The Parable of the Lost Sheep:
An Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 18:12-14

Brenda Jackson
Northwest Nazarene University
The Parable of the Lost Sheep: An Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 18:12-14

12 What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? 
13 And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. 
14 So it is not the will of my father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

Setting

As this parable is found in both Matthew and Luke but not in Mark, it is part of the dual tradition, and is assumed to derive from the Q source. In Matthew’s version, the parable is included in a teaching discourse to the disciples on taking care of “little ones,” in reference to both literal children and “children” in faith (Hultgren, 2000). This context within the gospel leads to the interpretation of the parable as an admonition to not give up on believers who have fallen away; this contrasts with the setting in Luke’s gospel, where Jesus delivers the parable to his opponents as a justification for his association with sinners, evoking a call to evangelism (Hare, 1993). Both of these interpretations were likely utilized in the early Christian church.

If one attempts to reconstruct the parable apart from the inherent application of the Evangelists, it is impossible to know in which historical context Jesus originally delivered the parable. It very well could be that he used the same story on multiple occasions, and adapted it to apply to the specific situation that he was facing—so both Evangelists could have the “right” historical setting (Green, McKnight, & Marshall, 1992).

Exegetical Analysis

The identification of the man as owning a hundred sheep necessarily conjures up the image of a shepherd and his flock. Thus, despite the absence of this term within the parable, the idea of the shepherd and the connotations with which it was accompanied to the first century Palestinian Jew need to be addressed in order to establish a more complete picture of the story. The cultural
implications and possible allegorical associations of the sheep will also be explored, along with
the apparently foolish action of the shepherd to leave the ninety-nine in search of the one.

Shepherd. Though Hebrew history and tradition had established the metaphor of God as
shepherd of Israel the flock, by Jesus’ time the position of shepherd in Jewish society was one of
degradation and dishonor—according to B.B. Scott, shepherd was considered a forbidden
occupation, as it was associated with thieves and crooks (1989). This more salient view of the
shepherd likely colored the original audience’s understanding of the man’s actions, causing a
mental conflict between the traditional idea of God as a “good shepherd” and the contemporary
concept of the despised outcast. In one sense, the shepherd in the story can represent God (or Jesus
as the presence of God on earth) and the fact that he never gives up seeking one of his children
who have turned away and rejoices if and when they return to him. In another sense, the man
could symbolize human leaders of the faith, charging them with the responsibility to never give up
on a single person charged to their care; the concept of shepherd as outcast could also apply here,
signifying that those who choose to follow Jesus and tend his flock will not be high on the prestige
scale, and may even be considered outcasts within the greater culture (NIB, 1995).

Sheep. The most immediate metaphorical referent for the sheep is Israel—throughout their
history, especially during the nomadic period, Israel as a nation was identified as a flock, tended
by God the good shepherd (Green, McKnight, & Marshall). However, within the context of the
parable, and the emphasis on a single sheep within the flock, it is more likely that the sheep is
meant to represent individuals that have rejected God—whether they were following him and then
strayed (Matthew) or are lost “sinners” who have not yet acknowledged God as Lord over their
lives (Luke). Thus, the lost sheep represents one who is unceasingly sought out by the shepherd
and over whom there is much rejoicing if and when they are returned to the fold.
Leave the ninety-nine... Despite the implied affirmative answer to the opening question in the parable, the decision of the shepherd to go in search of one lost sheep while leaving the other ninety-nine behind “on the mountains” (Matthew 18:12), apparently untended, is at least foolish and at most cruel—after all, Matthew’s shepherd never actually finds the lost sheep (“and if he finds it...”, 18:13, emphasis added), and could therefore be searching indeﬁnitely and possibly resulting in the loss of the rest of the flock to exposure or predators (Hultgren, 2000; Scott, 1989). After all, when one has a hundred sheep, is it really that devastating to lose one? This apparent silliness forces the reader to recognize the extreme risk that the shepherd is taking in his search for the one, and makes clearer the message that every single sheep is priceless to the shepherd. Thus, what happens to the ninety-nine that are left is not important to the story—they are simply used as a tool to make stark the contrast between the accepted human wisdom and the actions of a God so madly in love with his children that he refuses to give up his search for the lost (Hare, 1993).

Message

To Matthew, the parable of the lost sheep illustrates God’s extreme care for every single believer, and his desire that none of the “little ones” should perish (Matthew 18:14). He therefore interprets it as an admonishment to those in leadership positions to continually seek out those who have fallen away from the fellowship of believers (NIB, 1995)—as Hultgren puts it, “restoration, not excommunication, is envisioned” (p. 55). However, as Luke’s context and application are markedly different, we cannot assume that this was original or sole message of Jesus. Rather, by taking the essence of both gospel versions, we can attempt to discover the common thread between them—that is, that all who are outside the fold, whether lost or strayed, are constantly sought after by God, so that every time a single person is brought into relationship with God, there is jubilant rejoicing (Scott, 1989).
A secondary message of the parable as it exists in Matthew is to charge the leaders of the flock of believers to always seek to restore rather than reject those who stray—as God does not will that any should perish, those who fall away from the church should never be given up on, and should be incessantly sought out. This was likely a common interpretation within the context of the early church, where shepherding of the flock was a high priority and significant responsibility (NIB, 1995).

Application

This parable’s take-home message for the modern Christian, whether lay or leader, is an admonition to be Christ to those around us, both to wayward believers and to lost souls. We are not to extend judgment nor reconcile to the fact that they are lost—if God never gives up on them, then neither can we. Thus, we are called to appreciate the fact that God loves every single person beyond human reason, and must therefore defy the common wisdom to “cut our losses” and count our blessings (that we still have “the rest”) and instead persist relentlessly in our search for the missing. Practically, that means we need to love and reach out to those around us, believers and non-believers alike—without proselytizing but also with an unmistakable passion for the kingdom—and when one is “found” and is returned to or welcomed into the fold, we can have a party the likes of which we have never had before!
Footnotes

1. All biblical references are from the Revised Standard Version.

2. This parable also appears in Luke 15:3-7, with a few differences: In Matthew the man is a representative character, while in Luke Jesus asks “What man of you, having 100 sheep…” (emphasis added); in Matthew, the 99 are left in the mountains, while in Luke, they are left in the wilderness; in Matthew, the sheep goes astray, while in Luke, the sheep is lost; in Matthew, the phrase is “if he finds it,” while in Luke it is “when he has found it” (emphasis added); in Matthew, the shepherd rejoices over the found sheep, while in Luke, the man carries it home on his shoulders and calls together neighbors and friends for a celebratory feast; in Matthew, it is the Father who rejoices, while in Luke, there is joy in heaven; Matthew emphasizes that God wills none to perish, while Luke emphasizes the sinner’s repentance. These were all noted while comparing the two passages in Aland’s Synopsis.

Strong evidence of thoughtful research and reflection on the parables
Superior work

Grade: A+