1,3; Luke 4:2). Unlike the scribe in Mark 12 who sought information, the lawyer is testing Jesus.

Nor is the lawyer’s first question about eternal life a particularly good question (many of us have heard the old aphorism that there are no bad questions; there are). The lawyer is asking about a one-off (“do” – ποιήσας – is an aorist participle, which implies a single action) rather than about a life of righteousness. Nor, ideally, does one act *to* earn eternal life. One follows Torah in loving response to the gift of Torah.

Jesus, answering the lawyer’s question with another question and so gaining the rhetorical upper hand, asks, “In the Torah (νόμος) what is written? How do you read?” (Luke 10:26). The questions “what is *written*; how do you *read*?” presuppose a literate respondent (general literacy accompanied the rise of the public school system). The Hebrew term for “neighbour” (the letters *resh* and *ayin*) looks the same in writing as the Hebrew word for evil or evil one (the letters *resh* and *ayin*).<sup>12</sup> Reading is always an act of interpretation. When taken as an ethnic, geographic, or linguistic indicator, a “neighbour” may well be an enemy, which is why Leviticus 19 mandates behaviour marked by love. This approach is necessary to keep communities intact. When the term “neighbour” shifts to “friendship” or “voluntary affiliation,” the possible connotation of enemy drops out.

The lawyer responds to Jesus by citing Deuteronomy 6:5 on loving God and Leviticus 19:18b on loving the neighbour, and Jesus approves his answer. The lawyer, seeking to justify himself, now asks his famous question: “Who is my neighbour?” Jesus responds with what has come to be called the “Parable of the Good Samaritan.” This problematic title implies that only the hero of the parable is a “good” Samaritan. It would be like saying “good Jew” or “Good Muslim” with the presumption that the rest are not good.

Popular interpretation suggests that for Jews, “neighbour” means “fellow Jew,” and that this parable invents universalism by saying that we are all neighbours. The first point is, as we have seen, correct: neighbour in Leviticus 19 does mean fellow Jew. The second point is not correct. The Lucan Jesus, indeed, the historical Jesus, does not teach that we are “all neighbours” in the sense that we all have the same ancestry, geography, or language. Further, on the subject of “neighbour,” Samaritans provide the test case.

Samaritans are not gentiles. The question was whether they should be considered fellow Israelites. Samaritans worshiped the same G-d of Israel and had the same practices, but they had a priesthood and a former Temple on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria rather than on Mt. Zion in Judea. Were they neighbours or strangers? The answer one received in the first century depended on the Jew one asked.<sup>13</sup> How both Jews and Samaritans related to Rome necessarily skewed the determination; a neighbour one month (Jews and Samaritans make common cause against Rome) might, for political reasons, be an enemy a month later.

For modern examples, although the connections are not entirely matched, a neighbour in my synagogue is a fellow Jew (child of a Jewish mother or a Jew-by-choice), who would have the right to say the blessings before and after the Torah reading. But then the details complicate the determination of “neighbour” or “fellow Jew.” For example, does the participant’s type of conversion (Reform,

12. See Herbert W. Basser, “Rabbinic Legal Argument,” in *The Historical Jesus in Context*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison, Jr., and John Dominic Crossan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 285–295.

13. See Alan D. Crown, “Redating the Schism Between the Judaeans and the Samaritans,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 82, no. 1/2 (1991): 17–50.

Conservative, Reconstructionist, Orthodox...) or the rabbi or the members of the *bet din* who certified it matter in determining insider status? In some church contexts, only baptized Christians are welcome to participate in the Eucharist. But then the details again complicate the matter. Does infant baptism count? Is full-body immersion necessary? What is the age of consent? Determining insider vs. outsider status is often messy, and in religious, national, or tribal contexts it is also often painful.

The Synoptic Gospels suggest that for Jesus, Samaritans were not neighbours but proximate others. Samaritans do not appear in Mark's Gospel, and there's no Samaritan mission in Luke's writings until Acts 8. According to Matthew 10:5b–6, which I think is not from the historical Jesus or the hypothetical M source but Matthean redaction,<sup>14</sup> Jesus instructs his disciples, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The Samaritans are thus, at least for Matthew, not part of “Israel.” John 4 gives us the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman and so the recognition of Jesus as messiah by a Samaritan village. The story looks more like Johannine invention than historical memory, written after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (John 4:21), and designed to dismiss Samaritan claims to legitimate tradition (John 4:22). The disciples are not part of this mission, so John 4 need not be read as contradicting Matthew 10:5b. John incorporates the Samaritans by changing their identity: dismissing their sacred place; dismissing the legitimacy of their traditions.

In our parable in Luke 10, the Samaritan is not a neighbour. To act as a neighbour is not the same thing as to be a neighbour. The parable describes how a traveller (since Jesus is a Jewish storyteller talking to Jews, we can presume the traveller is also a Jew) is waylaid by robbers, beaten, stripped, and left half-dead. Two neighbours, a priest and a Levite, pass the traveller by. They do not pass by because of purity laws; to the contrary; they have no excuse. They fail to obey the commandment concerning both love of neighbour and love of stranger. But a Samaritan, a maybe-neighbour but unlikely given Luke 9, which describes how Samaritans refused Jesus' hospitality, stops to help.

At the end of the parable, Jesus rephrases the lawyer's question; the question now is not “Who is my neighbour?” but “Who proved neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?” The parable does not respond to the question “Who is my neighbour?” It shows rather how a neighbour is supposed to act.

### Neighbours and Strangers

While “neighbour” in Leviticus 19:18 and in the Synoptic tradition means fellow Jew, love is not restricted to Jews. Leviticus 19:34 reads, “The stranger (רֵגֶז; LXX: προσήλυτος) who resides/sojourns (וָרָגַז; LXX: προσπορεύομαι) with you shall be to you as one born among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers (רֵגִיזִים; LXX: προσήλυτοι) in the land of Egypt.” Love of neighbour is related to identity; love of stranger is related to experience. While the Greek προσήλυτοι can mean “proselyte” or in more modern terms “convert,” that makes little sense of Leviticus 19:34 in the LXX; the Israelites were not proselytes to Egyptian ritual or ethnicity. In this context, the term must have the connotation of sojourner or resident alien.

Ancient Israel has a lot to say about strangers, with the concern for experience undergirding the commandments. For example, Exodus 22:21 mandates against wronging or oppressing the stranger (רֵגֶז; LXX 22:20, προσήλυτον), for you were aliens (רֵגִיזִים; LXX: προσήλυτοι) in the land of Egypt. So also, Exodus 23:9 and Deuteronomy 10:19. Deuteronomy 23:7 (23:8 MT), “You shall not abhor an Edomite,

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14. See Amy-Jill Levine, *The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Salvation History: Go Nowhere Among the Gentiles (Matthew 10:5b)* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1988).

because he is your brother. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a stranger (רֵגִי; LXX: πάροικος) in his land.” Edomites are neighbours (kin); Egyptians are strangers. That the Edomites tried to slaughter the Israelites and the Egyptians enslaved Israel for 400 years and then attempted genocide suggests the move also to love of the enemy.

These biblical strangers would be comparable to today’s immigrants. For example, Exodus 12:49 (see also Numbers 15:15–16) mandates one law for the native/local (πῆγῆ; LXX: ἐγχώριος) and for the stranger or resident alien (רֵגִי; LXX: προσήλυτος). Deuteronomy 10:17–18 (see also Deuteronomy 1:16–17) connects the desire for justice for orphans and widows with concern for the “strangers” and the need to provide them food and clothing.

Maintaining the distinction between neighbour and stranger while having love mark both relationships continues into post-biblical thought. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus remarks in his *Contra Apion* 2:146 that Jews have both a “communion with one another” (κοινωνίαν τὴν μετ’ ἀλλήλων) and a “general love of humanity” (καθόλου φιλανθρωπίαν).

However, Torah’s calls to love the stranger effectively drops out of early Christianity.<sup>15</sup> The concern for the stranger as stranger appears in Matthew’s Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (25:31–46) where Jesus tells the (saved) sheep, “I was a stranger (ξένος) and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35). But for the followers of Jesus, neighbours were fellow believers. Everyone else was a potential neighbour, an infidel, or an apostate. As we have seen from church history, infidels are expelled, and apostates are tortured to death. The claim “we are all neighbours” not only eliminates the category of “stranger,” it also opens the door to all sorts of problems.

Patricia G. Kirkpatrick, in her “Questions as possible prompts for Professor AJ Levine.” noted that today, “more people are seeking common ground, which facilitates interfaith dialogue. What common ground will permit each religious tradition to grow and flourish and not become a threat to the other? Is a plurality of faith traditions what dialogue seeks to understand and promote?”<sup>16</sup> Seeing how Jews and Christians have understood the categories of neighbour and stranger can help answer these good questions.

To address this question of common ground from my Jewish perspective (since I cannot speak for all Jews), I must redefine the terms. For example, “faith tradition” sounds Christian to me. In Christian thought, broadly speaking, neighbour means fellow “believer,” one who shares a common “faith.” That is not what holds Jews together.

For the Bible, neighbours have, literally, common ground. Strangers have a common cause, based in experience.

My discomfort with both the idea of “common ground” and the labels “faith traditions” or “religious” settings is six-fold (it’s more, but I recognize that I do not have an unlimited word count).

First, the common ground tends to be the ground of the majority, the powerful, or the people paying for the program. The same problem can hold for the language of bridge building: staying in the middle of a bridge is not a long-term or even comfortable option. The bridge can threaten to be the access not only for cultural sharing but also for military expansion.

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15. See Michael Fagenblat, “The Concept of Neighbor in Jewish and Christian Ethics,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler, 2d edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 645–650.

16. Email sent to presenter from Prof. Patricia G. Kirkpatrick, 23 August 2022.



Second, one popular variant of the search for common ground is to talk about reconciliation. I am not sure “reconciliation” is the right term. “Reconciliation” presupposes a previous level playing field, which is rarely the case. Further, Judaism and Christianity today cannot be reconciled. There is either a Trinity or there is not; the Tanakh and the Old Testament are different books with different canonical order, different reception histories, even different translations. Either the messiah has come, or the messiah has not come. Judaism and Christianity cannot be reconciled, or at least not until the messiah comes, or comes back. The best we can do is note that both are unfinished products. I also do not find helpful talking about reconciliation in the sense of a post-Shoah rapprochement. I was not a victim of the Nazis, and my Christian interlocutors were not members of the party. I cannot grant forgiveness for sins committed against previous generations.

Third, the concern for common ground, for seeking similarities between religious traditions, or for discovering an underlying truth in all traditions, presumes a commonality where there may be none. Alternatively, and more boring, it drives toward a lowest common denominator religion for which we can all hold hands and sing “Kumbaya” or “Hine ma tov umanayim, shevat achim gam yachad” (“Behold how good and how pleasing when brothers [i.e., family members] live together as one” [Psalm 133:1]).

Fourth, I am not sure we all have the same truth, or for a different metaphor, I am not sure we are either climbing up the same mountain or chasing the same rabbits down the same hole. It was Pontius Pilate who asked, “What is truth?” (John 19:38). When Pilate poses the question, he is looking directly at Jesus, who had announced that he is the truth, in a text that uses the term “truth” about 25 times. Jesus is for John “The word became flesh and lived among us... full of grace and truth” (1:14). In John 14:6, Jesus announces, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” And no one comes to Jesus unless that person receives a prior call. Pilate cannot see the truth in front of him, because for John – and for the category we call “religion” – truth is based on revelation, not empiricism.

Fifth, claims of theological truths legitimize historical winners. Truth claims are forms of gatekeeping. What is true, or inspired, makes the canonical cut; what is not, is either ignored or countered as false, ignorant, or heretical.

More, theological truth claims can *oppress*. If we begin with the premise that there can be no error in an inspired text, we open the door to bigotry. Those who claim the Bible to be true – defined in this sense as without error, timeless, and meant to be put into practice – too easily weaponize the text, especially on matters of gender and sexuality, economics, and evangelization.

Finally, theological truth claims can interfere with honest interchange. Jewish/Christian dialogue has a general rule: no proselytizing. This approach removes conservative Christians from participation since their goal is to proclaim the good news of Jesus (usually having something to do with soteriology) to the unbaptized and unchurched. I would much rather have the conservative Christian engage in evangelization and then listen to various Jewish responses. Honest dialogue does not mean remaining silent about salient issues.

Moving from theology to ethics and history can help us with another question posed in Patricia’s note to me: “*Nostra Aetate* was initially motivated in response to the horrific events that resulted in the Shoah. Is there any reason to believe that paying attention to other religious traditions’ aspirations will help prevent such violence in the future?”<sup>17</sup>

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17. Email sent to presenter from Prof. Patricia G. Kirkpatrick, 23 August 2022.

I see little reason for optimism. Sixty years after *Nostra Aetate*, lectionaries still make Judaism the negative foil to Christianity, hymnals still use anti-Jewish images, and the reading of numerous Gospel texts inculcates or reinforces anti-Jewish attitudes. Nor did the Shoah convince all Christians that what Jules Isaac called the “Teaching of Contempt”<sup>18</sup> had to stop. In 2023, the Episcopal Church USA is discussing what to do about the lectionary. It’s hard to have trust when structural and systemic patterns of antisemitism remain in place.

To Patricia’s related question, “How has/does theological dialogue between Jews and Christians establish trust between these two communities?” I do not think it does, since the dialogue is not between communities. Dialogue takes place between individuals, and rarely do the results of the dialogue filter down from the privileged individuals who are invited to participate. Next, while numerous church bodies have hierarchical systems, world Jewry, outside branches of Hasidism, has no centralized system. Churches can produce official documents, such as the Anglican Communion’s 2019 “God’s Unfailing Word.” We Jews can only produce what self-selected individuals find viable.<sup>19</sup> While individual conversations can be like mustard seeds that grow into giant trees, with the best example being the meeting between Jules Isaac and Pope (St.) John XXIII, these are rare examples.

### Final Musings

Much Jewish-Christian dialogue has centred on common ground. I find understanding the distinctions to be more interesting, and more productive: for example, How, and why, do we read the same texts, whether Genesis or Isaiah or the Psalms, in different ways? How, and why do we have different messianic expectations, or different (and very diverse) views of the land of Israel?

If we keep the categories of neighbours and strangers distinct, we have more options. First, we can engage with each other without sacrificing the particulars of our own traditions. Second, can celebrate diversity including cultural particularism.

Third, we have a check against imposing our views as opposed to expressing them. Like the golden rule in Jesus’ formulation – “do to others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12//Luke 16:31) – “love your neighbour as yourself” can result in coercive practices. For example, and these are examples taken from actual comments made in the various “dialogues” I have had with Christians: “I love my neighbours,” says one friend, “so, of course, I insist that they believe in Jesus as lord and saviour; otherwise, they will go to hell.” “If I love my neighbours,” says another, “then I must assure that they follow my values, my politics; otherwise they will be damned.” This idea of loving the neighbour combined with the golden rule led to children from First Nations, Native Americans, and Australian indigenous populations being taken from their homes, stripped of their language and traditions, and assimilated into Christian settings. Loving the stranger allows the stranger to maintain a distinct identity.

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18. Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: The Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1964).

19. Self-selected statements regarding Christianity, see National Jewish Scholars Project, “Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity,” *Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations*, September 10, 2000, <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/dabru-emet>, and International Group Of Orthodox Rabbis, “To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians,” *Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations*, December 3, 2015, <https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/orthodox-2015dec4>. The self-selected signatories to the second statement were limited to Orthodox rabbis.

For Christian ministers, to retain a category of stranger, can be a new way of relating to Jesus, who is historically if not also theologically speaking a stranger (a Jew). His very otherness can be instructive. At the same time, perhaps we Jews can see Jesus as our neighbour.

Not all questions are of equal value, and not all questions can be answered as posed. Having the courage to ask what we want to know, and to rephrase when we cannot answer a question as posed, are good rules for dialogue.

And now, it is time for this dialogue, among neighbours and strangers, guided by love that does not colonize, does not smother, and allows for authentic expression.

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