

**Research and Interpretation of the Parable of the Lost Sheep as Recorded in
Luke 15:4-7**

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RESEARCH AND INTERPRETATION OF THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP AS RECORDED IN LUKE 15:4-7

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Abstract: This article will analyze the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:4-7. By employing Ruben Zimmerman's definition of a parable, it will outline Luke 15:4-7 and show that by using literary, historical, and reader-oriented approaches, the parable (like all others) creates a field of meaning. This article engages with various parable scholars and argues for the need to include various perspectives in interpretation. After discussing the parable's field of meaning, the final section of the analysis puts forth five possible interpretations of the parable. These interpretations include the author's understanding of the parable, a systematic theological interpretation, a reader-oriented interpretation, a queer interpretation, and an anti-capitalist interpretation.

Introduction

Each mountainous biblical figure provides insight on God and His covenantal kingdom in different ways. Moses was the law bringer, David was the poet, and Jesus was the parabolic preacher. There is a consensus among historical-critical scholars that the parables found in the synoptic gospels are the closest one can get to hearing the words of the historical Jesus. Great emphasis has been placed on the study of parables due to their historicity, puzzling nature, and rhetorical form. The goal of this essay is to provide thorough research on the parable of the lost sheep that is found in Luke 15:4-7. Throughout my personal research and interpretation, I will be interacting with scholarly work that surrounds the parable of the lost sheep in the Gospel of Luke.

This essay is broken up into two main sections: "Methodology" and "Analysis." In the methodology section of this article, I lay out the groundwork needed to properly analyze and interpret Luke 15:4-7. In the analysis portion, I dissect Luke 15:4-7 and surrounding writings to garner a greater understanding of what was written. I do not come to a single conclusion of meaning from my findings, however. Rather, as I hope to show, parables have

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multiple meanings that are created by interacting with the text from different perspectives. Therefore, Luke 15:4-7 does not have a single correct interpretation, but instead creates a field of meaning ripe for study today.

Methodology: Identifying Luke 15:4-7 as a Parable

In order to present an organized and justified analysis of Luke 15:4-7, I will be employing Ruben Zimmerman's definition of a parable. Zimmerman explains: "A parable is a short narrational fictional text that is related in the narrated world to known reality but, by way of implicit or explicit transfer signals, makes it understood that the meaning of the narration must be differentiated from the literal words of the text. In its appeal dimension it challenges the reader to carry out a metaphoric transfer of meaning that is steered by contextual information."²

With this definition, for Luke 15:4-7 to be considered a parable, it must be narrational, fictional, realistic, metaphorical, active in appeal, and contextually related to its surroundings. It is obvious that Luke 15:4-7 is narrational as Jesus tells a short-story that contains a basic plot in which a character, presumably a shepherd, realizes that one of his sheep is lost and goes out to look for it. Upon finding it, he rejoices with his neighbors. Moreover, this sequence of events is fictional. In the narrative, there is no specific character ever mentioned that could be tied to an actual person or event that once took place. Rather, this story is extremely realistic, yet fictional as nomadic farming was common in antiquity and the sequence of events could have taken place; however, the parable lacks reference to an actual shepherd or sheep. Zimmerman describes this dynamic concisely in saying "It is a narrative in a narrative—a fictional, imaginary episode that is nevertheless realistic because it is based on a shepherding scene that would have been part of daily life in rural society in first-century Palestine."³ Luke 15:4-7 is also metaphorical because the depiction of the shepherd and his career is a common stock metaphor used in Old Testament writings and other works in antiquity.⁴ In support of this notion, metaphoric transfer of this imagery takes place in verse 7. The beginning of Luke 15:4-7 illustrates active appeal. By directly

² Ruben Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretation*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 137.

³ Zimmerman, *Puzzling the Parables*, 216-17.

⁴ Duncan J Derrett, "Fresh Light on the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin." *New Testament Studies* 26 (1979): 37. *New Testament Studies* will hereafter be abbreviated *NTS*.

questioning the audience, Jesus invites the audience to participate in the story. The reader or listener would be able to put themselves in the place of either the shepherd, the flock, or the lost sheep.⁵ This short story is also contextually related to the greater narrative of Luke. It is a parable that discusses “the Kingdom of Heaven,” a recurring theme of Luke's gospel.⁶ Moreover, the parable appears to be a response to the actions that take place in Luke 15:1-3. Finally, the story displayed in Luke 15:4-7 shares thematic elements with the other two parables in Luke 15. Therefore, a nuanced application of Zimmerman's definition allows us to consider Luke 15:4-7 a parable.

Methodology: Parameters of the Parable

Regarding the parable's parameters, I suggest that verses 4-7 contain the scope of the parable we must analyze. The parable definitely begins in Luke 15:4, highlighted by the wording of Luke 15:3, “So he told them this parable.” Here, the word parable is *παραβολή* or *parabole*. This word is used by all of the synoptic authors to describe other similitudes (that share the definition previously described) spoken by Jesus. Therefore, Luke clearly indicates that the parable begins with Jesus's words in verse 4.

As for determining the end of the parable, a more in-depth analysis is required. I suggest that the parable proper⁷ is contained within Luke 15:4-6, whereas the parable pericope⁸ is Luke 15:4-7. It is necessary to differentiate the two as each can lead to different interpretations of the text. I propose that Luke 15:4-6 contains the parable proper because this section holds the entire “story” of the fictional man and the lost sheep. Moreover, there is a noticeable change in subject that takes place in verse 7: the story is no longer about the shepherd, rather, it is about the Father's heavenly affairs. In verse 7, this abrupt change is purposeful, denoted by Jesus saying “in the same way.” By saying this, the parable undergoes explicit metaphoric transfer by comparing the two stories with one another. Therefore, since there are two stories provided, the parable proper must be 15:4-6 as it

⁵ Zimmerman, *Puzzling the Parables*, 218

⁶ Ernst R. Wendland, “Finding Some Lost Aspects of Meaning in Christ's Parables of the Lost--and Found (Luke 15).” *Trinity Journal* 17, no. 1 (1996): 27.

⁷ The “parable proper” refers to the story-like similitude that contains all aspects of the parable definition described on pages 1-3. The parable proper follows a single, uninterrupted plot structure and does not undergo any explicit metaphoric transfer.

⁸ A pericope refers to a set of verses that forms one coherent unit or thought. Therefore, a “parable pericope” is the text that surrounds the parable proper and helps formulate a certain theme or thought.

maintains narrativity and does not undergo explicit metaphoric transfer.⁹ However, we cannot overlook verse 7 as it is clearly connected to the parable proper, maintaining the same theme and motif of rejoicing when the lost are found. Hence, Luke 15:4-7 is the parable pericope of the lost sheep because each verse is utilized to express one coherent thought. Additionally, the explicit metaphoric transfer in verse 7 is used to finalize the point Jesus is attempting to convey to his audience. Through explaining the meaning of the parable proper, Jesus subsequently concludes the parable pericope.¹⁰ This is further highlighted in verse 8 with the use of “or” before transitioning to another similitude.

Some writings list the parable of the lost sheep as Luke 15:1-7; however, I believe verses 1-3 are used in the greater narrative of Luke rather than in the narrative of the parable. Thus, Luke 15:1-3 explains why Jesus shares the parable and is not a part of the parable itself. Some scholars believe that Luke 15:1-3 gives context to all of the parables in Luke 15 (despite the singularity of “this parable” used in verse 3) because all the parables share a similar meaning and theme.¹¹ For these reasons, Luke 15:1-3 should not be included in the parable of the lost sheep, but instead must be looked at closely when trying to interpret the parable.

The Perspectives Involved in Interpretation

Before we move forward with any further analysis of the text, I must first introduce the different aspects of interpretation that I will be using, and the of using these tools in any parabolic interpretation. In this section, I lay out literary, historical, and reader aspects to show the value they provide in interpretation.

⁹ It must be noted that Luke 15:4 has the parable directly question the audience. This could be seen as a form of explicit metaphorical transfer; however, this question not only sets up the crisis for the narrative, but also seems to be rhetorical, and justifies the actions of the fictional Shepherd. Moreover, due to its rhetorical nature, the audience would be able to place themselves or anyone in the place of the fictional shepherd. Not to mention, by beginning the parable proper with a question, it adds an engaging factor to the story. Therefore, verse 4 is both a part of the narrative of the parable proper and engages the audience.

¹⁰ The counterpart of the parable of the lost sheep found in Matthew 18:12-14 shares the same structure of parable proper and parable pericope. In both gospels, the parable proper remains almost identical in terms of its narrative and characters. Both pericopes also contain a second story in the final verse that is compared to the parable proper. The difference between the pericopes is the interpretation. Luke’s comparison reveals the theme of rejoicing when the lost is found. Whereas in Matthew, the theme presented is the obligation to keep “little ones” from being led astray. The different themes in the final verses of both parables further highlights the need to differentiate the parable proper from the parable pericope.

¹¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: a Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018), 93.

Literary Aspects

When interpreting any parable, it is important to consider its literary aspects because parables come from ancient writings that are in themselves literary works. As Steven Notely has written: “The [G]ospel parables belong to a larger landscape of emerging Jewish thought. These didactic short stories give voice to the hopes and concerns that one can hear elsewhere in Second Temple Jewish literature.”¹² Therefore, as literary works, parables belong to their own ancient genre and must be seen as such. Viewing them in this manner, parables function as literary devices the biblical authors employ to get a point across to the reader.¹³ With this in mind, interpreters can grasp a greater understanding of the parable by taking a step back and looking at different elements and themes surrounding the parable. In addition, viewing the literary aspects of a parable leads to greater focus on syntax and diction, which can reveal previously unknown meaning hidden within language. On the other hand, by viewing parables as literary works, one can also take on Mary Anne Tolbert's view, receiving parables as timeless literary texts rather than historical artifacts belonging to a long-dead culture.¹⁴ Either way, by paying keen attention to the literary aspects of parables, the interpreter gains valuable tools to interpret meaning.

Historical Aspects

As previously mentioned, parables were written in antiquity, meaning the gospel writers and parable speakers were surrounded by an entirely different culture than our own that undoubtedly influenced their work. Ernst Wendland describes the necessity of looking at the historical aspects of a parable insofar as they allow one to “think more deeply about a given passage and not simply to assume that he/she knows what is going on or to impose immediately on the text his/her own perception and culturally conditioned framework of interpretation.”¹⁵ Understanding the historical aspects of a parable (i.e., its original setting,

¹² Steven R. Notley, “Reading Gospel Parables as Jewish Literature.” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 41, no. 1 (2018): 40.

¹³ Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 237. It is important to recognize that a biblical author *employs* a parable to guide their audience towards creating a particular image of Jesus and those who surround him. Therefore, it is not out of the question of whether biblical authors may have altered parables. It will not be explored much in this essay; however, parable pericopes due to their uniform narrative may have a higher historicity than a parable proper, as the summary or explanation at the end of a parable proper very easily could have been added or manipulated by biblical authors to better fit the parable within their narrative.

¹⁴ David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying About the Parables?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 24.

¹⁵ Wendland, *Finding*, 36

historical context, and the prevailing socio-cultural conditions) leads to a broader understanding of the characters within these stories, the actions that unfold, and the oddities that are usually packed within Jesus's parables that might otherwise go unnoticed. Therefore, it is paramount to consider parables' historical dimensions if one has any desire to forge any interpretation that is in line with the original audience's understanding of the message.

Reader Aspects

Approaching parables with the reader in mind is important because all parables draw the audience in with their active appeals. Parables were composed with the audience in mind and were crafted in such a way that the tale would invite the reader to participate in the story that it tells. Parables are literary works of art with meaning built into them, meaning that can only be elucidated through interaction and interpretation. Consequently, I agree with Mary Anne Tolbert's reader-oriented approach to parabolic interpretation: "A parable requires the reader to participate in the creation of meaning."¹⁶ To take the reader out of the picture leaves us with a dead, purposeless story; just as if there were no listeners, Jesus would not have uttered any parables. Zimmermann puts it nicely in stating that "[m]eaning thus occurs only through this interaction between text and recipient and cannot be objectively determined."¹⁷ Thus, we need to account for different forms of audience and readers when interpreting a parable. For example, a parable addressed to the Pharisees may have a different meaning than a parable used to teach the disciples. Beyond this, a parable recorded or written in the Gospel of Matthew to a Jewish audience could be interpreted differently by the readers than the same parable written in Luke to a Hellenistic audience. Consequently, it would be the interpreter's own folly to not include attention to the reader when searching for meaning, not least because the audience is the catalyst for the parable's creation of meaning.

The Steps Involved in Interpretation

Now that the value of literary, historical, and reader attention has been described, in this section, we will encounter various aspects of parables that are important in our interpretation of Luke 15:4-7.

¹⁶ Gowler, *What are they Saying*, 24.

¹⁷ Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 47.

Text: Analyzing Narrative Elements and Contexts

Literary aspects of interpretation can help extract meaning from the parable of the lost sheep. Since all parables (according to our definition) have a degree of narrativity, we can look at the plot structure of Luke 15:4-7. More specifically, to find the parable's point of emphasis, I will look to its unique form and the key concepts Wendland describes. Furthermore, we can examine the recounting of the parable by analyzing how the external focalization of the narrator leads to the indirect characterization of the shepherd and surrounding figures.¹⁸

Reality: Mapping the Socio-Historical Background

In the second section of our analysis, we must place appropriate emphasis on the historical aspects of the parable. By looking at the socio-historical context of the parable, a greater understanding of ancient economics is revealed, prompting questions such as: "What type of shepherd is described?" "Who is responsible for the sheep being lost?" "Is the sheep worth going after?" "Why does everyone rejoice when the sheep is found?" In an effort to answer these questions, I will rely on both Snodgrass's and Zimmermann's methodological tools, as well as that of Wendland and Bishop.

Tradition: Exploring Stock Metaphors and Symbols

Next, we must combine literary and historical aspects in order to expose symbolism and stock metaphors that were common to the writing tradition surrounding the parable. To have intersubjective traceability in our interpretation, I will find conventional probabilities of metaphors surrounding shepherding as described in Zimmermann's work. Beyond this, I will also explore the stock metaphor surrounding a shepherd that comes from the traditions of ancient Near Eastern writing.

¹⁸ Regarding context, this parable is recognized as one of the three parables of lostness found in Luke 15. As such, I will analyze the introduction of Luke 15 to help determine the overarching meaning that Luke is trying to express in the three parables of the chapter. I will also look for similarities between the other two parables found in the chapter, in search of continuous themes or structure that extend through the chapter and aid in the analysis of the parable of the lost sheep.

Meaning: Opening up Horizons of Interpretation

In the final section of our analysis, I will put forth five separate interpretations of the parable. The reason for doing so is because I agree with Tolbert: the structure of a parable does not generate a meaning, instead it provides basic constraints and possibilities within which a variety of meanings may be perceived.¹⁹ Therefore, because a parable requires the reader to participate in the creation of its meaning, I must consider multiple reader interpretations. The first interpretation will be my own and also deduced from the research expressed in this essay. The second will be a systematic theological interpretation that aims to decipher what the parable means in reference to Jesus and His mission. The third interpretation will be reader oriented and look at the parable as if it speaks directly to Luke's reader, functioning to guide the reader as a follower of Jesus. The fourth and fifth interpretations will be ideological and view the parable through queer and anti-capitalist lenses.

Analysis: Characters in Luke 15:4-7

The narrator that describes the characters in the parable of the lost sheep takes on an external focalization that inhibits the reader from knowing any of the characters' thoughts or motivations behind certain actions. This leads to the parable *showing* us what happens more often than *telling*.²⁰ The first prime example of this "showing" is the main character never being explicitly named a shepherd. In fact, the parable is addressed to an audience of Pharisees, not shepherds, and the main character is referred to in the third person. Because of the actions described, one can automatically deduce that the main character is a shepherd. Despite the parable's brevity, other characters are clearly included, namely the sheep that is lost, the ninety-nine sheep that are left behind, and the neighbors that rejoice with the shepherd when his sheep is found. Again, the parable does not tell us about these characters, but rather describes them through the actions of the main character: "having a hundred sheep and losing one of them" (15:4a); "leave the ninety-nine" (15:4b); "he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me'" (15:6). Through this indirect method of characterization, the parable author aptly imbues the story with emotion and

¹⁹ Gowler, *What are they Saying*, 24.

²⁰ Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 222.

paints a vivid portrait of each of the characters involved. Indeed, Zimmermann says, “[t]he parable thus seeks to create an emotional plurality that draws the audience directly into the event.”²¹ Undoubtedly then, an integral piece of the parable’s goal is to have members of the audience put themselves into the parable, whether that be as the shepherd, the sheep, the flock, or the neighbors. Clearly, this emotion extends to the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. Thomas Golding explains that the shepherd-sheep image is a highly relational one between human and animal and the only other relational metaphors that depict a covenantal relationship with God are of a human-to-human nature.²² Therefore, this relationship between the two characters is emphasized above all the rest and must be seen as the central interaction that takes place in the parable.

Analysis: Plot of the Parable of the Lost Sheep

By examining the parable’s plot, we are better able to determine the focus of the parable, and thus its possible meanings. The narrativity of the plot is easy to follow, but it does not adhere to the normal quinary scheme. Instead, the parable begins with a complication of one of the ninety-nine sheep getting lost, followed by the transforming action of the shepherd leaving the flock in the wilderness to find the lost one. Interestingly, this is followed by another transforming action of the shepherd finding the sheep and rejoicing. After this, the final solution is presented as the shepherd comes home, presumably with his entire flock, and celebrates with his neighbors. Then, Jesus puts forth the metaphoric transfer of the celebration of the lost being comparable to the celebration of a repentant sinner in heaven. Due to the odd narrative scheme, it is difficult to determine the climactic event of the parable which ultimately holds the most metaphorical meaning. Is the climax the finding of the lost, or the rejoicing after they are found?

Wendland provides some helpful insights on this question. He claims that the parable “manifests a parallelism that is both linear and concentric in nature.” He calls its make-up a “‘rhetorical-structural’ development because the larger contours of the text appear to be shaped in order to accent the main points of Christ’s implicit argument as well as the

²¹ Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 218.

²² Thomas A. Golding, “The Imagery of Shepherding in the Bible Part 1,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163, no. 649 (2006): 26.

principal aspects of his incisive message...²³ Wendland then breaks down the parable into its “key concepts” in each verse:

15:4 contains concepts of: You, One, Many, Lost.

15:5 contains concepts of: Found, Joy.

15:6 contains concepts of: Fellowship, Joy, Found, Lost.

15:7 contains concepts of: You, One, Many.

Even though the structure of this parable is not chiasmic in nature like its counterpart in Matthew,²⁴ there are still definitive poetic elements. Wendland asserts that the “structurally significant central core of this pericope emphasizes the ‘kingdom principle’...”²⁵ Though I agree with Wendland’s argument, in viewing parables out of context, I believe we can only pull out the three larger themes that are found within: finding repentance, joy, and fellowship. Consequently, we need to look at the parable in its surrounding context to derive the parable’s main point of emphasis.

Analysis: Surrounding Context of Luke 15:4-7

As has been discussed, the parable of the lost sheep is the first of three “Parables of Lostness.” These parables are intimately connected because they all function as a response to the criticism that takes place in 15:1-3. In his opening chapter on the “Parables of Lostness,” Snodgrass emphasizes the need to see the parables of chapter 15 in context with one another: “Luke has clearly arranged chapter 15 for rhetorical effect, and an understanding of how this section functions assists in interpreting the individual parables.”²⁶ As acknowledged in many scholarly commentaries and essays, each of the parables in chapter 15 contains two main components: (1) the climax of something that is lost or that has gone astray being found/returning, and (2) the emotional conclusion of a joyous fellowship. Tannehill considers the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin to be pairs that share basically the same story from two perspectives: male and female.²⁷ Wendland, in his structural analysis, finds these parables remarkably similar. He explains, “... the structural correspondences again serve to reinforce the main point that is being

²³ Wendland, *Finding*, 26.

²⁴ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 100.

²⁵ Wendland, *Finding*, 27.

²⁶ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 93.

²⁷ Tannehill, *Luke*, 237.

metaphorically made, namely, that genuine JOY should characterize the response of all who witness the finding.”²⁸ Snodgrass also highlights that the rejoicing in the parable of the lost coin seems exaggerated, out of place, and therefore emphasizes the theme of rejoicing.²⁹ Tannehill makes a fair assessment to prove the parables’ emphasis on rejoicing. He claims that when viewing the parables in the greater context of Luke and 15:1-3, the rejoicing fellowship at the end of the three parables contrasts the grumbling and questioning of the Pharisees.²¹ So, when looking at the parable of the lost sheep in its context with its surrounding parables and chapter, we can narrow down its main emphasis to rejoicing.

Historical Background: Nomadic Shepherding

The parable of the lost sheep depicts the main character as a nomadic shepherd.³⁰ Zimmermann points out in his analysis that this form of shepherding was common in antiquity.³¹ Due to lack of details in the parable, it is difficult to determine whether or not the shepherd was the owner of the flock. Snodgrass believes that the shepherd did own all one hundred sheep, and therefore, was materially well-off.³² On the other hand, Wendland has argued that the shepherd depicted is not the owner of the sheep, but rather a hired hand. Wendland does not believe that a man wealthy enough to own one hundred sheep would perform the “disagreeable and disreputable” job of shepherding.³³

My view deviates from the notion that a rich man would not be a shepherd because it is disreputable. In fact, there is extremely positive imagery of shepherds in the Hebrew Bible.³⁴ Either way, the ambiguity of the shepherd may be purposeful and will be explored further in the next session of analysis regarding metaphoric transfer. Regardless of whether or not the shepherd owns the sheep, it seems there is no blame assigned in the parable. Wendland believes the sheep’s lostness is not due to negligence of the shepherd, nor is it the sheep’s fault for getting lost, it is simply the sheep’s nature to get lost.³⁵ Therefore, it must be noted that in this parable describing the Kingdom of Heaven, there is no blame assigned to the

²⁸ Wendland, *Finding*, 27.

²⁹ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 102.

³⁰ Thomas A. Golding, “The Imagery of Shepherding in the Bible Part 2,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163, no. 650 (2006): 159.

³¹ Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 220.

³² Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 100.

³³ Wendland, *Finding*, 37.

³⁴ Derrett, *New Light*, 37.

³⁵ Wendland, *Finding*, 27.

sheep, the metaphoric sinner. The same theme is carried on throughout the chapter. It is not the coin's fault for being lost, nor does the Father blame the Prodigal Son for his folly. As some have pointed out, this lack of responsibility for lostness creates a difficulty in the metaphoric transfer of being found representing repentance.³⁶

Historical Background: The Value of Sheep

A common question that arises from interpreting the parable regards the origin of why the shepherd leaves all ninety-nine sheep alone to find the single lost one? Some scholars suggest that the reason for this behavior is validated if the shepherd was a hired hand, as the value of a single sheep could be close to one month's wage.³⁷ Others, such as Snodgrass³⁸ and Wendland,³⁹ argue that one hundred sheep could never be managed by a single shepherd, so the man left the ninety-nine in the wilderness with other shepherds. Some also argue that it is simply the job of the shepherd to find the lost sheep no matter the value. Regardless, again, Snodgrass makes a valid argument in that the disregard for the ninety-nine puts an emphasis on the joy of finding the single lost sheep.²⁹

Historical Background: Communal Celebration

Unlike the celebration in the parable of the lost coin, the joy of the fellowship in 15:6 seems justified. As many have pointed out, if the sheep was not found quickly, the shepherd was at risk of losing the animal to a wild beast.⁴⁰ Beyond this, in finding the sheep, the shepherd did not just save the animal and protect his own pocket, but he also brought honor to himself and the local community. Wendland describes this well in writing: "The people who would have been most aware of or affected by the shepherd's loss and the economic burden and social shame that this would entail—his close friends, fellow herdsmen, and family members... In a communal society, personal joy must be shared to be genuine."⁴¹ Therefore, the rejoicing in the parable that seems out of place to the modern eye would be a common and expected occurrence in antiquity.

³⁶ Derrett, *New Light*, 36.

³⁷ John S. Kloppenborg and Callie Callon, "The Parable of the Shepherd and the Transformation of Pastoral Discourse," *Early Christianity* 1, no. 2 (2010): 233.

³⁸ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 105.

³⁹ Wendland, *Finding*, 26.

⁴⁰ Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 220. Derrett, *New Light*, 40.

⁴¹ Wendland, *Finding*, 38-39.

Metaphors and Symbolism: Who is the Shepard?

To use Zimmermann's formulation, the imagery of the shepherd in the parable of the lost sheep has the conventional probability of being a metaphor. This is because the shepherd metaphor was commonly used in Jewish texts⁴² and the “entire linguistic world of antiquity.”⁴³ Golding, for instance, points to Ps 23, Isa 56:9-12, and Ezek 34:3-4 as metaphoric images of shepherds.⁴⁴ Zimmermann explains the *Bildfeldtradition* of the shepherd demonstrates four variations of the shepherd metaphor in the Old Testament: the King-Shepherd metaphor, the Leader-Shepherd metaphor, the Yahweh-Shepherd metaphor, and the Messiah-Shepherd metaphor. While the metaphoric transfer that takes place in this parable could belong to any of these four stock metaphors, Zimmermann explains that the most probable image would either be the Yahweh-Shepherd or Messiah-Shepherd, because these traditionally show the shepherd as a caring figure for the sheep like in Luke 15:4-7.⁴⁵ Tannehill agrees that the image of the shepherd in the parable is either Jesus or God, stating, “The seeking shepherd mirrors Jesus' role but also represents God...”⁴⁶

As was previously suggested, this duality of the shepherd metaphor may come from the ambiguity of the shepherd's ownership of the flock. If the shepherd described in the parable was the owner of the sheep, it would be a more appropriate metaphor for Yahweh; whereas if the shepherd was a hired hand, it would make more sense for the shepherd to be seen as the Messiah. Overall, the metaphoric transfer in the parable pericope is clear. The flock is the ‘lost sheep of Israel’ as it has been in every shepherd motif of the Old Testament and the shepherd stands as the Messiah (whom Luke regards as Jesus throughout his Gospel) or Yahweh.⁴⁷

In analyzing the parable proper, the reference to the heavenly community that rejoices as described in verse 7 is left out. Therefore, in many ways the parable proper does not guide the reader to believe the shepherd represents the messiah or Yahweh. In fact, it seems as if you solely consider the parable proper, Jesus’s direct address towards his audience, “Suppose one of *you* has a hundred,” would more often lead the reader to place themselves

⁴² Derrett, *New Light*, 37.

⁴³ Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 224-225.

⁴⁴ Golding, *Imagery of the Shepherd*, 26-28.

⁴⁵ Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 220.

⁴⁶ Tannehill, *Luke*, 239.

⁴⁷ Derrett, *New Light*, 37.

in the position of the shepherd in this parable rather than Jesus (Luke's messianic figure) or Yahweh. This is not to say the reader would not understand stock metaphors of shepherding from the Old Testament, as they very well could. If this were the case, they may view the parable proper as a challenge to replicate the actions of the Messiah or Yahweh.

Metaphors and Symbolism: Carrying the Sheep

The image of the shepherd placing the sheep on his shoulders is unique to Luke and most likely contains some sort of metaphoric meaning. Kloppenburg and Callon believe the image of the shepherd carrying the sheep on his shoulders could be reflecting a popular Greco-Roman figure, Hermes-Kriophor, creating an image of an idealized shepherd.⁴⁸ I would, however, tend to agree with Derrett's interpretation that the carrying of the sheep on the shoulders alludes to Yahweh taking the lost sheep upon his arms in Isaiah and Hosea.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Derrett believes this imagery could also be related to a legend of Moses carrying one of his own lost sheep on his shoulders.⁵⁰ With this in mind, the symbolism of the shepherd placing the sheep on his shoulders follows the same metaphoric transfer of viewing the shepherd as either Yahweh or the Messiah and the sheep being a person or people group.

Interpreting the Parable

With all the research we have thus far reviewed, it is clear that the focus of the parable is on the rejoicing that occurs in the Kingdom of Heaven when a sinner recognizes their wrongdoing and enters back into a covenant with God. Of course, this may seem obvious as it is the theme presented in 15:7, but the interpretation which I endorse nevertheless requires further discussion.

First, Wendland's breakdown of the structure of the parable and the Sondgrass's identification of the dichotomy of the one to ninety-nine sheep should help the parable's

⁴⁸ Kloppenburg, and Callon, *Pastoral Discourse*, 255. This interpretation does not come without merit. John Darr, in many of his works on Luke-Acts, uses literary criticism to evaluate the Lukan author. Darr argues that author of Luke-Acts implements Hellenistic motifs into his writing such as *synkrisis* or sophist-philosopher imagery to portray Jesus as a "philosophical Messiah" figure, so that Jesus and the emerging "Christian Way" could be viewed more favorably by highly Hellenized groups. See, for example, John A. Darr, *On Character Building: the Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 58-69.

⁴⁹ Most notably, Isaiah 40:10-11

⁵⁰ Derrett, *New Light*, 43.

reader move away from an emphasis on the lost being found, and rather towards the rejoicing that takes place. Furthermore, with the knowledge of the parable's historical context, it is all-the-more obvious that the parable paints a picture of a good shepherd that holds the idealized traits of being loving, caring, and strong. It is neither the sheep's nor the shepherd's fault that the animal gets lost, it is simply in the sheep's nature to stray. Due to the stock metaphor of Yahweh being a shepherd and the symbolism of the sheep being placed on the shoulders, the shepherd must thus best be understood as God. Therefore, I suggest the parable attempts to explicate that it is only in man's nature to stray away from God, and when we sinners are finally reunited with God (who is always ready to find and accept members of His human creation), there is great rejoicing in heaven.

A Systematic Theological Interpretation

Someone who seeks to interpret the parable for its Christological implications may perceive a different meaning than that which I have described. One may look at the structure of the parable, for example, and notice the emphasis on rejoicing, but also view the “finding” more important. As Zimmermann puts it, from this perspective, the “happy ending would not be possible without the dauntless actions of the shepherd. He sets out on his search and brings the sheep home...”⁵¹ Thus, the question in verse 4 functions to show the duty of the shepherd: to seek and save the lost. There is no doubt that someone viewing the parable from this lens would also see the stock metaphor of the shepherd; however, they may view him as the Messiah rather than Yahweh. With this interpretation, the parable functions solely as a response to the Pharisees questioning Jesus. Jesus places himself in the parable as a defense for eating with sinners. By demonstrating in the parable that the Messiah (and Kingdom of Heaven) brings forgiveness to all, he justifies his actions as righteous and reveals himself as the Messiah.

A Reader-Oriented Interpretation

From a reader-oriented perspective, one may view the opening question of the parable as addressed directly to the reader, rather than to Jesus's historical audience in the text. With this perspective, one might emphasize the showing rather than telling of the parable and the

⁵¹ Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 228.

external focalization of the narrator as more beneficial to the reader than the narrative. In this paradigm, the narrative form is used to allow the reader to easily put themselves in the place of the shepherd. Zimmermann alludes to this, saying: “The appellative character of the text creates a special proximity between the recipient and the shepherd.”⁵² Someone with this interpretation most likely would not be aware of the stock metaphors of shepherding in the Hebrew Bible. However, if they were aware of such metaphors, they might recognize the shepherd to be Jesus. Nonetheless, the reader may still put themselves in the place of the shepherd by reasoning that they must replicate Jesus’s actions. In this reader-oriented perspective, it is the shepherd’s paramount duty to find the lost. Therefore, the reader functions as the shepherd and the sheep function as their community. To this reader, the parable is a teaching mechanism that instructs them to disregard the members of their community who are doing well spiritually, and to make every effort to find the sinner and carry them to repentance. Thus, the emphasis is on ‘the finding,’ and ‘the rejoicing’ is a reward. With this interpretation, the repentance of the sinner is celebrated but is not credited to the sinner. Instead, the shepherd’s heroic action of finding the sinner is what led to repentance, and as such, is what is truly celebrated in heaven.

A Queer Interpretation

Before considering a potentially queer interpretation of the parable, it is contextually necessary to acknowledge that in many Christian traditions, homosexuality and gender fluidity are considered sinful abominations. In these religious circles, a person’s sexuality or gender identity is viewed as something that can be chosen, controlled, or changed. Consequently, many queer individuals do not engage with the Christian faith because they are either barred from engaging in a local faith community or choose not to engage with religious doctrines (or, rather, interpretations thereof) that condemn their actions.

With this contextual background in mind, it is likely that a queer interpretation of the parable of the lost sheep would focus on the ideas of lostness and rejoicing. A queer person may put themselves in the position of the lost sheep for two reasons. In the first instance, the queer person, like the lost sheep, is separated. In this view, the flock would represent the faith community, and as the lost sheep, the queer individual is singled out, separated, and

⁵² Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables*, 234.

different from the rest of the flock by virtue of their identity. Secondly, a queer person could identify with the sheep because the sheep's actions are not seen as inherently wrong but rather commonplace and expected.⁵³ Just as it is in the nature of a sheep to wander, it is in the nature of the individual to be queer. Furthermore, the queer individual may focus on the aspect of rejoicing because it stands in stark contrast to the prevalent Christian culture of rejecting and othering queer persons. Thus, from a queer perspective, the shepherd could either represent Jesus or the ideal Christian who seeks out and loves queer individuals unconditionally, rejoicing in their company. Furthermore, the neighbors may represent an ideal ecclesial community that welcomes and rejoices with queer persons. Finally, with this perspective, as verse 7 reads, "...there will be more *rejoicing in heaven*....," the queer reader may explicitly recognize that the heavenly Father loves queer persons and wants them to be a part of his Church. Such a realization would proudly stand in opposition to some current Christian cultures which outright oppose and/or condemn queer persons. Ultimately, this queer interpretation can be summarized in the opening question of verse 4 that stands as a call to action for those who want to be righteous by mimicking the shepherd. Its rhetorical nature explains that Jesus (the shepherd) does not hesitate to reach out to queer individuals who are isolated and outcast due to their human nature, one that was not chosen and cannot be changed. In this interpretation, Jesus rejoices with the queer individual and does not view their life as sinful. Furthermore, Jesus belongs to an equally righteous community that celebrates and welcomes queer persons just as the Heavenly Father loves queer persons and desires for them to be a part of His heavenly kingdom.

An Anti-Capitalist Interpretation

Another interpretation of this parable stems from a quasi-Marxist lens. From this perspective, it is more efficacious to interrogate the parable proper rather than the parable pericope. With an anti-capitalist interpretation, the reader may view verse 7 as a "guiding summation" that was provided by the author rather than Jesus himself, and thus look to the parable proper as the true words and intentions of Jesus. Moreover, by looking at the parable in this way, the parable proper could also have been placed in a foreign context and thus not actually reflect a response to Jesus eating with sinners, but rather something entirely different

⁵³ See my discussion of nomadic shepherding for more context.

and unknown.⁵⁴ Therefore, the parable would be taken out of its literary context and its socio-historical framework.

In this interpretation, Jesus's address to his audience in verse 4 leads the reader to take the place of the shepherd. Moreover, the question that follows this address is rhetorical, prompting the reader to believe it is obvious and expected to risk everything to find the single lost sheep. The rejoicing that takes place in verse 6 reinforces the necessity to find the single sheep. This "obviousness" is validated when the shepherd is viewed as a hired servant rather than the owner of the flock. With this view, when the single sheep was lost, the hired shepherd was under immense pressure to find the sheep because the shepherd would bear the financial burden of the loss which could bring complete ruin.⁵⁵

Perhaps, in this parable, Jesus is pointing out the flawed capitalist structure of the world in which he lives. In this anti-capitalist interpretation, Jesus addresses his audience in such a way that they take the place of the *poor* hired shepherd, who by happenstance loses a single sheep, so that they too may understand a flawed economic structure. In this view, Jesus speaks out against capitalism and its effect on the poor. By shedding light on the situation, Jesus shuns the structural view that expects the poor to risk everything to find their masters' sheep. By pointing out the joy and relief when the lost sheep is found, Jesus emphasizes the absurd value of the animal that is higher than the man. By highlighting the rejoicing of the shepherd and his neighbors, Jesus rebuffs the economic structure⁵⁶ that places a deflating and debilitating stigma on the community of the poor for inevitable events⁵⁷ such as sheep wandering.

Therefore, with this interpretation, the emphasis continues to remain on the finding and rejoicing of the lost sheep, but for very different reasons than previous interpretations. The stress is on finding and rejoicing works to condemn the economic structure instead of serving as a spiritual metaphor. In my view, this interpretation is not particularly unorthodox as the synoptic Jesus in many instances condemns the attitudes and lifestyles of the rich and

⁵⁴ With this framework, chapter 15 is viewed as a complete literary piece shaped by Luke to guide his reader into a certain way of thinking. The parables used in chapter 15 are spoken by Jesus as well as altered and placed in a context to further Luke's narrative rather than quote Jesus and convey his original message.

⁵⁵ See my discussion on the value of the sheep. The value of a male sheep would be worth up to one month's wages and a female sheep could be even more.

⁵⁶ Other parables that support the idea of Jesus "rebuffing the economic structure" include the Parable of the Laborers in Matthew 20:1-16, and the Parable of the Wedding Banquet in Matthew 22:1-14.

⁵⁷ See my discussion of nomadic shepherding for more context.

powerful who oppress the poor. Furthermore, many historical biblical critics have “found” a historic biblical Christ that was an apocalyptic Jewish prophetic figure who stood in opposition to contextual socio-political structures.

Conclusion

Luke 15:4-7 is a parable that contains the two themes of finding what is lost and rejoicing when the lost is found. In my analysis, I hope to have put forth a convincing argument that the parable of the lost sheep is a complex narrative that stands as the first of three parables on lostness in chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel. Due to this complexity, it is impossible to determine any “true meaning” from the parable. I have, instead, showed that when viewing the parable in its landscape of ancient Jewish thought and life, the parable opens itself to a range of meaning that revolves around the lost being found and the divine rejoicing by looking at the narrativity, socio-historical background, and literary history of Luke 15:4-7. Furthermore, I have demonstrated that parables are timeless literary works of art whose meaning is created only through readers’ engagement. Due to this incredible feature of parables, I was thus able to provide more modern, ideological interpretations to Luke 15:4-7 that fit within the field of meaning and may resonate more strongly with a contemporary audience.

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