



# In the kingdom everybody has enough – A social-scientific and realistic reading of the parable of the lost sheep (Lk 15:4–6)

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This article presents a social-scientific and realistic interpretation of the parable of the lost sheep (Lk 15:4–6). Attention is given to the history of the interpretation of the parable, its integrity and authenticity, and verisimilitude. It is argued that the Lukan-version (Q 15:4–6) of the parable represents the earliest layer of the historical Jesus-tradition. Specific attention is given to the social and economic registers presupposed in the parable, as well as certain cultural norms and values of the first-century Mediterranean world in which Jesus told the parable. The conclusion reached is that the parable exemplifies several aspects of the kingdom of God, aspects that are also present in several other parables that Jesus told about the kingdom.

## Introductory remarks

The history of the interpretation of the parable of the lost sheep shows that its interpretation has not changed significantly since its earliest allegorical interpretations. Almost all interpretations see the parable as either emphasising God's forgiveness, grace, mercy, love and compassion for the lost, or God's joy when a sinner is found. The reason for this unanimity is that almost all interpretations see the shepherd in the parable as a metaphor for God or Jesus. This is also the reason why themes like forgiveness, repentance, sinners and salvation are identified in the parable. A straightforward literal reading of the parable, however, shows that these themes are not present in the parable.

In this article a different approach is followed. The parable (Lk 15:4–6) is read as a parable of the historical Jesus (thus not in its Synoptic context). In this reading the economic and social registers that are presupposed in the parable are taken seriously, whilst social-scientific criticism is employed in trying to avoid the fallacies of anachronism and ethnocentrism. The conclusion reached is that the parable, in its 30 CE context, can be seen as one of Jesus' kingdom parables.

## History of interpretation

One of the earliest interpretations of the parable of the lost sheep<sup>1</sup> is the allegorical interpretation of Tertullian. According to Tertullian, the parable was directed at Pharisees and is proof of God's willingness to forgive; the lost sheep refers to the Jews with the intention to shame the Pharisees because they thought repentance was only necessary for the Gentiles (Kissinger 1979:4–5). Aquinas and Calvin, who tried to move away from the allegorical interpretation of the parables, by looking for one central theme in each parable, in a certain sense also interpreted the parable allegorically. Both focused on the shepherd as a metaphor for God: the shepherd typified the grace of God (Aquinas), and Calvin saw in the shepherd a God that rejoices over the repentance of one sinner (Kissinger 1979:40, 52).<sup>2</sup>

Modern scholars who read the parable in its Lukan context and who do not see it as the original context of the parable, identify in the parable a reference to God's grace and mercy (Capon 1989:31–39; Kähler 1995:131; Westermann 1990:135, 184), his love for the marginalised and the lost (Black 1942:275; Buzy 1982:101; Reid 2001:249), or God's joy when a sinner is found (Hendrickx 1983:149; Jones 1995:275; Trimp 1990:42), whilst those who see the shepherd as a metaphor for the activity of Jesus emphasise the evangelical intent of the parable (Wenham 1989:10, see also Bruce and Jones, resp. in Kissinger 1979:69, 156).<sup>3</sup>

1. This article takes as premise that the Lukan-version of the parable represents the Q-version (the so-called 'double tradition' in Matthew and Luke, not found in Mark), and therefore is most probably closest to the earliest layer of the historical Jesus-tradition. This section therefore focuses on the history of the interpretation of the Lukan-version of the parable.

2. Some interpretations in the early church understood the shepherd's going to find the sheep as a reference to Jesus' incarnation to recover lost humanity and the ninety-nine as angels. (Snodgrass 2008:103). Bengel went as far as to see the return of the shepherd as referring to Jesus' ascension (see Snodgrass 2008:103, 107).

3. Buttrick (2000:156) here is an exception to the rule. He sees the parable as a Lukan creation with partying as its focus, relating to Luke's special interest in the Lord's Supper.



Most interpreters see the setting of the parable in Luke as secondary, but argue that Luke's setting concurs with the original historical context in which Jesus told the parable. Interestingly all these scholars, without exception, see the main focus of the parable as God's joy when the lost (the sinner) is found (Bailey 1976:142; Boice 1983:49; Dodd 1961:230; Hultgren 2000:54; Kilgallen 2008:100–104; Linnemann 1980:66; Oveja 2007:211; Scott 1989:407; Schottroff 2006:152; Snodgrass 2008:93), with sub themes God's forgiveness (Hultgren 2000:59; Snodgrass 2008:93), God's compassion and love (Bailey 1976:142; Boice 1983:50; Snodgrass 2008:93), salvation (Hultgren 2000:54; Linnemann 1980:66), and the importance of repentance (Bailey 1976:142; Hultgren 2000:61; Kilgallen 2008:100–104; Schottroff 2006:152).<sup>4</sup>

Finally, those who see the Lukan version of the parable as going back to the earliest layer of the historical Jesus-tradition emphasise the apologetic character of the parable, namely a defense by Jesus of his associating with tax-collectors and sinners *vis-à-vis* the point of view of the Pharisees and the scribes; in the parable Jesus vindicated the good news against his opponents and declared God's character and his delight in forgiveness as the way he himself received sinners (see e.g. Derrett 1980:40; Donahue 1988:148; Hunter 1971:56; Jeremias 1972:40; Stein 1981:62). The themes identified by these scholars, however, are the same as those of the scholars described directly earlier: repentance (Perkins 1981:31), forgiveness (Jeremias 1972:40; Perkins 1981:31), God's grace, compassion and love for sinners (Drury 1985:140; Hunter 1971:19; Lambrecht 1992:43–44; Lockyer 1963:283; Perkins 1981:31; Stein 1981:52), the possibility of forgiveness and salvation (Hedrick 2000:49; Kistemaker 1980:173), the seeking of the lost (Stein 1981:52), and God's joy when the sinner is found (Boucher 1981:96; Groenewald 1973:174; Hunter 1971:56; Linnemann 1980:66).

The aforementioned history of interpretation of the parable shows that the interpretation of the parable has not changed since its earliest allegorical interpretations. When the shepherd is taken as a metaphor for God, almost all interpretations come to the same conclusion; the parable emphasised God's forgiveness, grace and mercy, love and compassion for the lost, and God's joy when a sinner is found. When the shepherd is seen as a metaphor for Jesus, the conclusions also do not differ substantially: the parable has as focus repentance and salvation. All these interpretations are 'theological-allegorical'. The moment the shepherd is seen as a metaphor for God or Jesus, the interpretation can go in no other direction. This is also the reason why themes such as 'forgiveness', 'repentance', 'sinners' and 'salvation' can be identified in the parable. A straightforward literal reading, however, shows that these themes are not present in the parable.

4. Snodgrass's (2008:93) interpretation of the parable can be seen as representative of almost all these interpretations. According to him, the parable deals with the themes of loss and recovery, the presence of the kingdom and the compassion of God. The parable reveals the character of God; the value he places on the least deserving, and depicts God as not being passive but the seeking God who takes initiative to bring people back. In the parable Jesus demonstrates the presence of the kingdom and that forgiveness is available to all.

The parable of the lost sheep is a story about a shepherd (not God or Jesus) and a sheep (not a sinner) that gets lost. A realistic and social-scientific reading of the parable, without taking the shepherd as a metaphoric reference to either God or Jesus, yields a different reading of the parable. If, on the other hand, the parable is detached from its Lukan context and a possible context in the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth is postulated, are different readings possible? What impact will attention given to pastoralism in first-century Palestine have on the parable's interpretation? Above all, if the shepherd is seen as a despised and unclean person (and not God or Jesus), where will the interpretation of the parable lead? These questions are deemed of utmost importance for the interpretation of the parable, and will be attended to in the following sections. But first, attention is given to the integrity and authenticity of the parable.

## Integrity and authenticity

Three versions of the parable are documented: Matthew 18:12–14, Luke 15:4–7 and Thomas 107:1–3. The version of the parable in Thomas 107<sup>5</sup> differs from the versions in the Synoptic tradition to such an extent that one can argue that it has moved away from the original. In Thomas 107:2 the sheep that gets lost is the 'largest' in the flock, and the one that the shepherd loves more than the ninety-nine which he left behind to go and look for the lost one (GThom 107:3). The 'motif of the largest' is also found in Thomas 8:2 and 96:2; a theme in Thomas, seen by some interpreters as the superior status of the Gnostic Christian in relation to the ordinary Christian, that prompted Thomas to change the parable. The version of the parable of the lost sheep in Thomas 107 can thus be dismissed as representing the earliest layer of the historical Jesus-tradition (Funk, Hoover & Jesus Seminar 1993:529; see also Snodgrass 2008:101).<sup>6</sup>

With regards to the Matthean- and Lukan-version of the parable, there is little in common (see Snodgrass 2008:99–100). The two versions differ to such an extent that many scholars assign them to Matthean *Sondergut* and Lukan *Sondergut* respectively (see e.g. Kistemaker 1980:171; Manson 1951:68; Streeter 1951:265) raising the question whether these two versions are related at all. In following Kloppenborg (1988:174–175, 2000:96) the view taken here is that both Synoptic-versions stem from the Q-version (see also Davies & Allison 1997:768; Buttrick 2000:155; Donahue 1988:147;

5. The version of the lost sheep in Thomas reads as follows: 'The [Fathers] empire is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One of them, the largest, went astray. He left the ninety-nine and looked for the one until he found it. After he had struggled, he said to the sheep: "I love you more than the ninety-nine"' (see Miller 2010:302). A reference to the parable is made in the Secret Book of James 16:15 (written in the first half of the second century), and in the Gospel of Truth 31–32 (written in the second half of the second century) where the parable is interpreted from a Gnostic point of view. In the Gospel of Truth the play on numbers is important. For the Gnostic the number hundred is perfect, and ninety-nine not. The shepherd thus has to go out and complete the perfect number. Also, the Gnostic reader would understand the 'left' and 'right' that is referred to in this version as references to the left and right of the demiurge God or throne of Jesus (see Perkins 1993:57). This Gnostic version of the parable is most probably derived from the Matthean-version (see Tuckett 1984:134).

6. Petersen (1981:128–147) argues for Thomas 107 as the earliest version of the parable and most probably earlier than the Q-version (see also Jeremias 1972:24; Patterson 1993:71). According to Petersen, Thomas 107 reflects a Jewish (not Gnostic) tradition in which God loves Israel more than the other nations. Quispel (1975:233), by pointing to Ezekiel 34:16, follows the same line of argument. See, however, Patterson (1993:71) who is of the opinion that Thomas contains no allegorisation.



Fitzmyer 1985:1073; Hedrick 2004:49; Hendrickx 1983:142; Hunter 1976:19; Jones 1995:273; Lambrecht 1983:37–42; 1992:44; Oveja 2007:205; Perkins 1981:29; Scott 1989:410).

The Matthean version of the parable has been redactionally edited by the evangelist. The parable is shaped to fit into Matthew 18, a chapter that served as a manual for the community (focusing on its leaders) of the evangelist.<sup>7</sup> Matthew 18 consists of six teachings: humility (one must become like a child [little one]; Mt 18:1–5); caring for the little ones (Mt 18:6–9); looking for the little ones that went astray and God's joy when the strayed are found (Mt 18:10–14); reconciliation (Mt 18:15–17); binding and losing (Mt 18:18–20); and forgiveness (Mt 18:21–35). The parable is fitted between the second and fourth teaching, running from Matthew 18:10–14, and forms a well-rounded inclusio.<sup>8</sup> The focus of the parable, to look for those in the community (the little ones) that went astray, has clearly been influenced by its context. The topic of 'the little ones', is a distinctive Matthean theme (see Mt 10:42, 18:6, 10, 14), and the question that introduces the parable, τί ὑμῖν δοκεῖ [What do you think?] (Mt 18:12), is typically Matthean (it does not occur in either Mark or Luke; see Mt 17:25; 21:28; 22:17, 42; 26:66; 27:17). Matthew's application of the parable (Mt 18:14) is a Matthean addition and linked to the content of the parable. Finally, Matthew's use of ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρη [on the hills] (Mt 18:12), instead of Luke's ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ [in open country or in the desert/wilderness] (Lk 15:4), also shows Matthew's redactional hand (most probably referring to Jr 50:6//LXX 27:6; see Hultgren 2000:55), and Matthew's use of ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν [I truly tell you] (Mt 18:13) is common to Matthew when compared with the other Synoptics.<sup>9</sup> Finally, Matthew rounds off his 'manual for the community' in Matthew 18 by adding the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:21–35), an exhortation to forgive the one that went astray (πλανηθῆ), a parable only found in Matthew.

The Lukan version of the parable (Lk 15:4–7) is the first of a triad of parables in Luke 15 that consists of the parable of the lost sheep (Lk 15:4–7), the lost coin (Lk 15:8–10) and the lost (prodigal) son (Lk 15:11–32). Typically Lukan, this chapter is carefully constructed. Luke 15:1–3 serves as introduction to all three parables, and is most probably secondary;<sup>10</sup> Luke 15:3 actually should read 'parables', not parable. The following formal aspects of the three parables bind them into a close and well-constructed unit: the terms 'sinner' or 'to sin' occur in the introduction and all three parables (Lk

7. When read from a pre-Paschal perspective, the parable is addressed to the disciples (the leaders). According to Jeremias (1972:42), the transmission of the materials of the gospels shows that a strong tendency was at work to transform parables which Jesus addressed at the crowd or his opponents into parables addressed at the disciples (see Jeremias 1972:42), a tradition that reached its conclusion in Thomas. This aspect of Matthew 18:12–14 also indicates its secondary nature.

8. For the structure of the inclusio in Matthew 18:10–14, see Snodgrass (2008:100).

9. In spite of this obvious redactional activity of Matthew (and its setting), there are some scholars that see the Matthean version as more original (see, e.g. Bultmann 1963:171, Drury 1985:140; Fitzmyer 1985:1074, Hedrick 2000:16, Linnemann 1980:67, Smith 1973:189 and Snodgrass 2008:103). Jeremias (1972:40), however, has argued convincingly that the context of the parable in Matthew is that of the early church, and thus secondary (see also Scott 1989:406).

10. Contra Jeremias (1972:100) who considers Luke 15:1–3 as reflecting the original historical situation in which Jesus told the three parables, and thus not secondary. See, however, Luke 5:29–32, in which Luke poses the exact same introduction to the narrative of the calling of Levi.

15:1–2, 7, 10, 18, 21), all three parables have the same scheme of lost-found-joy; in all three there is a play with the same words<sup>11</sup> and numbers (one in a hundred [Lk 15:4–7], one in ten [Lk 15:8–10] and one in two [Lk 15:11–32], indicating the parable of the prodigal as the climax of the unit), and all three parables are rounded off by the same theme (joy, see Lk 15:7, 10, 32). By creating an introduction to the three parables (Lk 15:1–3) and linking the three with respectively Luke 15:7, 10 and 32, Luke thus created a well-structured unit.

When the integrity of Luke 15:4–7 is considered in terms of the above described unit, it seems that Luke added Luke 15:7 to Luke 15:4–6 in line with Luke 15:10 and 32.<sup>12</sup> Luke 15:7 is most probably secondary and links the 'moral' of the parable with its introduction in Luke 15:1–3.<sup>13</sup> Luke 15:4–6 thus reflects the earliest form of the parable. Luke 15:4–6 represents the Q-version of the parable and most probably is the closest to the earliest layer of the historical Jesus-tradition (see also Bailey 1976:153; Hultgren 2000:49; Jeremias 1972:40; Miller 2010:161; Montefiore 1909:987; Scott 1989:406).<sup>14</sup> The introduction to the parable in Luke 15:4 (Τίς ἀνθρώπος ἐξ ὑμῶν ἔχων [Which man amongst you]) is widely attested in the Q-version (Q 11:11; 12:25; see Kloppenborg 2000:95–96), and several other parables in the Q-version start with a question (e.g. Q 12:42; 15:8). In Luke's Sondergut-parables the phrase Τίς ἐξ ὑμῶν [which of you] is commonly used (Lk 11:5; 14:28; 17:7; see however Lk 12:25), another indication that Luke's version stems most probably from the Q-version.

To summarise: Luke 15:4–6 is most probably the original form of the parable. The content of Luke 15:4–6 is not influenced by the context of Luke 15, as is the case with Matthew 18:12–14. Without its context, Luke 15:4–6 can stand on its own, and should be interpreted as such.

## Realism (verisimilitude)

The history of the interpretation of the parable shows that almost all interpreters ask questions relating to certain aspects of the parable. These questions relate to the reputation of shepherds, the size of the flock, ownership, the

11. See ἀπόλλυμι [lose] (Lk 15:4, 6, 8–9, 24, 32), εὐρίσκω [discover or find] (Lk 15:4–6, 8–9, 24, 32) and χάρα/χαίρω/συχαίω [gladness] (Lk 15:5–7, 9–10, 24, 32).

12. The use of λέγω ὑμῖν (I tell you) in Luke 15:7 is a common use in Luke to introduce the application of a parable (see also Lk 11:9; 15:7, 10; 16:9; 18:8; 14; 19:26). The use of οὕτως (so or in the same way) in Luke 15:7, as well as the theme of repentance, is also typically Lukan. Luke 15:4–7 also takes the form of a three-stanza poem with a chiasmic structure that shows Luke's redactional hand (see Bailey 1976:144–145). Luke 15:7 thus could be seen as a Lukan addition to the parable. Most scholars see Luke 15:7 as a secondary addition to the Q-parable used by Luke (see Bultmann 1963:171; Cadoux 1930:231; Dodd 1961:92; Fitzmyer 1985:1073; Funk *et al* 1993:355; Hedrick 2004:91; Linnemann 1980:68; Perrin 1967:99; Schottroff 1971:34; Smith 1973:191; Stein 1981:62) or his source (Donahue 1988:148; Hultgren 2000:60–61; Stein 1981:148). Lambrecht (1992:43–44) considers Luke 15:6–7 as secondary elements in Luke's version; the shepherd's coming home and rejoicing with friends and neighbors 'does not fit into the picture of a shepherd on the hills' (Lambrecht 1992:43). In a coming section it will be indicated that this understanding of Luke 15:6 lacks a realistic reading of the parable. Read from a realistic point of view (verisimilitude), Luke 15:6 is part of the parable that stems from the Q-version.

13. Luke has lost the conclusion in v. 7. The parable is interpreted as an allegory in which the lost sheep stands for sinners, whilst the ninety-nine, who do not stray, represent the virtuous Judeans. This, of course, reflects the pastoral interests of the new movement and accords with the concluding remarks Luke has provided elsewhere (compare 12:21; 14:33; 17:10) (Funk *et al*. 1993:355).

14. For a different construction of a possible Q-version of the parable, see Robinson, Hoffmann and Kloppenborg (2000:478–483).



value of one sheep, and whether the shepherd did or did not abandon the ninety-nine when he went to look for the one lost one. Kloppenborg & Callon (2010:4) correctly assert that most parable scholars routinely neglect 'the wealth of social and economic documentation available from documentary papyri and other sources from the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods' in trying to answer these questions:

A key problem in the interpretation of parables is the degree to which the elements in the story are simply part of what a first-century eastern Mediterranean audience would take for granted and what it would regard as hyperbolic, unusual, striking, or counterintuitive ...<sup>15</sup> The issues of what in the parable exhibits verisimilitude and what features are unusual *are of significant moment*, because interpreters normally fix upon either what they believe to be the parable's reflection of the typicalities of pastoralism in order to suggest an argument from analogy ... or they focus on what they suppose to be the unusual features of the story and build interpretation upon these. Hence, it is crucial to determine *what was normal and what was not*.

(Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:3, [author's own emphasis])

The following remark from Snodgrass (2008:105) serves as an example of the approach referred to by Kloppenborg and Callon:

Would a shepherd abandon the ninety-nine other sheep? *What relevance does a decision here have for understanding?* A number of commentators are sure the shepherd abandoned the ninety-nine sheep and interpret the parable accordingly as absurd as showing that God's mercy is a mystery or that the shepherd is irresponsible ... *This approach violates both cultural and literary sensitivities*. Care for one sheep does not preclude care for all the sheep, and certainly some provision would be made for the ninety-nine, to leave them either in some enclosure or more likely with another shepherd. A flock this size may have had more than one shepherd anyway ... Did the shepherd carry the lost sheep home and leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness? Should we think he took the lost sheep back to the ninety-nine? ... Parables are marked by focus and brevity and do not care about unnecessary issues. Like all literature they often have gaps. *This parable does not care about any of these questions, for it is focused on the certainty of searching and the celebration at finding*. Nothing else counts, and to make such issues matters of interpretation is catastrophic. Interpretation based on elements not there is almost certainly wrong.

(Snodgrass 2008:105, [author's own emphasis])

The fact of the matter is that a responsible interpretation of the parable of the lost sheep should care about these questions. These questions count. It is the brushing away of these 'unnecessary issues' (Snodgrass 2008:105) that 'violates both cultural and literary sensitivities' (Snodgrass 2008:105) that are part and parcel of the parable. If one wants to guard against an ethnocentric and anachronistic reading of the parable, attention has to be paid to the social and economic registers presupposed by the parable (Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:2). To this we now turn.

15. [T]he New Testament ... consists of documents written in what anthropologists call a "high context" society where the communicators presume a broadly shared acquaintance with and knowledge of the social context of matters referred to in conversation or writing. Accordingly, it is presumed in such societies that contemporary readers will be able to "fill in the gaps" and "read between the lines" (Elliott 1993:11; see also Hall 1994:79). The main problem for modern readers of the Bible therefore is '... that we do not know what we do not know'. The spare descriptions of context in the Bible often leave us without the essential ingredients for understanding the message' (Rohrbaugh 2006:567; own emphasis). To know what we do not know, attention has to be given to the social and economic registers presupposed by the parable (Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:2).

## Did shepherds own sheep?

Answers to this question differ somewhat amongst interpreters of the parable. Almost all interpreters see the shepherd as the owner of the flock (see e.g. Jeremias 1972:133<sup>16</sup>; Snodgrass 2008:102). Bailey (1976:148–150) and Wenham (1989:100) take a middle position: when the flock is small, the owner (or someone who is part of the extended family) cares for the flock, and when the flock belongs to several people who are part of an extended family (thus a larger flock), a shepherd is hired who is part of that extended family<sup>17</sup>. This is why, Bailey (1976:149) argues, a shepherd always feels responsible for every sheep that is part of the flock, since the loss of one sheep is a loss to the entire family clan. Mein (2007:497), on the other hand, opines that the shepherd normally did not own the flock. This is also the point of view of Schottroff (2006:152). Interestingly, no reasons are given for the above points of view on ownership, except in the case of Bailey: the fact that the shepherd is part of an extended family can be seen in the whole clan rejoicing when the lost sheep is found (Lk 15:6).

In contrast to the aforementioned 'received view', documented papyri and other sources indicate that it was common practise in pastoralism for owners to employ shepherds (hirelings, strangers) to take care of their sheep (Kloppenborg & Callon). *M. B. Qam.* 6.2,<sup>18</sup> for example, states that when an owner places his sheep 'with a (professional) shepherd, the latter substitutes him (as regards liability for damages)'. *P.Princ.* II 24 (Oxyrhynchus, 21 CE; see Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:6–7), a contract between an owner and a shepherd for tax purposes, states the relationship between the owner and shepherd even clearer: it contains the name of the owner and the shepherd, how many sheep and goats the shepherd is responsible for (109 sheep and 3 goats), to whom the newborn lambs will belong, where the sheep will graze, and who will pay the necessary taxes. It also takes it for granted that the shepherd will be transient (see Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:7).<sup>19</sup> Contra Bailey (1976:148–150) and Wenham (1989:100), even in the case of

16. Jeremias (1972:133) bases his point of view on his estimation that the owner was not a rich man, since a hundred sheep constituted a medium-sized flock (see section 'How big was a flock?').

17. This does not mean that the shepherd in this parable is a "hireling". The extended family owns the sheep. The shepherd is not a "hireling" nor a "stranger". He is a member of the extended family and naturally feels responsible for the entire family clan; any loss is a loss to all of them' (Bailey 1976:148).

18. 'If one drive his sheep into a sheep-cot and properly bolt the gate, but still they manage to come out and do damage, he is free. If he does not properly bolt the gate, he is liable. If they break out in the nighttime, or robbers break in the gate, and the sheep come out and cause damage, he is free. If the robbers lead them out, they are responsible for the damage. If one exposes his cattle to the sun, or he places them in the custody of a deaf-mute, a fool, or a minor, and they break away and do damage, he is liable; if, however, he places them with a (professional) shepherd, the latter substitutes him (as regards liability for damages). If the cattle fall into a garden and consume something, the value of the benefit they derive is to be paid. If, however, they enter the garden in the usual way, the value of the damage is paid. How is the value of the damage to be ascertained? It is appraised how much a measure of the land required for planting a saah was worth before and how much it is worth after' (m. B. Qam. 6.2; emphasis added).

19. Kloppenborg and Callon (2010:7) list several similar declarations by owners of flocks tended by a shepherd: *P.Berl. Moeller* 7 (8–9 CE); *P.Oxy.* LV 3779 (20 CE); *P.NYU inv.* 35 (20–21 CE); *P.Oxy.* LV 3778 (21 CE); *P.Oxy.* II 350 (24–25 CE); *P.Oxy.* II 245 (26 CE); *P.Oxy.* II 356 = *SB XVI* 12761 (27 CE); *P.Oxy.* II 353 (27–28 CE); *P.Ross. Georg.* II 13 (54–68 CE); *P.Oxy.* II 357–361 (77–90 CE); *P.IFAO I* 21 (54–68 CE); *P.Batav.* 8 (1 CE); and *P.Oxy.* XLVII 3338 (150 CE); for the number of sheep, goats and owners involved in these declarations, see Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:7). Also note that the flocks referred to in these papyri vary between 87 and 146 sheep, excluding goats that were almost always part of a flock.

small crops, owners made use of hired shepherds,<sup>20</sup> likely because owners had other more important duties to attend to, and identification with the role of a shepherd would have amounted to status degradation (Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:7–8). Although not the main focus of these declarations, it can thus be concluded that it was normal practice for a shepherd to be a hireling or stranger, someone who did not own the sheep.

### How big was a flock?

Again interpreters differ substantially in the answer to this question. Bailey (1976:148) estimates that an average family had 5 to 15 animals and a flock of 100 therefore was made up of the flocks of people belonging to the same extended family. Hultgren (2000:53), taking as base Bedouin flocks in the Middle East, also sees hundred as a large number. The number of sheep in the parable should rather be seen as a round number that paints a picture on a grand scale. Schottroff (2006:152), on the other hand (in following Jülicher 1910 and Derrett 1976:40) sees the number hundred as a small flock. Jeremias (1972:133, in following Dalman) takes a middle position: 100 sheep constituted ‘a medium-size flock’ (see also Scott 1989:412, who follows Jeremias on this point). Like Bailey, Jeremias bases his estimate on what is known from contemporary Bedouin flocks and also makes use of information available in Jewish law, Bedouin flocks vary from 20 to 200 head of small cattle, and in Jewish law 300 head is seen as an unusually large flock: ‘Hence, with 100 sheep the man possesses a medium-sized flock’ (Jeremias 1972:133).

By now it is clear, with the data Kloppenborg and Callon (2010) have put on the table, that a flock of hundred ‘is unexceptional as a flock to be put in the care of a single shepherd’ (Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:8).<sup>21</sup> It is, as Jeremias has argued, a medium-sized flock. Note, however, that the estimate of Kloppenborg and Callon is based on evidence that can be tested, and not based on anachronistic evidence.

### The reputation of shepherds

Shepherding indeed was a despised trade. Shepherds were associated with tax collectors and not to be used as witnesses (*b. Sanhedrin* 25b), were seen as robbers (because they drove their herds onto other people’s land; *m. Qidd.* 4.14; Derrett 1976:60; Hultgren 2008:58; Jeremias 1969:305; Scott 1989:413; Snodgrass 2008:102), and were seen as finding it difficult to repent and make restitution (*b. B. Qam.* 94b). Shepherds were rendered unclean (ἀμαρτωλοί [sinners]; Jeremias 1972:132) because they belonged to one of the proscribed trades (e.g. excise-men, tax-collectors, donkey-drivers, pedlars and tanners; Jeremias 1972:132) and were seen as dishonest (Jeremias 1972:132; see also Bailey 1976:147; Boucher 1981:98).

20. See *PiFAO III* 43 (20–21 CE); *P.Oxy.* II 245 (26 CE); *P.Oxy.* II 353 (27–28 CE); *P.Köln II* 86 (98–99 CE); *P.Phil.* 8 (136/7 CE); *SB XII* 10794 (21 CE); *P.Oxy.* II 245 (26 CE); *P.Oxy.* II 353 (27–28 CE); *P.Oxy.* II 351 = *SB XII* 10795 (28 CE); *P.Oxy.* II 355 = *SB XVI* 12763 (40–41 CE); and *P.Oxy.* I 74 (116 CE); see Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:7).

21. In terms of available papyriological evidence Kloppenborg and Callon (2010:9) estimate most flocks in first-century Palestine as consisting of between 25 and 150 animals that were tended by a single shepherd. They also list evidence from early Roman texts that boils down to the same numbers.

Clearly, being a herdsman was not a sought after trade (*m. Qidd.* 4.14; see also Scott 1989:413). As was the case with tax collecting, tending sheep was avoided by Jews (Donahue 1988:148).

Kloppenborg and Callon’s (2010:10–13) study on pastoralism in the Mediterranean add significant features to the perceived figure of the shepherd in first-century Palestine. The shepherd spent most of his time unsupervised, was transient (‘moving his flock over a large range of agriculturally marginal land’; Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:10) and was armed with a sling and club.<sup>22</sup> Because of this, ‘shepherds in antiquity were stigmatized figures, often associated with bandits and agitators’ (Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:11). As Grünwald has indicated, it was easy for shepherds to become involved in criminality because of the freedom of movement and the fact that they were armed (see Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:12).

In light of the aforementioned information, it is interesting that Derrett (1980:40) and Schottroff (2006:152) state that it is not important for the interpretation of the parable that shepherds had a bad reputation. Boucher (1981:96) goes as far as to state that, despite the fact that shepherds were regarded as dishonest, Jesus did not hesitate to use the figure of the shepherd as a positive symbol. Clearly, Jesus’ reference to a shepherd is a feature of the parable that is unusual and therefore ‘of significant moment’ (Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:3) in the interpretation of Luke 15:4–6. Contra Snodgrass (2008:2105), to use his own words, it does ‘have relevance ... for understanding’, and ignoring it can only lead to violating ‘both cultural and literary sensitivities’ that are part of the story. The interpretation of the parable indeed ‘care(s) about these questions’.

### Why look for one lost sheep? Wages and value

In the parable, when one sheep gets lost, the shepherd leaves (καταλείπει) the ninety-nine in the wilderness (ἐν τῇ ἐμῆρῳ) and goes to search for the lost one. Καταλείπει, the verb used by Luke, literally means ‘to leave behind’ (cf. Lk 5:28; 10:40; see also Scott 1989:415); the shepherd literally abandoned the ninety-nine.<sup>23</sup> Interpreters of the parable explain the καταλείπει-action of the shepherd quite differently. Some argue, firstly, that the shepherd in fact did not leave the ninety-nine alone: the shepherd either left them in an enclosure (Bishop 1962:47; Hendrickx 1983:147), had someone with him to take care of the sheep (Bailey 1976:149–150; Bishop 1962:45; Bussby 1963:95; Jeremias 1972:133; Levison 1926:152; Smith 1937:188; Wenham 1989:100); or one should simply assume that the ninety-nine were cared for (Kilgallen 2008:98; Schottroff 2006:152; Snodgrass 2008:105). Those who argue that the shepherd indeed abandoned the ninety-nine,

22. This description of shepherds concurs with the point of view of Malina and Rohrbaugh (1998:182, 2003:232): to meet the needs of shepherding, shepherds carried a sling, club and rod, and were usually ranked with ass drivers, tanners, sailors, butchers, and camel drivers (i.e. despised occupations). Shepherds were perceived as men with no honor (they were not home at night to protect their women), as well as being thieves, since they grazed their flocks on other’s property.

23. Καταλείπει, in certain cases, can also be translated as ‘leaving behind without help’ or ‘abandon’ (BAGD, 414).



also interpret this possibility differently. They either see this aspect of the parable as absurd (Buttrick 2004:154), see the action of the shepherd as irresponsible (Hedrick 2004:14) or foolish (Scott 1989:417), typify the shepherd as a symbol of risk-taking (Huffman 1978:211; Hultgren 2000:53–54; Perrin 1967:415), or give other reasons why he left the ninety-nine alone.<sup>24</sup>

Is this aspect of the parable important for its interpretation? Some do not think it is that important, whilst others answer this question in the affirmative. According to Hultgren (2000:54), the question regarding whether the shepherd left the ninety-nine alone or not is hypercritical. Snodgrass (2008:105) also deems this question as unnecessary: the 'parables are marked by focus and brevity and do not care about unnecessary issues'; whether the shepherd abandoned the ninety-nine is not important at all, especially because the parable 'focuses on the certainty of searching and the celebrating at finding' (Snodgrass 2008:105). This is also the point of view of Capon (1989:37): the leaving behind of the ninety-nine is not important because 'Jesus is parabolically thumping the tub for the saving paradox of lostness' (Capon 1989:37). Linnemann (1980:65), on the other hand, argues that the effectiveness of the parable would be lost if this feature was not introduced; the contrast between the one and ninety-nine would lose its significance if the shepherd did not abandon the ninety-nine.

A possible approach to this aspect of the parable is the question put by Hedrick (2004:50): what would justify this risk? If the shepherd did abandon the sheep, which is accepted here as what he did, for what reason did he do it? Interestingly, parable scholars who did reflect on this question are almost unanimous in their verdict: it is not because of the value of the sheep. Jeremias (1972:134), for example, states that it was not the high value of the sheep that caused the shepherd to set out on his search, but simply the fact that it belonged to him, and without his help it could not find its way back to the flock. Boucher (1981:98) argues in the same vein: the shepherd does not go and look for the sheep because it is of great value, but simply because it has gone astray and cannot find its way back by itself. Scott (1989:407) concurs: the sheep has little intrinsic value; its value is in being found, in the joy of its recovery.

Schottroff (2006:152), on the other hand, argues that one sheep out of a hundred represents something valuable for the person affected; a shepherd, and perhaps his family as well, depend on the sheep to live. When the recent study of Kloppenborg and Callon (2010) is taken into consideration, Schottroff has struck the correct key. In their realistic reading of the parable Kloppenborg and Callon (2010:13–16) indicate that the wages typically paid to shepherds were meager, and that the intrinsic value of a sheep, relative to a shepherd's wage, was high. Due to the fact that the shepherd's work was

24. Others reasons give are the following: the shepherd's action shows that God's mercy is a mystery (Agnew 1989:38); one could be so lucky to find the others still there on one's return (Perkins 1981:31); the shepherd had to do it because it was his duty (Groenewald 1973:173); and if the ninety-nine got lost it will be no problem since the Good Shepherd will find them also (Capon 1989:37).

physically demanding, the average wage of a shepherd 'was pitifully small' (Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:14). *Rust.* 2.10.3 and *P.Lond.* III 1171 (in Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:14–15) indicate that the wage of a shepherd was more or less 16 drachmae per month – thus less than a farm laborer, sewage cleaner, water carrier or mule driver and half the wage of a carpenter, stone mason or baker.<sup>25</sup>

When the wage of a shepherd is compared with the intrinsic value of one sheep, the reason why the shepherd went to look for the lost sheep becomes even clearer. *SB XX 14525* (in Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:14–15) indicates that the price of a male sheep was not less than ten *drachma* and that of a female sheep close to double the amount. In the case of the leasing of a flock, the numbers were more or less the same (11 *drachmae* for a male; see *P.Amst.* I 41, in Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:15). Since a shepherd was held accountable for livestock losses (see e.g. *P.Amst.* I 41.8, in Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:15), it means that the loss of a male was close to one month's wage, and the loss of a female more than the wage of one month:

Thus, the motivation to recover one lost sheep becomes exceedingly clear: the replacement cost of a male would be about one month's wages, the loss of a female would likely amount to more than a month's wages, and if the herd were leased, the loss of an animal would not only represent a replacement cost but it would also reduce the income from the flock with which the lessee paid the rental costs.

(Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:15–16)

Thus, what justified the risk the shepherd took? Clearly it was economic survival, survival that led to 'irresponsible' and 'risky' behavior. This then, also explains the shepherd's celebration with friends and neighbors in Luke 15:6 (see the following section).

## A social-scientific and realistic interpretation of Luke 15:4–6

### Presuppositions

Almost all interpreters of the parable take as point of departure the shepherd imagery of the Old Testament as an interpretative key to unlock its meaning. In using texts such as Genesis 48:15 and 49:24, Psalms 23, 77:20, 80:1 and 119:176, Isaiah 40:10, 53:6 and 60:4, Jeremiah 23:1–4 and 50:6, Zechariah 11:4–17, and especially Ezekiel 34, it is argued that these texts provided the imagery for the parable: God or Jesus is the good shepherd who tends his sheep, and the lost sheep is the 'sinner' (see e.g. Bailey 1976:147; Buttrick 2000:153; Donahue 1988:148; Hendrickx 1983:146–147; Hultgren 2000:52–53; Perkins 1981:32; Snodgrass 2008:105; Wenham 1989:99).<sup>26</sup> Lambrecht (1983:45) goes as far to

25. That shepherds engaged in theft is thus hardly surprising. Wages, no supervision, mobility and the carrying of weapons afforded them the means and opportunity for theft and the temptation for other forms of criminality (see Kloppenborg & Callon 2010:13–14).

26. See, for example Hendrickx (1983:146): 'The image solely and unambiguously refers to God who requires his lost sheep ... to be searched for and looked after.' The following remark of Snodgrass (2008:105, 107) is also worth noting since it represents scholarly consensus with regard to the interpretative key of the parable: '[A]t the very least the parable has been framed on the OT shepherd tradition .... At least with respect to Luke, the analogy of the shepherd refers to both the character of God and the activity of Jesus'.



state that ‘without this ... Christological dimension every explanation of the parable is superficial’.

Does the parable fit this tradition? It is simply not possible when the image of the shepherd in first-century Palestine is taken into consideration (see The reputation of shepherds): As put by Malina and Rohrbaugh (1998:179): ‘These old traditions account for a certain idyllic quaintness in the use of the metaphor that does not square with the real view of shepherds in Jesus’ day’. In the history of the interpretation of the parable, it is only Scott (1989:405), and, in a marginal sense Buttrick (2000:154), who identified this anachronistic reading of the parable. According to Buttrick (2000:154) the parable draws on traditional biblical imagery, but that the social position of shepherds may have skewed the parable a bit. It is argued here that the parable in no way whatsoever draws on the shepherd imagery of the Old Testament. The reason for this adamant position is the simple fact that by the time of Jesus, Palestine was an advanced agrarian society consisting of large estates and smallholdings. Scott (1989:405) correctly indicates that in the Old Testament Israel was nomadic, a situation in which shepherds were positively perceived. There was little or no ‘property’ onto which shepherds could drive their herd and it was not necessary to drive a flock over a large range of agriculturally marginal land to feed the flock. In first-century Palestine, as an advanced agrarian society, a ‘primarily agricultural and urban economy’ (Scott 1989:413), shepherds sometimes had to drive a flock over other’s property and had to look for pastures in agriculturally marginal land. Did this happen in the time of Jesus? The well attested despised image of the shepherd confirms this fact.<sup>27</sup> If one assumes, like Schottroff (2006:152), anachronistically that the milieu described in the parable is that of nomadic conditions, it is understandable that she can also state that the reputation of the shepherd is not important for the interpretation of the parable. If one, however, takes the first-century Palestinian social and economic registers presupposed by the parable seriously, shepherd imagery as found in the Old Testament cannot be used as interpretative key to interpret the parable. Rather, when Jesus started to tell the parable, his listeners would have been shocked, for herdsmen, as Samaritans (Lk 10:30–35), are not supposed to be the heroes of any story.

This presupposition leads to another. If one does see the shepherd imagery in the Old Testament as the blueprint for the parable, it would be difficult to equate a responsible and caring God or Jesus with an irresponsible despised person. It needs quite a bit of maneuvering to overcome this obvious obstacle when one perceives the characters used by Jesus in his parables as analogies to God or Jesus. To equate God or Jesus with a despised shepherd, and for that matter, God with a commoner that is woken up in the middle of the night who can be badgered into submission (Lk 11:5–8; see Van

Eck 2011) inevitably leads to a ‘moral dilemma’. The fact of the matter is that, in spite of the general tendency amongst parable scholars to identify the actors or characters in the parables with God or Jesus, the characters in Jesus’ parables are not analogies for God or Jesus (or sinners in the case of Lk 15:4–5; see Van Eck 2009a:318). Jesus’ parables are not stories of God; they are stories about God’s kingdom (Funk 2007:90). Or, in the words of Herzog: ‘[T]he parables were not earthly stories with heavenly meanings, but earthly stories with heavy meanings’ (Herzog 1994:3). The characters in the parables do not point to God. The parables point to the kingdom of God. Put differently: ‘[T]here is something about the parable as a whole that is like the kingdom of God’ (McGaughy 2007:11). The parable of the lost sheep, therefore, is not a story about God, Jesus and sinners, but a story about a despised shepherd and a lost sheep, a story that points to the kingdom of God. This sentence should be read literally.

The final presupposition that will serve as one of the lenses through which the parable will be read is the conclusion reached in the section ‘Realism’. In terms of verisimilitude, the social and economic registers presupposed by the parable are that a flock of hundred sheep was a medium-sized flock that most probably belonged to more than one owner; the shepherd contracted to care for the flock was most likely not its owner; shepherding was a despised trade, and shepherds were rendered unclean and seen as robbers, criminals and thieves; shepherds were also unsupervised, transient and armed, often associated with bandits and agitators; wages paid to shepherds were poor, and the intrinsic value of a sheep, relative to a shepherd’s wage, was high.

### Reading the parable

First-century Palestine, the world in which Jesus told his parables, was an advanced agrarian society<sup>28</sup> under the control of the Roman Empire and centered in the temple in Jerusalem (indirect rule), the kingdom of Rome and the kingdom of the temple. Advanced agrarian societies were divided into the *haves* (rulers) and the *have-nots* (the ruled): the ruling class (elite) comprised of only 2% of the population and controlled most of the wealth (up to 65%) by controlling and exploiting the land and sea, its produce and its cultivators (the peasantry and fishermen) whose labor created the produce. The elite had contempt for manual labor (see Sirach 38:25–34; Cicero, *Duties* 1.150), and as a result exploited cheap labor with slaves and tenant farmers. Local, regional and imperial elites imposed tributes, taxes and rents, extracting wealth from non-elites by taxing the production, distribution and consumption of goods. The priestly aristocracy in Judaea were no different – to keep their base of power (the temple system) intact they added to the Roman tribute their own tithes, offerings, and contributions during festivals. All this left the peasantry ‘on the edge of destitution, and often over the edge’ (Borg 2006:227). People lived from hand to mouth and had no provisions beyond what was needed for the day (Schottroff 2006:189), living extremely marginalised

27. See, for example, *m. Qidd.* 4.14 and *m. B. Qam.* 10.9 respectively: ‘A man should not teach his son to be an ass-driver or a camel-driver, or barber or a sailor, or a herdsmen or a shopkeeper, for their craft is the craft of robbers’, and ‘None may buy wool or milk from herdsmen, or wood or fruit from them that watch over fruit-trees’.

28. For a short summary of the salient attributes of an advanced agrarian society, see Hanson and Oakman (1998:14).

lives. Not everybody could make ends meet.<sup>29</sup> This was the kingdom of Rome and the kingdom of the temple.

Against this background, Jesus tells a story of a different kingdom, a kingdom in which everyone has enough. It is a story about a shepherd and a flock. The flock is medium-sized and the shepherd does not own the flock; he is a hireling. As a normalcy, a contract between the owner(s) of the flock and the shepherd would have been in place, stating the number of sheep (and goats?) the shepherd is responsible for, to whom the lambs to be born will belong, who will pay the necessary taxes and what the shepherd will be paid. Because the sheep had to be kept away from planted crops, it will also state where the sheep will graze. The shepherd will therefore be nomadic and away from home for a lengthy time, as predetermined by the contract. He will graze the flock in the wilderness (ἐν τῇ ἐρήρῳ), most probably far from where he makes his home (contra Schottroff 2006:152).

Using a shepherd in a story about the kingdom of God would have shocked those who listened to the parable. In the first-century Mediterranean world where the pivotal social value was honor (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:369), a shepherd was someone without any honor. In the eyes of the listeners he was someone without any shame. Several obvious reasons lead to this estimation. First of all, an honorable person was expected to protect the women in his family. Obviously, being nomadic and away from home, the shepherd was not able to do so. Consequently he had no shame, and therefore no proper concern about his honor (in other words, the 'sensitivity to one's own reputation [honor] or the reputation of one's family'; Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:371). A second reason was the peasantry's perception of limited good (Malina & Pilch 2008:217), a perception reinforced by the level of subsistence they were experiencing. This perception of limited good, according to Foster (1967:304), consisted of the peasant's perception that all of the desired things in life such as land and wealth always existed in limited quantities and were always in short supply. Because of this, peasants believed that when persons improved themselves it was always at the expense of others. An honorable man, therefore, would only be interested in what was rightfully his, any kind of acquisition, like grazing a flock on somebody else's property, was seen as stealing (Malina & Pilch 2008:217). This is why herdsmen were seen as thieves; they drove the herds they tended to onto other people's land. Finally, shepherds were rendered unclean because they belonged to one of the proscribed trades. Therefore, hearing of a shepherd that is part of a parable pointing to the kingdom of God was indeed shocking.

If herding sheep, like tax collecting, was avoided by Jews, why was this man a shepherd? Why intentionally choose a

<sup>29</sup>Peasants who owned and farmed land had economic obligations that severely limited their prospects for moving above the level of subsistence. Obligations were internal and external. Internal obligations were made up of produce for subsistence, seed for planting the next crop, feed for livestock, and the reservation of some produce to use as trade (for acquiring equipment, utensils, or food the family did not produce). External obligations consisted of social or religious dues (e.g. participation in weddings or local festivals), tithes and taxes. With regard to the latter, peasants in Roman Palestine paid taxes of 35% to 40%; and, with all the other obligations factored in, a peasant family most probably only had as much as 20% of their annual produce available for subsistence (see Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:390–391; Oakman 2008:148–149).

trade that will stigmatise a person? Most probably because it was one of the few options left that would have enabled him to support his family. Maybe he was, like Lazarus who ended up at the front gate of the rich (see Lk 16:19–26), the second or third son of a peasant farmer that only had enough land for the eldest son to inherit; maybe he had to leave the family plot and seek work elsewhere because there were too many mouths to feed in his household, or that they could hardly make ends meet; or maybe his father lost his land because of rising indebtedness and eventual foreclosure on his mortgage by one of the exploiting urban elite (Herzog 1994:119; see also Van Eck 2009b:353). He may even have been a smallholder of inherited land who has lost his land for the same reasons.

Since the elite had contempt for manual labor and exploited cheap labor, there must have been ample opportunities for the man to become a herdsman. The wage, obviously, was not that good. As Kloppenborg and Callon (2010) have indicated, the wage of a shepherd was more or less 16 drachmae per month, or 192 drachmae per year. If one takes into consideration that the standard remuneration in the time of Jesus was one denarius for a day's work (Oakman 2008:43), and that the Greek drachma roughly equaled the value of the Roman denarius (Oakman 2008:44), it means that a shepherd earned more or less just over half (16 denarii) of the normal wage for a month. Could this possibly be enough to sustain a family of four adults for a month? According to Oakman (2008:43–44), the buying power of a denarius gives us a good indication how far this income could be stretched. Two denarii represented around three weeks' worth of food for one person, and in terms of a family of four '[t]wo denarii would stretch a week to a week and a half for a family; one denarius would supply 3–6 days for a family' (Oakman 2008:44). A year's supply of food for a family of four thus required between 60 and 122 denarii. If the shepherd worked for a full year (which was unlikely), it means that he and his family had more than enough for food (192 denarii). However, this was only for food. If other needs like clothes, taxation and religious dues are also taken into consideration, 250 denarii per annum (20 denarii per month) was a poverty-level income (see MacMullan, in Oakman 2008:44). Hence, the wage of the shepherd of 16 drachmae per month was well below the poverty level income.

So, when one sheep got lost, the shepherd had no other option than to go and look for it. Remember that a shepherd was held accountable for livestock losses and that the intrinsic value of one male sheep was not less than ten drachmae, and that of a female close to double the amount. Leaving the lost sheep by itself would have meant, in the case of a male, close to one month's wages, and the loss of a female more than the wages of one month. Also remember that the wage of the shepherd was already below the poverty level. The shepherd's duties, undoubtedly, carried several risks. Was it risky to leave the ninety-nine behind? It was. Was it irresponsible? It was. But there was no other option. He and his family already lived below the poverty level. He was in dire straits. He was already seen as a despised person who



was rendered unclean; a situation the kingdom of Rome and the kingdom of the temple forced him into. In a certain sense, there was nothing left to lose, nothing except the well-being of his family. That was all that was left and that alone made it worth his while.

Therefore, when he found the lost sheep, he rejoiced (Lk 15:5). But the real celebration had to wait for later. After finishing his contract with the owner(s), he drove the flock back, and after accounting for all the sheep he had to tend to, and receiving the contracted wages, he returned home, and then the celebration started (Lk 15:6).<sup>30</sup> At least his hard labor was enough to support his family, proving that risks sometimes do pay off.

What does this parable say about the kingdom? First of all, the kingdom of God is also for those who are rendered unclean by the kingdom of the temple. In fact, the kingdom of God in itself is 'unclean', as depicted in the parable of the leaven (Q 13:20–21 [Mt 13:33/Lk 13:20–21]/Thomas 96). In the time of Jesus, as indicated by Scott (2007:95–119), leaven was a symbol for moral evil, corruption, and the unclean; unleavened was not the proper symbol for the kingdom (see Ex 12:19; Gl 5:9; 1 Cor 5:7; Mk 8:15 and par), just as a shepherd. The kingdom, however, is also for shepherds and women. After all, it is by a women's doing that the kingdom of God is identified with the unclean and the impure. And as the parables of the despised and unclean Samaritan (Lk 10:30–35), the father who welcomes back an unclean prodigal (Lk 15:11–31) and the elite secular king who fills up his banquet with the unclean (Q 14:16–23 [Mt 22:1–13/Lk 14:16–23]/Thomas 64) show, it is in the action of Samaritans, non-patriarchal fathers and secular elite kings, and shepherds, that the kingdom becomes visible. The kingdom of God is therefore not like the kingdom of Rome or the temple.

The parable also teaches that the kingdom becomes visible in the unexpected. As in the parables of the elite vineyard owner (patron) who pays all his hirelings the same wage in spite of them working different hours (Mt 20:1–15), a Samaritan who stops to help someone with a different ethnicity (Lk 10:30–35) and a father that throws a party for a prodigal that should be excommunicated, all unexpected behavior, the shepherd acts unexpectedly. There were other ways for him to cut his losses. Armed with a sling and club, and unsupervised with freedom of movement, banditry was a logic option. But then the unexpected happens: the shepherd takes the risk to go and look for the one that is lost. This then also shows that the kingdom is achieved by non-violence. Just as the owner of a vineyard is the one with honor by not answering violence with violence (Mk 12:1–12 and Thomas 65; see Van Eck 2007:909–936), the shepherd becomes a symbol of the kingdom by refraining from violence to solve his problem.

30. According to Snodgrass (2008:102) this aspect of the parable is not realistic. Linnemann (1980:68), who understands Luke 15:6 in the sense that the shepherd returns home directly after finding the lost sheep, thus leaving the ninety-nine in the wilderness, also sees this aspect of the parable as unrealistic (see also Hedrick 2004:14). Bailey (1976:150), on the other hand, sees this aspect of the parable as realistic; only the celebration takes place that same evening, since the shepherd returned home every evening. Clearly these interpretations lack a realistic reading of the parable.

Penultimately, the kingdom is also present there where everybody has enough. The kingdom becomes visible when a patron hires everybody that waits at the marketplace to be hired to feed their families, and pays everybody one denarius, enough food for three to six days (Mt 20:1–15; just as the kingdom becomes visible in a shepherd that risks everything in order for his family to have enough).

Finally, being part of the kingdom is risky some would even say irresponsible. Telling stories like the above that cut against the social and religious grain of the day; stories that challenge the 'normalcies' of society; stories that are in direct opposition to the way 'we do things here'; stories that shock and question the status quo, power and privilege; and stories that characteristically call for a reversal of roles and frustrate common expectations (see Laughlin 2000:91; Hoover 2001:92, 94; Beutner 2007:2; Scott 2007:15–16, 118), is risky. Some people would say that telling stories of a different world, of the way things ought to be, of 'life as ruled by God's generosity and goodness' (Hoover 2001:92); stories that re-envision the actual world in wholly unaccustomed ways (Scott 2007:15–16), and offer its listeners an alternative world to the world created by aristocratic society (Rome), privilege and power, tradition and custom, religious authorities, temple ritual and sacred texts (Hoover 2001:98; Borg 2006:167), is irresponsible. One can, after all, end up on a cross.'

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