

The Parable(s) of the Lost Sheep

The parable of the lost sheep, that wonderful story told to so many Sunday School children over the centuries is not as innocent and lovely as it might first appear. I am indebted to my friend and colleague of many years, Colin Gauld, for arousing my interest in this simple or not so simple parable. As I have thought about it I have begun to realise that this blog series could turn out to be a little complicated and somewhat longer than originally I would have thought necessary.

The parable is recorded in two of the Gospels: Matthew 18: 10 - 14 and Luke 15: 3 - 7.

The Parable

Essentially the accounts are the same. A man has a hundred sheep. One is missing. The man leaves 99 of the sheep to find the missing one. There is rejoicing when he finds it.

However they differ in a number of details. Though they both begin with a rhetorical question, in Matthew, it is in terms of, “What do you think?” (i.e. with respect to, the following situation), whereas in Luke it is along the lines of, “What man of you” (i.e. finding yourself in the following situation) “does not”. Matthew’s account, by far the simpler, then speaks of one of the sheep “going astray”, while in Luke, the man has “lost” one of them. In Matthew, the 99 are left upon the mountains. In Luke, the 99 are left in the desert. In Matthew, the man “searches for the one that went astray and then if he finds it, he ...” and this is in contrast with “he searches for the lost sheep until he finds it”, in Luke. Matthew then records that the man upon finding it “rejoices over it more than over the 99 which have not gone astray”. Luke is far more elaborate at this point and the story advances with, “And having found (it), he lays (it) on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together friends and neighbours saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’”

The Settings

The differences between the two accounts of the parable are enough to suggest that Jesus may have told similar though somewhat different stories on at least two different occasions. Indeed, perhaps of greater significance is that the settings in the Gospels for the parable are very different. However we cannot dismiss the possibility that Matthew and Luke simply inserted the one parable, whether it was told only once or more times, into their literary structures, giving it different twists for their own literary and theological purposes, and given their different readerships. None the less we will proceed as though the parables are different and see where that tactic leads us.

Matthew

Chapter 18 of Matthew begins with the disciples asking Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He then focuses on a child and remarks upon becoming like children as a necessary qualification for entry into the kingdom of heaven and identifies who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. After equating reception of one such child with reception

of himself he warns of the terrible seriousness of causing one of these little ones to sin. Then follows his remedy for those by whom stumbling blocks arise in the world – cutting off of a limb, plucking out an eye. This is followed by his warning not to despise “one of these little ones and gives a reason for this which focuses on their “angels” “always having an audience with” (?) (literally “their angels continually behold the face of”) his father in heaven. At this point Jesus asks the question that begins his parable of the lost sheep. The parable is then immediately followed with the words, “So it is not the will of (literally “the will before”) your (or “my”) father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” The phrase uttered before the parable, “behold the face of my father in heaven” seems to be in parallel with the phrase uttered after the parable, “before your (or “my”) father in heaven”.

What follows this statement, namely advice about a brother who sins, does not seem to be intimately associated with the parable, though it is not totally without relevance. In fact Jeremias is of the view that it is this advice, about how to treat a brother who sins, that indicates, how for Matthew, in the way he uses it, the parable is mainly hortatory in character – “addressed to the disciples, a call to the leader of the community to exercise faithful pastorship toward apostates.”¹

The setting for the parable in Matthew then, is predominantly that of the “little ones”. While it is clear that to begin with Jesus is referring to “children”, (“*paidion*” or a cognate occurs four times in the first few verses of the chapter – vv. 2, 3, 4 and 5), he later refers only to little ones (“*mikron touton*” in vv. 6, 10 and 14), which many agree seems to be a reference to his disciples. The cross over from “children” as “children” to “little ones” meaning something like “young, precious but vulnerable disciples” is not a clearly defined one but begins perhaps as early as verse 4 if not verse 3.

It might appear, at first glance, a little odd, to have this “tender” parable preceded by the reference to: the terrible judgement that will fall upon him who causes one of the little ones to stumble, the dire procedures to be adopted to avoid creating a stumbling block and the warning not to despise one of the little ones. However, these matters may be considered to be consistent with the reference in the parable to the lost sheep having wandered away rather than having been lost by the carelessness of the shepherd. In fact to refer to the parable as told in Matthew as “the parable of the lost sheep” may be considered misleading. The implication could be that the sheep has gone astray because someone else has placed an obstacle, in its path, causing it to stumble.

Luke

The parable in Luke is immediately preceded by a reference to the Pharisees and the scribes muttering about how Jesus fraternised with “tax collectors and sinners”. Jeremias maintains that “the term ‘sinners’ means: (1) People who led an immoral life (e.g. adulterers, swindlers, Luke 18.11) and (2) people who followed a dishonourable calling (i.e. an occupation which notoriously involved immorality or dishonesty), and who were on that account deprived of

¹ Jeremias, J., **The Parables of Jesus**, Study Edition, SCM press, London, 1963, p. 40

civil rights, such as holding office, or bearing witness in legal proceedings. For example, exercise-men, tax-collectors, shepherds, donkey-drivers, pedlars, and tanners.”² Although the incident begins with the note that “all” these tax collectors and sinners were approaching Jesus to hear him, the Pharisees and the scribes in their murmurings referred to something more - his receiving sinners and eating with them. That Jesus received sinners may imply that sometimes he acted to some extent as host at these dinners. Undoubtedly the Pharisees and the scribes considered and wanted others to conclude that Jesus himself was tainted by his relationship with these people. And to have gone so far as to have eaten with them, displaying, in his world, such a hospitable attitude towards them in the act of eating with them, and perhaps behaving in some way as a host to such at certain dinners, must have resulted in their contempt for him, concomitant with their contempt for the “sinners”.

Luke earlier records how Jesus was a guest at a great banquet thrown by the tax collector Levi where many other tax collectors were present and how some Pharisees and in particular some scribes who were Pharisees, muttered to his disciples questioning how they could eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus replied with sarcasm saying, “Those who are healthy do not need a doctor, only those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5: 29 – 32, similarly reported in Matthew 9: 10 – 13).

Having told the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus then says, “So I say to you there shall be (more) joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who have no need of repentance.” (Jeremias believes that God himself and his joy are being referred to but that the statement is expressed in this way because it would be inappropriate to ascribe emotions to God.³) With respect to the idea of their being 99 righteous persons who have no need of repentance, Jesus was perhaps using a Semitic turn of speech involving a comparison where there was no comparison at all. There are no “righteous persons who have no need of repentance.” Alternatively he may have been simply speaking with a tinge or more of sarcasm when he uttered the latter part of his saying.

Luke then recounts the parable of the lost coin and what is commonly called the parable of the prodigal son. While not discussing these later parables it is clear that the latter deals with how the older brother responds to and how he should respond to the “repentance” of the younger one – surely dealing with the same theme that lies behind the parable under discussion.

So for Luke, unlike for Matthew, the setting is one of how one does or should respond to the repentance of those considered “sinners” and what Jesus has to say about the so-called righteous.

The cultural and other backdrops to the parables

² **Ibid.**, p. 132

³ **Ibid.**, p. 135

I think one needs to be cautious about writing into the parables what one considers to be the natural backdrop to the parables. Jesus may have chosen to ignore some of what would be described as normal, in order to make a necessary point. However, it may be of some value to consider the following perspectives.

According to Kistemaker⁴

Kistemaker, who recognises that Jesus may have told a similar story twice in two different settings, treats the parables as one. He draws upon material produced by Bishop, Smith, Armstrong, Jeremias and Brouwer. Referring to Bishop he writes, “A person who owned a hundred sheep was a man of small to average means. He himself cared for the sheep, knew them by name, and counted them at least once a day.” While recognising that the parable simply indicates that the 99 sheep are left by the shepherd, he points out that it does not say that they were unprotected and quotes Smith, saying, “We must probably picture them as driven into some enclosure.” He further writes, making references to Armstrong and Jeremias, “Sheep are very social animals; they stay and live together as a flock. When a sheep is cut off from the flock, it becomes bewildered. It lies down unwilling to move, waiting for the shepherd. When he at last finds it, he puts it on his shoulders, in order to cover the distance back to the flock more quickly. Soon shepherd, sheep and flock are together again.” He also mentions Jeremias and Brouwer, portraying “the shepherd with a sheep around his neck, grasping front and hind legs with each hand.” In dealing with the difference between Matthew and Luke as to where the 99 sheep are left he refers to Black whom he says, “suggests that the word mountain may have been influenced by the Aramaic *tura* ‘which in Palestinian Syriac has the twofold use of “mountain” and “country,” the “open country” as contrasted with inhabited places.’” I will refer again to this matter of “mountain” and “open country” later.

According to Jeremias⁵

We have already noted Kistemaker’s use of Jeremias and that Jeremias understands that the term, “sinners” would include “shepherds”.

However we should recognise the following: In the ancient world, to describe a ruler as a shepherd was to refer to the responsibility of a ruler to care for his people just as a shepherd has the responsibility to care for his sheep. Moses was a shepherd, God himself is referred to as a shepherd (e.g. Psalm 80:1). There are many references to a “shepherd” in the Old Testament in a noble sense, even a shepherd whom God will raise up. for the care of his people. Probably in the time of Jesus the notion of “shepherd” could be accompanied by either or both bad and good connotations.

⁴ For Kistemaker’s chapter on the parable see Kistemaker, S., **The Parables of Jesus**, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1978, pp. 206 - 210

⁵ For references by Jeremias to the parable and its setting see Jeremias, **op. cit.**, pp. 38 – 40, 132 - 134

On other relevant matters Jeremias writes, “Among the Bedouin the size of a flock varies from 20 to 200 head of small cattle; in Jewish law 300 head is reckoned as an unusually large flock. Hence with 100 sheep the man possesses a medium-sized flock; he looks after it himself (like the man in John 10: 12), he cannot afford a watchman. Similarly though a little differently to Black, Jeremias believes that “the mountains” (*ta ore*) of Matthew are a translation of an Aramaic word meaning, “hill-country”. He also comments that “shepherds are reckoned among the *hamartqloi*, because they are suspected of driving their flocks into foreign fields, and of embezzling the produce of their flocks ... A Palestinian shepherd counts his flock before putting them in the fold at night, to make sure that none of the animals is lost. The number 99 implies that the counting has just been carried out. ... Experts all agree that a shepherd cannot possibly leave his flock to itself. If he has to look for a lost animal he leaves the others in charge of the shepherds who share the fold with him ... or drives them into a cave. ... When a sheep has strayed from the flock, it usually lies down helplessly, and will not move, stand up or run. Hence there is nothing for the shepherd to do but to carry it, and over a long distance this can only be done by putting it on his shoulders.”

We should note that Jeremias believes there was only ever one parable and that the original version is preserved in Luke.

According to Carson⁶

Carson says little about the cultural or other background to the parable in Matthew, though he argues that the reference to the sheep “wandering away” suits the pastoral setting of the parable and should not be understood as signifying later apostasy from the Christian community.

He devotes considerable attention to the matter of the “angels” referred to in the verse immediately preceding the parable, verse 10 (considering verse 11 as lacking good manuscript support). He is reluctant to consider the “angels” as a reference to angelic beings and writes, as one of his reasons, “Nowhere in Scripture or Jewish tradition of the NT period is there any suggestion that there is one angel for one person.” Although he recognises that there are references in Scripture to angels in connection with believers, such as in Hebrews 1: 14, he believes that “the most likely explanation is the one Warfield ... defends. The ‘angels’ of the ‘little ones’ are their spirits after death, and they always see the heavenly father’s face ... their destiny is the unshielded glory of the Father’s presence”. He concludes that “The evidence though not overwhelming, is substantial enough to suppose that ‘their angels’ simply refers to their continued existence in the heavenly father’s presence.”

One of Carson’s concerns is the idea that for every believer there is a guardian angel. However one could still hold to the view that angels have a special concern for believers without subscribing to that specific idea. Indeed, as the writer of Hebrews puts it, “Are they (angels) not ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?” And as already mentioned, in Luke Jesus follows his telling of the parable of the

⁶ For Carson’s comments on the parable and its setting see Carson, D.A., “Matthew” in **Matthew Mark Luke**, The Expositors Bible Commentary, volume 8, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1984, pp. 395 - 404

lost sheep with a comment on the joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents (Luke 15: 10).

Might it not be, as expressed in Matthew, that “their angels” are the angels of the little ones, in the sense simply that they have a special interest in the salvation of these believers, these little ones? Additionally, it may well be that in the comments being made by Jesus in Matthew 18: 10 and Luke 15: 10 we are being given information concerning which people were previously ignorant.

According to Bailey⁷

Bailey assumes that the parable was told only once and argues that the account in Luke is the original one. His argument against an alternative view that Matthew is closer to the original and that Luke is secondary is extensive.

Concerning the setting of the parable in Luke, Bailey is concerned to stress the importance of “table fellowship” and has an extensive quote from Jeremias in a work not cited in this blog. Part of that quote reads, “To understand what Jesus was doing in eating with ‘sinners’, it is important to realize that in the east ... to invite a man to a meal was an honour. It was an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood and forgiveness.” Bailey himself writes, “In the East today, as in the past, a nobleman may feed any number of lesser needy persons as a sign of his generosity, but he does not *eat* with them. However, when guests are ‘received’ the one receiving the guests eats with them. ... Jesus is set forth in the text as engaging in some such social relationship with publicans and sinners. Small wonder the Pharisees were upset.” He also argues that not only might Jesus have been eating with ‘sinners’ but that he himself had been hosting ‘sinners’.

In accordance with what one expects from Bailey, he sees a precise structure to the text, beginning with “What man ...” and ending with “... who need no repentance”. The structure he perceives is chiasmic, with the centre piece being, “And coming to the home he calls to the friends and neighbours”. And on each side of this centre piece there is a reference to “rejoicing”. One should note, that in order to discern the chiasmic structure that he proposes he has to include the words that Jesus uttered that followed the parable.

Bailey claims that while in the Old Testament “the figure of the shepherd was a noble symbol ... the flesh-and-blood shepherds who in the first century wandered around after sheep were clearly ... unclean. ... It is difficult to know how the rabbis managed to revere the shepherd of the Old Testament and despise the shepherd who herded the neighbour’s sheep ... But this seems to have been the case.” Furthermore he writes, “It can be seriously questioned whether any Pharisee would ever take up the task of a shepherd under any condition. Thus the decision to address Pharisees as shepherds is a culturally and theologically conditioned decision of some significance.”

⁷ For Bailey’s section on the parable and its setting see Bailey, K.E., **Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes**, combined edition, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1983, pp. 142 - 156

Concerning the parable itself, Bailey claiming that in the case of his shepherd friends, in his day and age, a shepherd in charge of 100 sheep would most likely be hired by one or more people, 100 sheep either being an indication that their owner was quite wealthy or that a number of families had made of their sheep one flock, the average family only owning five to fifteen animals. Transferring this understanding to the time of Jesus he argues that the shepherd in the parable does not necessarily own the sheep. This possibility does not seem to have occurred to Kistemaker who has a different view on what it would mean for a man to own a hundred sheep and accepts Bishop's view that such a man would be one of small or average means. Perhaps Bailey is in error in supposing that what the situation was like in the twentieth century applied to what it was like in the first century A.D. However, Bailey, with his perspective, that the man would most likely be someone who was hired, argues that the man would not necessarily be a hireling but rather someone from an extended family which would explain why the community is so glad upon the lost sheep having been found. What would have been a loss for the shepherd would have been a loss for them.

Bailey believes that the reference to the rejoicing by the shepherd is not true to form. "The natural thing for the shepherd of the parable to have said would be, 'I have found my sheep.' Instead we have a ... climax on 'joy of restoration'". Again, referring to the need to carry the lost sheep, now found, over a long distance, he writes "Surprisingly, this shepherd rejoices in the burden of restoration still before him." His point seems to be that the oddity is something purposefully inserted into the parable, being consistent with, from his analysis, the matter of "rejoicing", which brackets the centre piece of the account, and thereby being of considerable significance.

He also recognises two matters which the reader or listener may see as problems. Firstly he says that one might expect a passive phrase, such as "'if the sheep was lost' which would exonerate the shepherd from any blame. Rather the shepherd is clearly assumed negligent in his duty as a shepherd. He 'loses' the sheep." Bailey seems to assume that in his telling of the story, Jesus wants the hearer to recognise that the shepherd has been at fault.

Secondly, the association of "the wilderness", where the sheep are left, with "the house", to which the shepherd returns, might seem odd. As part of his rationale for what he believes would have occurred in real life, Bailey writes, "The roving tribesmen keep sheep in the open at night. Peasants, living on the edge of the pasture lands, bring the sheep to the courtyard of the family home at the end of each day." That there is a reference to "coming to the home" or "coming to the house" suggests to Bailey that a peasant shepherd is in mind. He then refers to a possible scenario, quoting at length from Levison. The scenario is that in the situation being portrayed, there would have been a number of shepherds involved in the caring of the flock and they would form part of that community which would be overjoyed upon one of the shepherds returning with a sheep that had been lost. Levison, referring to his own observations made in relatively modern times, writes, "Two and even three, shepherds are commonly employed. When one sheep is lost and the shepherd goes to seek it, the other shepherd takes the flock home. On arrival, the neighbours would at once notice the absence of the shepherd or they would be told of it, for apart from the possibility of the loss of the animal, it is often a question of the safety of the man. Should he encounter a wild beast, a

single-handed shepherd, with only his stick and sling, is in a perilous predicament. The finding and bringing home of the lost sheep is therefore a matter of great thanksgiving in the community.” Bailey appeals to his own observations to indicate how natural it would be for a shepherd to celebrate with his friends in a situation similar to the parable by saying that, “Village men gather almost nightly to discuss the events of the village, recite poetry, and tell stories from the oral tradition.”

However his appeal to Levison’s belief that there would have been more than one shepherd involved could be seen to be at odds with his argument that one shepherd, whatever his relationship to those who owned the sheep, would have been in charge. In seemingly endeavouring to avoid this difficulty he writes, “I am told by Palestinian shepherds that no man can care for a hundred sheep permanently by himself. He has no feed for the sheep. They must be led out each day. No man can count on perfect health 365 days a year (not to mention his family and community duties).” But in the story that Jesus tells, the reference is to a single occasion. It could be that Bailey in providing his understanding of what probably lies behind the story, however interesting, has gone too far. Although one of the problems might be that practices “now” and “then” might differ considerably, we also need to recognise that the story that Jesus told is short on details. In fact Bailey recognises that as told, the parable itself says nothing about what happened to the 99, apart from their being left in the wilderness. One might also add, that among other things, the story knows of only one shepherd!

“The mountains”, “the desert” and what the parables do and do not say.

Before turning to our understanding of the two parables, some attention will be devoted to “the mountains” of Matthew and “the desert” of Luke and what the parables do and do not say, independently of what commentators believe were the realities that lay behind the parables. Though at first it might seem unnecessary to devote much attention to these matters, it could be important to do so in order to better understand what the parables might or might not be alluding to.

“The Mountains”

Matthew reports that in the parable, Jesus refers to the shepherd leaving the 99 in the mountains, “*oros*” being the Greek word used. “*Oros*” is used 63 times in the New Testament and the NIV translates it, “mountain” or similar 56 times (“mountain” [20 x]; “mountains” [10 x]; “mountainside” [8 x]; “mount” [18 x]⁸ and “hill” or similar 7 times (“hill” [2 x]; “hills” [3 x]; “hillside” [2 x]).

The mountains of the Bible are not all that great in height. While Mt Sinai is over 2000 m high, Mt Zion and the Mt of Olives are around 800 m, with the Mt Carmel range being around 500 m. Twice in the New Testament, a mountain is described as “high” (the

⁸ In three instances where the literal expression reads, “the mount called Olives, the NIV translates the phrase as, “the hill called the Mount of Olives”. In the analysis I have ignored the reference to “hill”. Most of the usages of “Mount” are in the name, Mt of Olives, with a few being in the name, Mt Sinai and a couple in the name Mt Zion.

transfiguration mountain), once as “very high” (the mountain to which Satan took Jesus) and once as huge (the visionary mountain of Revelation 8: 8).

The word, “*bouvos*” meaning a hill or a mound is only found twice in the New Testament and both times in conjunction with “*oros*” - Luke 3: 5, where the reference is to a text from Isaiah: “every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low” and Luke 23: 30 where the reference is to a text from Hosea: they will say to the mountains, “Fall on us” and to the hills, “Cover us”. The two terms are used as though they had something in common (i.e. the notion of height) while being actually different (i.e. with respect to “how high”) Given the choice of deciding between “mountain” or “hill” when translating “*oros*”, “mountain” would normally seem to be the preferred choice. And the NIV has proceeded that way in most instances.

The exceptions in the NIV are: the city on a hill not being hidden (Matthew 5: 14), the town of Nazareth being built on the brow of a hill (Luke 4: 29), a demon possessed man living among the hills (Mark 5: 5), the demons possessing the pigs on the hillside (Mark 5: 5 and Luke 8: 32), the seven hills on which the woman sits (Revelation 17: 9) and the hills of the parable under discussion Matthew 18: 12. It cannot be dogmatically argued that in each of these cases, the translation should have referred to “mountain” or similar nor that in every other case, a translation of “mountain” or similar was rightly made instead of “hill” or similar. Hills grade into mountains. However, the New American Standard Bible, contrary to the NIV refers to “mountains” in Matthew 18: 12, Mark 5: 5 and Revelation 17: 9 and “mountain” in Mark 5: 11 and Luke 8: 32.

Foerster in his article on “*oros*”⁹ writes, that concerning Palestine, in days beyond the Old Testament, “the mountains, most of which are not much over 3000 ft., were in general denuded of trees. ... In the main we find only pasture ... the mountains offer extensive views in general. ... But the mountains of Palestine with their ravines, were then, as now, an obstacle to communications. ... They are lonely.” He further writes, “*Oros* in the NT means both the single ‘mountain’ ... and also the ‘mountain range’” and in a specific reference to the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew, he says, “the shepherd leaves the 99 *epi ta ore*, i.e., in dangerous isolation.”

Black may be correct when he suggests that the word (*oros*) translated mountain may have been influenced by an Aramaic word (see under Kistemaker earlier) which can mean either “mountain” or “country” but to go so far as to suggest that the latter would imply “open country” seems to be a jump too far. Jeremias, with his view that “hill country” is the notion that lies behind the Aramaic word, is more conservative in his judgement. Ultimately all we have is a Greek word, which should generally be understood to mean “mountain” or “mountains” or “mountainside” etc., even if not a very high mountain or very high mountains. The word, “*oros*” occurs 16 times in Matthew, on two occasions being a reference to the Mount of Olives. 5 times it is incorporated into direct speech uttered by Jesus. It would be rather odd if we were to understand that in only one of these instances (Matthew 18: 12) is

⁹ Foerster, W., *oros* in **Theological Dictionary of the New Testament**, volume V, (trans. and ed. Bromiley, G.W.), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1967, pp. 475-487.

the Greek influenced by an Aramaic word that suggests that a translation such as “country” or even “open country” would be appropriate. In at least three of the texts (Matthew 5: 14, 17: 20 and 21: 21) the notion of a raised entity seems obviously in mind. Perhaps understanding “*oros*” in Matthew 18: 2 as “hill country” is about as far as one can go using this approach. On the surface what we seem to have is an attempt by some to have Jesus tell a story in which the sheep are left in reasonably pleasant circumstances.

With this in mind one can understand the NIV preference for “hills” in Matthew 18: 12, the sense of “pasture lands in a pleasant place” being thereby conveyed. This is however, as implied above, interpreting the parable in a certain way before the translation takes place. Viz.: the shepherd leaves the 99 in not so foreboding circumstances, while he searches for the one that has wandered away. Understanding “*oros*” in its more usual sense of “mountain” (“*ore*” as “mountains”) is the more cautious approach unless there appear to be good reasons to the contrary. That is, in the parable, the shepherd leaves the 99 in a place where there was indeed pasture, but where the terrain was here and there rugged and the situation one of isolation.

“The Desert”

In Luke’s parable of the lost sheep, the 99 are left in the desert (*eremos*). But is “desert” an appropriate translation for “*eremos*”?

In the New Testament, the word “*eremos*” occurs 49 times and the NIV has numerous ways of translating it: as a noun - “desert” (32 x), “deserts”, “desert region”, “lonely places”, “solitary places”, “desolate woman” and “open country” (1x each) and as an adjective – “solitary” (4 x), “remote” (3 x), “desolate”, “lonely”, “quiet” and “deserted” (1 x each). Related forms are “*eremia*” translated as “remote place” (2 x) and “deserts” and “country” (1 x each), “*eremo*” translated as “bring to ruin” (5 x) and “*eremosis*” translated as “desolation” (3 x).

The general sense being conveyed by “*eremos*” according to the NIV is one of either a remote region or a desolate region. The 99 do not have to be left in a desert but wherever they are left it is a region of some difficulty for sheep – they are left in a remote and isolated place; they are left substantially in a lonely place. It is interesting however that the only terms used by the NIV in their translation of “*eremos*” that are not in accordance with this general understanding, are “quiet” and “open country” and the latter is their choice in Luke 15: 4 where the reference is to the 99 sheep. The NIV translators have decided that they will fill out the parable for the reader by indicating that the 99 sheep would not have be left in difficult circumstances!!

The New American Standard Bible is little different. Preferring to use the word “wilderness” rather than “desert”, “*eremos*” is translated “wilderness” (32 x), “secluded place” (5 x), “desolate” (6 x), “desert” and “deserts” (2 x each) and “unpopulated areas” and “open pasture” (1 x each). You guessed correctly – “open pasture” is the translation used in Luke 15: 4.

Kittel in his article on “*eremos*” and related forms, writes, “The adj. *eremos* ... and the subst. *he eremos* refer to “abandonment”, whether of a person ... or a cause ... or a locality. The latter does not have to be a desert. It is a place ‘without inhabitants’, ‘empty,’ e.g. an ‘abandoned city or a ‘thinly populated district’”¹⁰.

If Luke, in his retelling of the parable, wished to convey an understanding that where the 99 were left was simply out in “the country”, he could have used the word “*chora*”. While “*chora*” is more commonly used in the sense of “a region” it can refer to something like “countryside” – see Luke 21: 21 (“Let those in the countryside not enter the city”) or even “fields” - see John 4: 35 (“See how the fields are already white for harvest”) and Luke 2: 8 (There were shepherds in the field, watching over their flock by night”). Presumably he could also have used the word “*agros*” generally translated “field”. However Luke chose the word “*eremos*” and consequently we cannot avoid the notion that in the parable that Jesus told, according to Luke, the 99 sheep were left in desolate surroundings. Given that the definite article is used, translating “*en te eremo*” as “in the desert” or similar, such as “in the wilderness”, is not at all inappropriate. Of course by “desert” we should not conjure up the image of rolling sand hills or vast tracks of nothing but sand. The wilderness regions of Palestine were not devoid of vegetation but they were not lush with pasture either and were certainly not the most desirable of places to inhabit, to choose for feeding sheep or in which to leave sheep.

Bailey, as noted above, believes that a reference to “in the wilderness” is not at all out of place.

What the parables do and do not say

As well as trying to discern what was meant by the words “*oros*” and *eremos*” in the parables, we need to be careful to recognise what the stories do and do not say about such as, “What happened to the 99 sheep”, “What was involved in the rejoicing that took place” and “What was involved in looking for, finding and bringing to safety a lost sheep”. Certainly we need to know as much background as is applicable to the parables, but knowing what is applicable can be a problem. Associated difficulties are recognising anything odd in the stories that Jesus may have purposefully made part of the stories and being aware of anything odd in terms of what we might have expected to be part of the stories, yet not mentioned.

What happened to the 99 sheep?

The commentators are often at pains to say that the 99 sheep would not have been left on their own – that there would have been another shepherd or other shepherds into whose care the sheep would have been entrusted, or alternatively that the shepherd would have ensured that the 99 sheep were safely left in an enclosure of some sort. That Jesus was telling stories of his own creation seems to have been forgotten.

¹⁰ Kittel, G., *eremos*, *eremia*, *eremo*, *eremosis* in **Theological Dictionary of the New Testament**, volume II, (trans. and ed. Bromiley, G.W.), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1964, pp. 657 - 660

I was once looking at a children's cartoon on television in the company of a four year old grandson. I pretended to be enthralled with the cartoon and anxiously exclaimed something like, "Oh, I hope she escapes!" He turned to look at me and very seriously said, "Pa, it's only TV. It's not real."

If you had been present when Jesus told the parable either the one in Matthew or the one in Luke, and asked him, "Are you implying that the shepherd left the 99 sheep in the hands of other shepherds or made sure that they were safely within an enclosure, before he left them?" one could perhaps understand if his reply were along the lines of, "I am telling a story. It's not a real story. I have not said in my story that the shepherd did this or did that with the 99 sheep before he left them. It is not part of my story. My story is very simple – the shepherd left the 99 sheep and went in search of the one." Of course we do not have any such dialogue and in reality I suspect that if such a question were asked of Jesus he would not have been so obliging in his answer!

The hearers of the story would simply have made up their own minds as to whether or not Jesus was implying that the shepherd would not have left the sheep defenceless. My guess is that most if not all would have thought that in real life a shepherd would not leave 99 sheep unprotected but that most if not all, considered, that in the story, the 99 were left by themselves - that their being left alone and vulnerable was that part of the story indicating how focussed the shepherd was on finding the lost one - that there was a sense in which the 99 became unimportant as the story quickly moved to speak of the shepherd searching and finding the one sheep (as in Luke) or searching with the possibility of finding the one sheep (as in Matthew). In one sense the 99 are abandoned. Of course we do not actually know what was in the minds of any of his hearers concerning the lack of reference to any care exercised for the 99. What we do have is a story invented by Jesus that says nothing about such care.

So, with respect to what happened to the 99 sheep, it makes no sense to ask if there was more than one shepherd in charge, or if all, only some or none of the sheep were the property of the shepherd or if the sheep were left in some sort of enclosure. Jesus invented a story and the story is what it is.

What was involved in the rejoicing that took place?

The two parables differ in the way they report the rejoicing of the man upon finding the one sheep and we should be careful not to transfer either account or parts of either account to the other. In Matthew it is said that the man rejoices more over the one he finds than over the 99 that never went astray. In Luke, it simply says that the man lays it on his shoulders rejoicing.

With respect to the story in Matthew, one might question to what extent there would be any rejoicing over the 99 that never went astray. Are we seeing here an expression, perhaps peculiarly Semitic in origin, that indicates that while there would be no feeling towards the 99 sheep that had not gone astray, there would be a sense of relief upon finding the one that had gone astray? Perhaps Jesus speaks of the relief as though it were joy in order to highlight the relief. Furthermore, the words, "Truly I say to you", that preface the remark about rejoicing, emphasise this rejoicing. Consequently perhaps the reference is to "immense relief". On the other hand, the notion of "rejoice" rather than "relief" is what we find in the text and if we

think this is not what we would expect then perhaps we have to see the reference to “rejoice” as an oddity.

In Luke there is no comparison between the rejoicing at finding the one sheep that was lost with the rejoicing over the 99 that were not lost. Upon finding the sheep, the man lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing at the same time. Bailey, as already indicated, thinks there is something a little peculiar to this part of the story. He says one might expect him to say, “I have found my sheep!” but why would he then rejoice at the thought of having to now carry the sheep on his shoulders? The text does not say directly what he rejoices about but the implication seems to be that it is the finding of the one sheep. That this rejoicing is placed alongside of his placing the sheep on his shoulders seems to indicate however that he dismisses from his mind the physical labour in bringing it back to safety.

Perhaps in different ways, each story, each with its focus on rejoicing has Jesus strongly emphasising the point.

Luke’s story concludes with the man calling together his friends and neighbours, asking them to rejoice with him, because he has found his sheep that was lost. The use of the dual, “friends and neighbours” may be a simple even Semitic way of referring to those who have a close relationship to the man both socially and spatially. They are members of his community, perhaps a small village community. They will react, one way or another, to his having found the sheep.

Bailey and Levison whom he cites, as mentioned earlier, provide possible insights into how the rejoicing of neighbours and friends might have occurred and why it might have occurred. However, while such rejoicing is readily assumed, the parable itself says nothing about neighbours and friends rejoicing with the shepherd over the lost sheep having been found. It could be that we ourselves are meant to expect that under normal circumstances there would be considerable rejoicing and so supply such an ending to the story that Jesus told. Or more to the point it could be that we are meant to expect that the hearers on the day should have come to such a conclusion as being a satisfactory ending to the story. Of course in real life, no such ending could be guaranteed. For any number of reasons, a particular village community might not rejoice with a particular shepherd under similar circumstances. For instance, a shepherd might have established a reputation for losing a sheep or two and even his friends and neighbours might have tired of his repeated failures, even when a sheep had been recovered. But what Jesus told was just a story and one would be inclined to think that as a satisfactory conclusion to such a good story, the neighbours and friends would respond to the shepherd’s call to rejoice with him.

However, Jesus leaves the story hanging without such an ending.

This lack of a definitive conclusion is consistent with the parable of the lost coin where we are not told whether or not the woman’s friends and neighbours rejoice with her, and the parable of “the lost son” where we are not told whether or not the older son joins in the feast for the younger brother.

What was involved in looking for, finding and bringing to safety a lost sheep?

Naturally we do need to have some background knowledge to appreciate the stories even as stories. Sheep were in fact looked after by shepherds. That shepherds would often count the number of sheep and by so doing would discover if one or more were missing helps us appreciate the story however that knowledge is not essentially for coming to grips with the story. One would expect that a sheep that had gone missing would normally be looked for. What is interesting is that in neither account is there any mention of “shepherd”.

Depending upon the terrain in which a sheep was lost, the task of finding a sheep could vary from being relatively easy to extremely difficult. However, to what extent would a man engage in searching for a missing sheep, leaving 99 behind, without care or even with care? For how long would he search? How valuable would he consider the one sheep to be and thus, how important would it be to find that one sheep? Perhaps the idea that a man is looking after someone else’s sheep or in some other way sees himself as having a significant duty to care for each sheep or the idea that the loss of one sheep no matter what the circumstances is a serious matter for any such man, is part and parcel of the background assumed by the hearers. Alternatively, we might assume that if one has 100 sheep to start with, the loss of one is not an extremely serious matter, though serious enough for the man to spend a little time trying to find it. Probably we are simply meant to focus on the fact that in each story the man is intent on finding the missing sheep. We can imagine that once having decided to try to find that sheep, the man becomes obsessed with finding that one sheep and so his finding the sheep then becomes a matter of considerable relief. But again, we must not read too much into the stories. They do not go into such possibilities.

Though it might be tempting to see the possibility of the shepherd in searching for the sheep, putting his own life in danger as some sort of reference to the actual death of Jesus, that is not part of the story. In fact there is no hint of such in the story and besides Jesus did not put his life in danger, he gave up his life!

It is understandable that a shepherd upon finding a sheep that had been lost and perhaps it being exhausted and bewildered, might carry it on his shoulders and presumably no one would consider that part of the story in Luke to be odd.

However, although Bailey sees no problem in the following matter, it is questionable, as to whether a shepherd would be pasturing sheep in a wilderness area, but even if so, a further question could be asked as to the likelihood of the proximity of a village to such an area, as seemingly indicated in the story as recounted in Luke. None the less, such features **are** part of the story.

It could be that in a real life situation one or more shepherds having taken over caring for sheep under the care of another shepherd who has gone to look for a lost sheep, return to their dwellings to report that one of them is still “out there” looking for one that has gone missing. But such a feature is **not** a part of the story in Luke.

What we have in Matthew and Luke are only stories. They have been made up. Their artificiality is highlighted, in each case, by their being 100 sheep to begin with. Is there any evidence that Palestinian shepherds tried to have flocks consisting of a “nice” round number like 100?! It certainly sounds like a “nice” round number to us and surely to the hearers of Jesus also. If Jesus had begun his stories with, “A man had 83 sheep” we would be tempted to search for the significance of that number. By using the number “100” Jesus indicates that there is no significance to be attached to the number and that he is simply telling stories of his own creation.

Both stories are stark and perhaps the starkness has to be recognised for what it is, in order for us not to miss the truths that Jesus is portraying. To embellish much at all beyond what is given in the stories may well hinder us as we try to understand the point or points Jesus is making. The hearers at the time may have seen the stories as they developed to have more or less certain background features and perhaps different hearers having had different experiences, created different images in their minds as the stories unfolded. But as far as we know, all they heard, all they had fundamentally to apprehend, in the end, was something like the stories as we are given them in the two Gospels.

Understanding the Parables – What was Jesus really saying?

If only one could be certain of the answer to that question! In spite of our uncertainty, we must still try to understand why Jesus told the stories – what he was “getting at”. In making this attempt it should now be reasonably obvious that we will have to consider the parables separately. There is very likely to be two separate answers to the question, one for each of the parables as reported in Matthew and Luke. Almost certainly Jesus would have spoken in Aramaic, but we can only gauge what Jesus said by examining the Greek documents. Though here and there we might detect a Semitic feature underlying the Greek, the Greek is all we have.

The parable in Matthew

The story that Jesus told as recorded by Matthew has the notion of “suppose” written into it. It seems to flow as follows: “What do you think about the following? Suppose a man has 100 sheep and suppose one goes astray, would not the man leave the 99 on the mountains and look for the one that went astray? And suppose he finds it. He would be ever so glad, compared to his feelings for the 99 that had not gone astray.”

There is an emphasis not so much on the shepherd and his searching for the sheep but upon the shepherd finding it and being so “joyful” (utterly relieved?). And what would bring about this joy or “immense relief”? That the sheep was found? Yes, but only because the sheep would be very precious. The story actually focuses upon how precious the sheep would be, how valuable it would be, to the man. If it were not valued, there would not be this joy or immense relief.

That the reference is to a “man” rather than a “shepherd” may have been a way of avoiding focussing on shepherds and the way they were viewed at the time of Jesus. Consequently the

attention of the hearer of this “suppose” story would more likely be directed towards the sheep that was lost and its needing to be found.

In fact that the 99 are left behind on the mountains suggests that in the story, the man himself would deliberately focus on the one sheep. That there is no mention of any care being exercised towards the 99 adds weight to this notion. It is this focus on the one sheep that results in his leaving the 99 behind. And why “on the mountains”? In the story Jesus could have said “in the countryside” but chose not to. Unless one argues that the translation should simply refer to “hills” then the reference to “mountains” and the lack of reference to any care for the 99 is presumably meant to imply that in his search for the one sheep the man would be prepared to basically abandon his 99 for the sake of that one sheep. The focus is on finding that one sheep and the joy that would result from finding that one sheep.

It is at the end of the parable that one would not have been surprised to have read that Jesus said, “There is more joy in heaven before the angels over one sinner who repents than over ...”, as recorded in Luke. Instead of which we find, “So, it is not the will of (literally “before”) your (or “my”) father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” As discussed earlier, it is the idea of “these little ones” which surround the parable. “These little ones”, his disciples, are very precious to the Father. Being described as, “little ones” we recognise their vulnerability, their fragility. They can easily be led away from their allegiance to their Lord. They need protection. Perhaps, we are reminded of the words of Jesus elsewhere – “When I was with them in the world, I kept them in your name. I guarded those whom you gave to me and none of them perished except the son of perdition that the Scripture might be fulfilled.” (John 17: 12) Their “angels” always behold the face of the Father of Jesus in heaven. If my understanding is correct, that is, their “angels” always have an audience with the Father. Or to put it another way, Jesus is saying, “My (their) Father, who is in heaven, is fully aware of what happens to his little ones on earth.” Given its setting is the parable then not one of considerable warning to any who would cause one of these little ones to sin? The Father will know what has happened. And it is not his will that any of these little ones should perish. Woe to those who have caused them to perish!

Better for a person to have a great millstone fastened to his neck and be cast into the sea and drowned than to cause one of the little ones who believe in Jesus to sin. Woe to those by whom temptations come. Better to cut off a foot or a hand or pluck out an eye, if that will prevent the temptation arising, than to be cast, whole into hell. Do not look down on, do not despise one of these little ones. Beware because “their angels” have a continual audience with my Father.

Who were those who did indeed look down on the little ones of Jesus? As a group it was the Pharisees and the scribes. The disciples were not trained as the scribes were. Many were commercial fishermen. One was an ex tax collector. They had no fame, nothing really to commend them to the learned and the very religious. I remember being contacted by a man in a retirement village, whom I thought was interested in finding out about Jesus. However I soon realised that was simply looking for some purely stimulating conversation. I was horrified (Oh that I should have shown my horror!) when I soon learnt how he was an

arrogant unbeliever boasting about how he had seduced an elderly christian widow away from her Lord and had bonded her to himself. Better that he had never been born. He had enticed one of “these little ones” away. I only hope that she was not irretrievably lost.

It seems to me that the parable is essentially about how precious the little ones that Jesus had are to God, his father. These humble ones, these little ones are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and whoever receives one of these little ones in the name of Jesus receives him.

It is possible that we are meant to see the shepherd, only ever called “the man”, as portraying God, recognising that God is portrayed as the shepherd in the Old Testament. Furthermore, God as father is mentioned either side of the parable. Additionally, we note that the man does not lose the sheep. The sheep of its own volition wanders away just as God is not at fault when his sheep wander away. However, to see the man as representing God, I suspect, is going too far.

It could be that we are to see the 99 abandoned on the mountains as representing those who “look down upon” or “despise” the little ones – the Pharisees and the scribes, looking down, from their perspective, from their lofty heights. After all, Jesus could have simply referred to their being left in the countryside, but he chose to speak of “the mountains”. But perhaps the 99 being left in the mountains bespeaks of the man’s relative disinterest in them compared to his concern for the one that had wandered away. Perhaps the reference to the mountains indicates how dangerous the situation was for that sheep and consequently the considerable urgency in finding that “lost” sheep if at all possible.

Whether or not any in the crowd who listened would have thought of either of the above possibilities we will never know. But hopefully, some at that time, would have understood the essential aspects of the story and recognised how Jesus condemned the attitude of the Pharisees and the scribes towards his followers. Surely some of the Pharisees and scribes themselves recognised essentially what Jesus was saying. Perhaps some of those who heard the story in the course of time better understood who Jesus was and better appreciated the love the Father has for his Son and his followers.

The parable in Luke

The parable is introduced with a reference to the Pharisees and scribes commenting on Jesus receiving sinners and eating with them. After the parable Jesus utters those well known words, “So I say to you, there shall be (more) joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous persons who have no need of repentance.” This saying seems to have a strong element of sarcasm within it. For who are the ninety nine who need no repentance? Surely the reference is to the scribes and the Pharisees who while seeing a need for repentance in the sinners could barely see any such need in themselves. Given that this is the comment Jesus makes upon telling the story, we might find not only that the story relates in some way to the Pharisees and scribes but that there might be an element of sarcasm within the story as well. In an earlier reference in Luke we have Jesus speaking similarly somewhat sarcastically when he said he had come to call sinners to repentance, not the righteous, just as healthy people do not need a doctor only the sick (Luke 5: 29 – 32).

The parable begins with the statement, “And he spoke to them this parable, saying”, followed by the rhetorical question, “What man of you, having a hundred sheep ...?” None of the Pharisees and the scribes of course would have had a hundred sheep. Although the word, “shepherd” is not used, each was being addressed as though he could be. Indeed to be addressed as though they could have been shepherds would have been somewhat offensive. Shepherds in the time of Jesus were regarded as people belonging to a far from noble profession, in fact a profession the members of which fell under the category of “sinners”. Somehow or other, the Pharisees and scribes are intimately involved in this parable.

As with the parable in Matthew, one of the sheep is missing, but rather than having wandered away, as in Matthew, it is lost. While this may be going too far, there may be a suggestion here, that the man in Luke is irresponsible and this would imply that the Pharisees and scribes are themselves culpable.

However, perhaps with a twist, the man, who is indeed a shepherd, nobly searches for the one sheep that is lost. But in doing so he leaves the 99 in the desert or wilderness region. Could it be that, given the sarcasm evident in the words of Jesus that accompany the parable that here we have more sarcasm? If the 99 is now a reference to the Pharisees and scribes, rather than the shepherd being one of such, this 99 is left in the wilderness. They see themselves as being markedly superior to sinners, and mimicking the parable, the remarkably superior are indeed separated from the one sinner, but in their separation they exist in the wilderness. And in the parable they are, it would appear, abandoned there. Is there a hint of the OT reality of the tribes of Israel having to struggle through the wilderness and being left in the wilderness, longer than necessary because of their unbelief?

In the parable the shepherd, the noble shepherd, perhaps recognised as God himself, the true shepherd of Israel, seeks for the lost sheep and indeed does so until he finds it (not on the chance that he might find it as in the parable in Matthew.) And having found it, he carries it home. It does not have to struggle to bring itself home. And as he carries it on his shoulders, his joy breaks out. A wonderful thing has happened. The lost sheep is lost no longer. According to Bailey, in real life, one would not expect the shepherd to be so exuberant. If this is correct then in the story perhaps Jesus is highlighting what for God (the one in heaven) is wonderful – the repentance of a sinner. The Pharisees and the scribes should have recognised what God’s perspective was and adopted his perspective. And if they in any way are to be identified with the shepherd, then they should have rejoiced as that shepherd rejoiced, when sinners repented.

At this point Jesus could have finished the parable. However, he then describes how the shepherd, having arrived home, calls his friends and neighbours together to rejoice with him upon the finding of his sheep. What is the point of this extra detail? For Bailey this calling of his friends and neighbours to rejoice with him is no mere detail but the central piece of the linguistic structure that he observes.

Interestingly, Jesus does not say in his story that the friends and neighbours did in fact rejoice. The man calls upon them to rejoice but that is the end of the story. Are the hearers

of the parable, including the Pharisees and the scribes being called to decide for themselves what an appropriate ending would be? And if so, do the Pharisees and the scribes in particular see that they have been entrapped by the parable? Are they being portrayed as the “friends and neighbours” of the sinners who have been found? Are they being called upon to rejoice?

The Pharisees and the scribes had murmured, “This man receives sinners and eats with them!” In the parable, there is rejoicing by the shepherd and the call to others to rejoice, that the lost sheep has been found. Many sinners had flocked to Jesus, gladly hearing his words and some had met with him in joyful table fellowship. In contrast, the Pharisees and the scribes had looked down on him and the sinners with whom he met.

The parable was actually addressed to the Pharisees and scribes with the words, “Which one of you ...?” They are the ones who primarily are called upon to consider the parable. At the time how many other hearers of the parable saw it as focussed on these self righteous ones held in high esteem by many?

If the Pharisees and scribes are to be associated with any of the entities in the story, which would they be? Are they the shepherd (What man of you?) who has the 100 sheep but loses one? - The 99 left behind in the wilderness (where they want to be, apart from sinners, but where God places them, under judgement)? - The shepherd who searches for the lost sheep (just as they should be seeking the sinner’s repentance)? - The shepherd who rejoices over finding the sheep that was lost (just as they too should rejoice over the repentant sinner)? - The friends and neighbours who are called upon to rejoice (will they respond and rejoice over sinners that repent)? If we want a simple parable with each feature uniquely identified, so many possibilities will not do. Perhaps however Jesus is being extremely subtle. Maybe the story is meant to have its twists and turns.

At the other extreme, perhaps we are not meant to associate the Pharisees and Scribes directly with any of the entities in the parable. Are we to see them listening to the story, with themselves outside of the story but being exposed by the story to the reality that there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repents? Yet it is difficult not to see them as somehow part of the story itself. If the intention is that we are to see them reflected in the parable only once, the introduction by Jesus, “Which one of you ...?” might suggest we should see them in some sense as the shepherd. However that introduction might have been a way of Jesus referring to **them** as “sinners”, recognising how shepherds were viewed at the time of Jesus. If we are to be restricted to seeing them only once in the parable, my preference would be that either they are being placed in the position of the friends and neighbours needing to respond to the call to rejoice, or, being portrayed to be like the 99, left in the wilderness.

One way or another, the parable in Luke, while focussing on “joy” as the great marker of what is really important – a lost one being found, a sinner repenting, has Jesus directly confronting the Pharisees and scribes with their abhorrent attitude towards the sinners turning to him and their close association with him. At the same time he pushes to one side, as utterly despicable, their murmurings against him.

Final Words

As discussed earlier, Jesus may have only uttered the one parable with Matthew and Luke “tweaking” it and aligning it with certain different statements of Jesus, to suit their own purposes as they created their Gospels, for different readerships. However, the settings are so different and the content of each parable sufficiently different to warrant their being treated as two separate parables. Hence the title to the series, “The Parable(s) of Jesus”, though they are sometimes treated as one.

However in each Gospel, the hearers as portrayed in those Gospels appear to be much the same – the Pharisees and the scribes. In Matthew, they are the ones who place themselves under the severe judgement of God by looking down upon the little ones who belonged to Jesus. In Luke, they are the ones who see themselves far removed from those sinners whom Jesus received and mutter against Jesus because of his close involvement with them.

In Matthew that the 99 are left on the mountains and in Luke that they should be left in the wilderness, could be significant with “mountains” and “wilderness” not simply being necessary backdrops for the story. In both cases, Jesus could have referred to the sheep having been left in the countryside. While such references could have been made for purposes of sarcasm, they do convey the idea that the ninety nine are basically abandoned – they really do have little interest for the shepherd as he searches for the lost one.

And who does the great shepherd, God, regard as precious? – the little ones who follow his Son Jesus! The despisers of these little ones he condemns.

And over whom does the great shepherd, God, rejoice? – the sinners who repent! The hypocrites, the pious self righteous he abandons.

And whom do we regard as precious? And over whom do we rejoice?