Title: The Parable of the Lost Sheep: Two Snapshots
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THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP: TWO SNAPSHOTS

The Christian Bible is an intricate text, meticulously built and structured for specific purposes. Before its formation, about thirty Gospels and over two hundred additional books teaching Christian ideals existed (ALBERT, 1907). In the 2nd century, Saint Justin Martyr (c. 100—165), an early Christian apologist, followed by Saint Irenaeus (c. 120—c. 200), a Roman apologetic bishop, was the first to assert the authenticity of only four Gospels as canonical scripture (DAVIS, 2010). Two centuries later, during the Council of Rome (382), various bishops attempted to select the manuscripts that would form the official Bible (Crabtree, 1998). The dispute over which texts to include continued until the 16th Century, when the delegates of the Council of Trent (1545—1563) ultimately polished the Catholic Bible into what it still is today. Interestingly, even though the various councils had to select only the most pertinent texts from a myriad of options, they all allowed some passages to appear more than once in the Bible. The repetition of a passage might seem futile when there is so much to include in only one book, but it was actually meant for a very significant purpose: to address every possible category of audience.

A case that illustrates this intended repetition is The Parable of the Lost Sheep, which appears twice throughout the Bible: in Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 18, verse 10-14, and in Luke’s Gospel, chapter 15, verse 1-7. Even though the central plot of the parable is similar in both Gospels, the way in which each author narrates the story and the textual framework in which each parable appears differ. These noticeable differences are an effect of each Gospel’s historical context and audience, as well as of the particular beliefs
and intention of each author. These factors indicate that the differences present in Matthew’s and Luke’s narrations are not arbitrary; rather, they are meticulously constructed for a purpose and they are equally relevant for the construction of the Bible. The Parable of the Lost Sheep reveals that while Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience whose faith he was trying to preserve and reinforce, Luke wrote for a gentile audience whom he was trying to convince and indoctrinate.

Both passages resemble each other because Matthew and Luke based their Gospels on Mark’s Gospel and another unknown source Q. On the one hand, the biographical facts about Jesus in Matthew’s and Luke’s texts belong to Mark’s Gospel, which was written the first. On the other hand, the overlaps between Matthew’s and Luke’s texts that do not appear in Mark’s Gospel—such as common sayings by Jesus, as well as their grammatical structure and diction—reveal the existence of Source Q (WILKER, 2008). Since The Parable of the Lost Sheep does not appear in Mark’s Gospel, scholars hypothesize that it must come from Source Q.

Given that the parable originally belongs to source Q, in both Gospels Jesus narrates the same story of a shepherd who finds his lost sheep. According to these texts, the man has one hundred sheep, but one of them goes astray. He decides to go looking for that one lost sheep, leaving the other ninety-nine sheep behind. The author appeals to the intuitive reasoning and life experiences of the audience by posing the question: “Having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, doth he not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?” (Luke, 15:4), challenging the readers as to whether they would go looking for the lost sheep too. Even
though the lost sheep is only one among the hundred that the man owns, he still rejoices enormously when he finds it: “He rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray” (Matthew, 18:13), implying that this one lost sheep has greater value for the shepherd than the other ninety-nine sheep put together. Yet, this causes the readers to question: would it not be dangerous to leave the entire herd alone while looking for the lost sheep? Is the shepherd not afraid that the ninety-nine sheep might be scattered and lost while he is gone? It might be possible that the shepherd knows that sheep’s protection mechanism is to congregate close to other members of the cluster (LYNN, 2011). Therefore, the shepherd is confident enough to leave his entire herd alone and go looking for his one lost sheep.

The parable implies that God, represented by the shepherd, can leave his group of believers alone safely. The group’s knowledge of God is what assembles them together, and they will not disintegrate if God is not visibly near. Just like the sheep, God’s followers will stick together for protection. On the other hand, the lost sheep is unlikely to find its way back on its own, and the shepherd can only save it if he actually goes looking for it. In addition, the parable implies that God cares about every single one of his children, since he is willing to go looking for anyone who strays. Both of these implications suggest that Jesus uses this parable to teach his audience about God’s love. Whenever a drifted soul comes back into path, God rejoices enormously, for he has regained one of his children back into His Kingdom. Just as the scholar Joel B. Green writes, “these parables are fundamentally about God, and their aim is to lay bare the nature of the divine response to the recovery of the lost” (GREEN, 1997).
In order to understand why the passages are different, we must first acknowledge each Gospel’s background. The Gospel of Matthew, written before 70 AD, is anonymous. Nevertheless, the story supposedly belongs—and Christians give credit—to Matthew Levi, one of the twelve apostles called by Jesus, who was a tax collector and a Jew in origin. Unlike Luke, Matthew writes his Gospel for a Jewish audience (WILLITS, 2008). As a way to prove the fulfillment of the Jewish prophecies and demonstrate that Jesus is their expected savior, Matthew repeatedly refers to the Old Testament (EHRMAN, 2009). For example, when he narrates the escape of the Virgin Mary and her husband Joseph to Egypt, he finishes the passage by stating, “This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son’”(Matthew 2:15). Likewise, since lineage is so important for the Jewish community, Matthew meticulously describes Jesus’s descent from David, son of Abraham, in the first passage of his Gospel (Matthew 1:1). Just as the scholar Bart D. Ehrman states, “It is thought that Matthew, a Gospel concerned to show the Jewishness of Jesus, wants to emphasize Jesus’ relation to the greatest king of the Jews, David, and to the father of the Jews, Abraham” (EHRMAN, 2009). The links between Matthew’s Gospel and the Old Testament indicate that the author’s intention is to show the Jews that Jesus is their savior and, just as The Parable of the Lost Sheep teaches, that it is never too late for a sinner to convert.

On the other hand, Luke addresses his Gospel, written between 80 AD and 100 AD, to the Greeks. Given that Luke himself was a gentile, he remarks throughout his text that salvation is possible even for the non-Jewish (EHRMAN, 2009). While Matthew presents Jesus as the Messiah, meaning the “royal descendant of the dynasty of David

While both authors narrate the same basic plot in The Parable of the Lost Sheep, each author suggests a different interpretation of the parable, by intentionally placing it between passages that have with particular themes. According to Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus lectures his audience about tolerance before narrating the parable. Specifically, Jesus expresses that the “little ones” must be accepted: “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 18:10). Given that Matthew writes to the Jews, with the “little ones,” he might be referring to the outcasts of the Jewish community—the poor, the sinners, the woman, and the children. Therefore, by acknowledging Matthew’s textual context, we can presume that Jesus professes The Parable of the Lost Sheep to lecture the Jews that God values everyone, even the “little ones,” and that He rejoices when one of them repents after committing sin. The herd is a symbol of the
chosen people of Israel, and the lost sheep represent the outcast Jews to whom the community rejects. This parable teaches the Jews that they must not cast out someone who has sinned but, rather, they should forgive him, since he is as a lost sheep that God strives to gain back.

In addition to his previous lecture on tolerance, Matthew follows the parable with a discourse on sin and forgiveness within the Jewish people. Here, Jesus sermonizes that “if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother” (Matthew 18:15). If your brother fails to listen, you should “take one or two others along with you, so that every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses” (Matthew, 18:16). Still, if he does not listen, you should tell the church. If he fails to listen to the church, you must see him as a pagan: “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18: 17). This narration reveals the strength of Matthew's Jewish doctrine: he diminishes gentiles and tax collectors as worthless sinners; once again showing that he exclusively addresses the Jews. It is very interesting that, according to Matthew, Jesus places gentile and tax collectors as the worst kind of person, even beyond salvation. Therefore, we can postulate that for Matthew the lost sheep can only represent a Jewish sinner, given that he does not even consider pagans within his parable.

Contrastingly, Luke’s narration argues that God saves and accepts everyone in His Kingdom. The author introduces The Parable of the Lost Sheep by stating that Jesus
was sitting among tax collectors and sinners, lecturing them. Israelites considered it offensive to eat and drink with these types of people, since the law excluded sinners from the community and tax collectors were associated with foreign power or dishonesty (ATTRIDGE, Harper Collis Study Bible). Therefore, the Pharisees judged and criticized Jesus’s behavior, saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). In response, Jesus presents The Parable of the Lost Sheep, illustrating that everyone is important to God and that He will rejoice whenever a lost sheep comes back into path. Thus, for Luke the lost sheep symbolizes the gentiles or nonbelievers who convert, and the herd represents the believers who were already following God, the shepherd. In contrast to Matthew, Luke highlights the involvement of the tax collectors and sinners in order to indicate that God is willing to forgive and take back the lost ones, even if they are not the original “Chosen Ones”.

Following the parable, Luke imposes a very interesting narration that greatly differs from Matthew’s Gospel. According to Luke, after the shepherd finds his lost sheep, he calls upon his neighbors to celebrate with him: “And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost’” (Luke 15:6). The author indicates that this shared happiness is similar to what happens in Heaven when a lost soul is regained: “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in Heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7). Even though Matthew clearly believes in the value of a sinner repenting, Luke goes as far as saying that there is more happiness in Heaven if one non-believer repents than if all of the faithful continue believing. Luke presents one of the most controversial and debated beliefs of
Christianity: a repented sinner is more valuable than a righteous person—or, in Jesus’s epoch, a *gentile* who converts is more valuable to God than all the “Chosen Ones” following Jesus. Intriguingly, we could consider Luke’s subtle assertion—*gentile* believers are more valuable than Jewish believers are—as a hint of anti-Semitism in his Gospel.

Moreover, Luke’s Gospel reinforces the meaning of *The Parable of the Lost Sheep* by following it with a similar parable—*The Parable of the Lost Coin*, which recounts the story of a woman who sweeps her whole house in order to find one silver coin she had lost. Similar to the shepherd, “When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost’” (Luke 15:8). With this parable, Luke not only draws a clearer image of the joy a repentant soul causes in Heaven, but he also emphasizes the possibility for everyone to repent, since he intends to convince the *gentiles*—specifically the Greeks—to join Christianity. Unlike Matthew, who targeted the Jewish community, Luke argues that the non-believers who come into righteous path are actually in advantage to the Kingdom of Heaven. If we could prove Luke’s implication correct, would it mean that God favors the pagans? Can the ardent believers be in disadvantage when it comes to God’s preference? These assertions might as well only prove that Luke elevates *gentiles* over Jews due to his anti-Semitic stand, having in fact no connection to God’s preferences. Either way, we can easily realize that even the shortest parables in the Bible hold great controversies for the religious.
The Parable of the Lost Sheep is a metaphor that represents God looking for a lost child. It reveals that God is forgiving and compassionate, and that He searches for his children when they have drifted into sin. According to both Gospels, the shepherd rejoices when he has gained his lost sheep back, just as God rejoices when a sinner repents. Nevertheless, the background against which each author places the parable is different: while Matthew emphasizes the possibility for sinners to repent and to be reaccepted into the Judeo-Christian community, Luke emphasizes the possibility for the lost gentiles to unite God’s herd. The main reason for these distinct foci is the audience for which each disciple writes. Matthew writes to convince the Jews that Jesus is their Messiah, and to teach them the correct behaviors and intentions that they should adopt in order to be worthy of Heaven—in this case, repentance and forgiveness. Contrastingly, Luke writes to teach the Greeks that Jesus is a merciful God, who strives to reach them and is joyful when one of them joins his herd. It is equally important to include both of these passages in the Bible, since each of them particularly addresses its audience.

Even though these passages present variances in Jesus’ teachings, seeming contradictory to many, believers think that when these variances become united, they compose a greater, more inclusive, truth. A faithful follower believes that each Gospel is like a snapshot of Jesus taken from a particular angle and with certain lighting. Even though all four snapshots evidently depict Jesus, he does not look exactly alike in each picture. In order to know Jesus better, it is necessary to look at his four snapshots, and appreciate him from different angles and lights. Similarly, when believers read the
different Gospels, they congregate their knowledge of Jesus into a richer, more wholesome understanding. *The Parable of the Lost Sheep*, presented in two different ways, ultimately teaches that God affectionately looks for his lost child just as a shepherd would look for his lost animal.
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