

INTERPRETATION OF LUKE 15

by

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The fifteenth chapter of Luke consists of three similar parables prefaced by a common historical introduction. It is the goal of this study to interpret the three parables by comparing them with each other on the foundation of the historical introduction.

It is necessary for the interpreter to have some understanding of parabolic literature; therefore, a brief survey of this issue is presented in chapter two. Additionally the integrity of the text is defended, because the unity of the chapter is essential to the thesis. Luke 15 is then considered within its historical and canonical setting in order that the interpreter might understand the theological perspective of the passage.

The greater part of the study is concerned directly with the interpretation of the chapter. The writer proposes that the parables have in common a structure of eight parts. He proceeds to identify the specific elements within the parables. This structure is then used as an interpretive model on the three parables. The writer develops his interpretation by noting both the similarities and dis-similarities of the parables.

The final chapter brings the three parables together and gives their significance in their historical situation.

It is the conclusion of this writer that all three parables were spoken to the nation of Israel as a whole. He understands the lost elements in each parable to be analagous to the "publicans and sinners," and the elements not lost as the remainder of Israel (represented especially by the "Scribes and Pharisees"). Furthermore, he interprets the "woman" of the second paragraph as having reference to the various groups within Israel as a collective unit.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CGT	Cambridge Greek Testament
EGT	Expositor's Greek Testament
ICC	International Critical Commentary
NBC	New Bible Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIDNTT	New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
WBC	Wycliffe Bible Commentary
ZPBE	Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Need for the Study

If "in these last days God has spoken to us by his Son," (Hebrews 1:1) it is imperative that believers know and understand what his Son said. In spite of the necessity of gaining this understanding, there is a great deal of confusion over these words which the Son did speak. This study is presented in light of that confusion.

The confusion arises primarily from two utterly diverse directions. The first source of confusion, as might be expected, is that scholarship, so-called, which in its anti-supernaturalistic bias tells the reader of the gospels that it is virtually impossible to know for sure which words Jesus spoke. The second source of confusion is found among those who truly believe in all of the Bible, yet they fail to grasp the significance of Jesus' words and their proper application because they fail hermeneutically to understand the meaning of Christ's words.

This confusion is especially apparent in the various interpretations of the parables of Christ. The three parables of Luke 15 are certainly not exempt from this bewildering array of interpretations. The student will

discover that the woman who loses the coin (Luke 15:8-10) has been interpreted by generally conservative scholars as being either the Holy Spirit¹ or the Church² to name but two of the prospective candidates. Liberal scholarship has even less unity. Witness the amazing interpretations of the "Prodigal Son" presented in Semeia 9.³

Therefore, there is a need to clear the air with respect to the interpretation of the words of the Lord. This is certainly true of the parables such as those found in Luke 15.

Purpose of this Study

This study seeks to ascertain the meaning of the three parables in Luke 15 to the original hearers and without violating that meaning to develop the significance of those parables to believers today.

Scope of this Study

This study will include an analysis of the first two parables (Luke 15:1-10) in their entirety and of the corresponding material of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). Background passages of the Old Testament will be examined

¹Henry Alford, "The Four Gospels," in vol. 1 of Greek Testament, rev. by Everett F. Harrison, 4 vols. (reprint ed., Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), p. 590.

²Alfred Plummer, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke, in International Critical Commentaries (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1901), p. 370.

³Semeia 9 (1977), p. 1-147.

at the appropriate junctures. The emphasis will be upon the hermeneutical method by which the results of the analysis are interpreted. The preliminary considerations will deal with those problems which could render this study unfeasible.

Approach to this Study

Luke 15 will be considered as a literary unit--an intact body of Jesus' teaching on a subject (see the Preliminary Considerations) which He carefully constructed. After objections to this position are answered and certain ground rules are laid (again in the Preliminary Considerations) the study will proceed in an analysis of the parables. Each parable will be broken down to its constituent elements and the corresponding elements will be diligently compared as to their vocabulary and grammar. On the basis of those comparisons this study will show how both the harmonious and the discordant factors within those corresponding elements affect the interpretive thrust of each parable. The three parables will in effect interpret each other.

CHAPTER II

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Presuppositions

These positions will be assumed as true and no attempt will be made to prove or defend them: 1) Inerrancy, and 2) Dispensationalism.

Parabolic Interpretation

The field of parabolic interpretation is both complex and immense. The first 230 pages of Kissinger's Parables of Jesus¹ give a broad, if incomplete, view of both the history and current state of interpretation. It is true that few are presently allegorizing to the extent that some of the Church Fathers did, but if anything there is an even greater variety of proposed interpretations today.

It is not within the purview of this paper to interact with all historical or current theories of parabolic interpretation. Therefore, the writer will seek to lay down some basic concepts upon which this study will be

¹Warren S. Kissinger, The Parables of Jesus, The American Theological Library Association Bibliography Series, number 4 (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1979), pp. 1-230.

built. This writer finds A. M. Hunter's definition of a parable to be a good starting point.

In germ then a parable is a figurative saying: sometimes a simile ('Be wise as serpents'), sometimes a metaphor ('Beware the leaven of the Pharisees'). What we call parables are simply expansions of these.¹

Hunter continues by illustrating his definition in a way particularly appropriate to this current study.

'All we like sheep have gone astray' is a simile. Expand it into a picture and you get a similitude like the Lost Sheep. Expand it into a story by using past tenses and circumstantial details and you get a story-parable like the Prodigal Son.²

Other interpreters have proposed numerous possible classification systems for the parables, but the similitude and the story-parable are the two types found in Luke 15.³

For most of the church's history the primary interpretive system applied to the parables has been that of allegory. (This includes the work of Trench.⁴) The movement in parabolic interpretation has been away from allegory.⁵ In spite of this, some allegory is recognized in the parables.⁶ Hunter defines an allegory as a story in

¹Archibald M. Hunter, Interpreting the Parables (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 9.

²Ibid., p. 10.

³A. Berkley Mickleson, Interpreting the Bible (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), p. 212.

⁴Richard C. Trench, Notes on the Parables of Our Lord (Westwood: Revell, 1953 Reprint).

⁵Kissinger, Parables, p. XIII.

⁶Hunter, Interpreting, p. 38.

which each detail has a counterpart in meaning while in contrast a parable would have one central point.¹

Mickleson shows seven differences between the parable and the allegory of which the four most important are: (1) formal comparison versus direct comparison; (2) words used literally versus words used figuratively; (3) one chief point of comparison versus a plurality of points of comparison; and (4) imagery kept distinct from the thing signified versus imagery identified with the specific thing signified.² It should be noted that Mickleson softened Hunter's "every detail" to a "plurality of points of interpretation." Even so the tension of interpretation is between the "one" and the "plurality." Virkler asks "How much is significant?"³ before he notes that "there have been scholars on both sides of the question throughout history."⁴ Two recent evangelical works seem to put the issue in proper perspective as they advocate a limited but vital role for the lesser aspects of the parables. In Hermeneutics, Virkler analyzes Jesus' interpretation of the

¹Ibid., p. 10.

²Mickleson, Interpreting the Bible, pp. 213-230.

³Henry A. Virkler, Hermeneutics (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 171.

⁴Ibid.

parables and he finds Christ's interpretation "to be midway between the extremes . . . both a central, focal idea, and a significant emphasis on details as they relate to that focal idea."¹ Kistemaker in The Parables of Jesus seems to be of the same mind when he writes, "The details of a story are supportive of the message the parable conveys."² Furthermore, the details of grammar as well as of content are important. Again Kistemaker is helpful. "The moods and tenses which the evangelist has employed in relating a parable are most significant, and they shed light on the main teaching of the story."³ The general position of this paper concerning the significance of details in the parables of Luke 15 will be to follow the lead of Virkler and Kistemaker.

An overlooked aspect of parabolic interpretation is that of "Dispensational Distinctives." Although the Old Testament background of the parables is well-documented as is their thoroughly Jewish flavor,⁴ yet many interpreters are guilty of placing them in a church situation.⁵ In spite of the fact that Christ was addressing the Jewish

¹Ibid., pp. 171-172.

²Simon J. Kistemaker, The Parables of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), p. XV.

³Ibid., p. XXIV.

⁴W. O. E. Oesterly, The Gospel Parables in the Light of Their Jewish Background (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1936).

⁵E.g. Plummer, Luke, p. 370.

nation through much of his ministry, interpreters sometimes omit the necessary hermeneutical step of examining the parables in the light of their meaning to those Jews who were listening before applying them to the twentieth century.

This study seeks to examine the parables of Luke 15 with particular regard to their Jewish setting in the Old Testament economy and an evaluation of the details of the parables as they contribute to the understanding of the meaning of the chapter.

Unity of Luke 15

There are four questions which need to be answered in turn if the unity of Luke 15 is to be maintained. The first question concerns the origin of the Parable of the Lost Sheep. For those who hold to the inerrancy of Scripture the occasion of the parable of lost sheep in both Matthew and Luke presents no real problem. This is true even though the setting and application of the parable is different in each gospel. Those who hold to inerrancy today would be of the same opinion as John A. Broadas that Jesus simply used the same parabolic construction at a later date.¹ It is unfortunately true that even some commentators who consider themselves conservative now view

¹John A. Broadus, A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, in the American Commentary on the New Testament, edited by Alvah Hovey (Valley Forge Judson Press, 1886), p. 386.

this parable as being spoken only once and then re-interpreted by one of the evangelists.¹

In spite of this trend it would be absurd to limit the number of times Christ could have used the simile of the Good Shepherd.² Both Marshall³ and Kistemaker⁴ uphold the plausibility that Jesus spoke this parable twice each time in a different setting. This plausibility is enhanced by the content of the parable. A lost sheep would have been a familiar incident,⁵ an incident out of the everyday life of the hearers.⁶ Oesterly sums up the position of this writer well.

The question is often asked as to which of the two evangelists was indebted to the other here, or as to which was the original purpose and form of the parable, both questions are, we think, beside the point. It is simply that we have here another instance of a parabolic theme being used for more than one purpose.⁷

This writer concurs with the above argument and accepts the independent origin of the two parables of the lost sheep.

¹Robert H. Gundry, Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981).

²Plummer, Luke, p. 368.

³I. Howard Marshall, The Gospel of Luke, in the New International Greek Testament Commentary, edited by I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), p. 600.

⁴Kistemaker, Parables, p. 207.

⁵Oesterly, Jewish Background, p. 173.

⁶Illustrated Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Parable" by R. V. G. Tasker and I. H. Marshall.

⁷Oesterly, Jewish Background, p. 177.

The second question concerns the relationship of the parable of the Lost Sheep and the parable of the lost coin. The majority of interpreters of both liberal and conservative persuasion regard these two parables as belonging together. T. W. Manson has written the following,

The first two parables of chap. 15 form a pair. Doubtless Luke found them together in his source and most probably they stand together in the tradition because they were so given by Jesus in the first instance.¹

Marshall appeals to the structure of the parables in coming to a similar conclusion. "The construction of the parable of the lost coin is almost identical with that of the lost sheep, and it is likely that the two parables originally formed a pair in the teaching of Jesus."²

Marshall then proceeds to attack those who insist on a divergent origin for the two parables.

The hypothesis that one parable has been formed by the tradition (Bultmann, 185; Klostermann, 155) or even by Luke himself (Conzelmann, 103; Drury, 155f.) on the pattern of the other rests on the unlikely assumption that Jesus could never have repeated himself, and on the postulate that two similar parables would not have been separated by an application attached to the first of them (Bultmann).³

This writer holds that these two parables were spoken on the same occasion as a unit. This is accepted by

¹Thomas Walter Manson, The Sayings of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975 Reprint), p. 283.

²Marshall, Luke, p. 602.

³Ibid., pp. 602-603.

virtually all commentators who are not prejudiced by the presuppositions described by Marshall.¹

The third question concerns the integrity of Luke 15:11-32. Again this is an issue which is not of relevance to most Christians who hold to the inerrancy of God's Word, but the unity of this portion of Scripture has come under significant attack. Sanders has attacked the unity of the passage, basing his argument on the number of Semitisms in each section.² O'Rourke has neutralized his arguments with a more thorough analysis which removes the number of Semitisms as a factor in the argument.³ Carlston accepts the passage as a package because of its theological message. His viewpoint is that "the parable must have risen in a situation in which Phariseeism is rejected, but Pharisees are still understood as belonging to the people of God."⁴ This writer would agree with his position though he would disagree with many of Carlston's liberal presuppositions.

Plummer saw both parts of the story as having special reference to its historical setting.⁵ Jeremias also

¹Ibid.

²Jack T. Sanders, "Tradition and Redaction in Luke XV.11-32," New Testament Studies 15 (July 1969), pp. 433-8.

³John J. O'Rourke, "Some Notes on Luke XV, 11-32," New Testament Studies 18 (July 1972), pp. 431-3.

⁴C. E. Carlston, "Reminiscence and Redaction in Luke 15:11-32," Journal of Biblical Literature 94 (1975), pp. 368-390."

⁵Plummer, Luke, p. 371.

sees the compound story as Christ responding to the situation. "Why did Jesus add it? There can only be one answer, because of the actual situation. The parable was addressed to men who were like the elder brother, men who were offended by the Gospel."¹

In his study of the parable in the light of its Jewish background Oesterly also defends the integrity of these verses.

The second part of the parable belongs indissolubly to the first part, the soul-stirring love which Christ shows for the repentant sinner overflows in its longing to gain also the self-righteous one who in his blindness and uncharitableness fails to see that his state is that of an unrepentant sinner.²

One of the arguments brought against the unity of the story is that nowhere else does Jesus speak a double-story parable like this one.³ Surely the argument that Jesus could not have used a particular variation of storytelling only once is as preposterous as maintaining He could only use a particular parable once (e.g. Lost Sheep). This section is properly closed by the words of T. W. Manson. "There is, in fact, no good reason for supposing that the story is anything but a perfect unity."⁴

¹Joachim Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus, second revised edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), p. 131.

²Oesterly, Jewish Background, p. 285.

³Sanders, Tradition and Redaction, p. 434.

⁴Manson, Sayings, p. 285.

The fourth question concerns the inter-relationship of the three parables. There is perhaps more uncertainty on this issue than on any of the previously discussed issues. This is due in part to the fact that it is dependent on the conclusions previously reached and in part to the ambiguity of the connecting formula.¹ In spite of this uncertainty, few reasons, other than those mentioned above, are advanced for the fragmentation of the chapter.

Its unity is certainly plausible in light of the historical setting of verses one and two.² In fact the situation could even be deemed appropriate for them.³ This has led a variety of scholars to endorse the unity of the chapter. Here are but four examples:

. . . this whole chapter was taken over by him (Christ) substantially as we now have it.⁴

. . . we find it difficult to believe that these three parables, which belong so closely together, did not originally form a single chain.⁵

¹William F. Arndt, The Gospel According to Luke, in the Bible Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 350.

²Malcolm O. Tolbert, "Luke," in Broadman Bible Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 123.

³Merrill C. Tenney, "The Gospel According to Luke," in Wycliffe Bible Commentary, edited by Charles Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962).

⁴Manson, Sayings, p. 283.

⁵Oesterly, Jewish Background, p. 175.

There can be no doubt that chap. 15 forms one self-contained and artistically constructed unit with a single theme.¹

It cannot well be doubted that this triplet belongs together and that we have therefore, no chrestomathic combination of parabolic discourses, but a well connected didactic discourse.²

This study will proceed on the basis that Luke 15 is an intact unit of Jesus' teaching preserved by Luke.

Historical Setting of Luke 15

This is not a difficult question if the conclusions of the previous section (The Unity of Luke 15) are accepted. As Arndt has written, "There is nothing to oppose the opinion that these parables, too, were spoken in Perea, when Jesus before the Feast of Dedication was travelling toward Jerusalem."³

In analyzing the setting of the parable the first two verses of chapter 15 are of paramount importance. They are described as "profoundly significant" by Oesterly.⁴

As we seek to arrive at the main point of this parable for the Sitz im Leben of Jesus, we must identify the audience to which Jesus directed this parable. . . . Nevertheless it seems reasonable to conclude that Luke

¹Marshall, Luke, p. 597.

²John Peter Lange, "Luke," in Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, Translated and Edited by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 234.

³Arndt, Luke, p. 346.

⁴Oesterly, Jewish Background, p. 175.

15:1,2 is an accurate portrayal of the situation in which this parable was originally uttered.¹

The contrast of the divergent groups of the audience should be well noted. It has been a common failing in the interpretation of these parables to ignore one of the constituent elements of the audience. Pentecost goes so far as to interpret the single use of παραβολήν in 15:3 as "showing that there are not three replies, but a single reply" to the Pharisees murmuring.² His statement is an overstatement which fails to do justice to the three parables but properly emphasizes their common origin.

In the setting of the parables there are then three parties. They are: (1) "the publicans and sinners," (2) "the scribes and the Pharisees," and (3) the Lord Jesus Christ. In these parables we have then the literary device of triads.³ Although this is most obvious in the parable of the Prodigal Son, it will be the contention of this writer that this device is used in all three parables.

Canonical Setting of Luke 15

In the Gospel of Luke the fifteenth chapter occurs within the so-called "gospel of the outcast."⁴ The

¹Robert H. Stein, An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), p. 123.

²Dwight J. Pentecost, The Parables of Jesus (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1982), p. 100.

³Kistemaker, Parables, p.

⁴Marshall, Luke, p. 597.

transition from the parables of Luke 14 is not difficult and the preparation for chapter 16 is sufficient. The third parable does include emphasis on the doctrine of repentance which is a favorite theme of Luke.¹

In many ways the placing of this chapter is crucial to its correct interpretation. The two primary reasons for this are: (1) parts of the parables are direct allusions to the Old Testament, and (2) the situation in which Christ spoke these parables was a classic Old Testament situation. Concerning the former reason the pertinent material will be covered in the analysis of the parables, but the latter reason is such a fundamental hermeneutical position that it must be dealt with before the body of the study is attempted.

Dispensationalism is assumed in this study and whether the interpreter calls this present dispensation the "Age of Grace" or "the Church Age" and whether he would begin it at the resurrection, Pentecost, or later in the Acts the events of Luke 15 did not occur within this present economy. The subject of Luke 15 is Christ's attitude toward the lost of the House of Israel. This will be brought out especially in the exegesis of the first and third parables, but with Alford, it is important at the start to recognize that the Scribes and Pharisees as well as the publicans and sinners were all Jews and all belonged to God's family.²

¹Donald Guthrie, New Testament Theology (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), p. 574.

²Alford, Greek Testament, p. 591.

God's family or rather His covenant people are in this chapter confronted with the ministry of their Messiah and their relationship to that ministry.¹

¹There is an ongoing struggle within the scholarly community concerning the interpretation of parables. This writer became aware of Blomberg's article, "New Horizons in Parable Research," Trinity Journal 3:1 (Spring 1982):3-17, after this thesis was virtually complete. In it he suggests that allegory has been wrongly defined and that the emphasis on a single focal point of a parable may be incorrect. This writer sees much in his article worthy of further research, but feels that Blomberg's suggestions are far from common acceptance among evangelicals and that some of his article may be suspect because of his indiscriminate use of concepts put forward by those with a low view of Scripture.

CHAPTER III

THE INTERPRETATION OF LUKE 15

The first part of this section will establish an interpretive model derived from the three parables. This model will serve as one of the tools to properly interpret the parables. In fact the model will allow the parables to interpret each other. The second part contains selected exegetical comments and logical arguments concerning the relationship of the elements within each grouping. The third part of this discussion will examine closely the parable of the "Lost Son." Particular attention will be given to the Old Testament background of the parable. The results of this examination will be used in the final part of the section in an analysis of the other two parables, at least in part, by the use of the proposed literary model.

An Interpretive Model

All three parables follow a pattern. It is the objective of this sub-section to create an interpretive model from that pattern. The elements which make up this model were isolated by virtue of their content and their place in the development of the story in each parable. The names given to the groups of elements are merely descriptive and rather than identifying with any particular school

of literary criticism the writer intends only to use terms which do justice to the role each group of elements plays in the development of the parable.

This chart shows the groups of elements within the three parables and identifies them as a unit.

Name of Elemental Grouping	"Parable of the Lost Sheep"	"Parable of the Lost Coin"	"Parable of the Lost Son"
Main Charac- ter	ἄνθρωπος (man, vs. 4)	γυνή (woman, vs. 8)	ἄνθρωπος (man, vs. 11)
Secun- dary Charac- ter	ἑκατὸν πρόβατα (hundred sheep) (vs. 4)	δραχμας δέκα (ten coins) (vs. 8)	δύο υἱούς (two sons) (vs. 11)
Crisis	ἀπολέσας ἐν (losing one) (vs. 4)	ἀπολέσῃ δραχμὴν (loses a coin) (vs. 8)	υἱὸς ἀπεδήμησεν (son leaves) (vs. 13)
Climax	οὐ καταλείπει (does not leave) (vs. 4) πορεύεται (goes, vs. 4)	οὐχὶ ἄπει (does not light) (vs. 8) σαροῖ (sweep, vs. 8)	εἶδεν (saw, vs. 20) ἐσπλαγχνίσθη (moved with pity) (vs. 20)
Resolution	ἐπιτίθουσιν (puts [it] on) (vs. 5)	(none)	ἐπέπεσεν (fell on, vs. 20) κατεφίλησεν (kissed, vs. 20)

Epilogue	συγκαλεῖ (calls together) (vs. 6)	συγκαλεῖ (calls together) (vs. 9)	εἶπεν (said, vs. 22)
	συγχαρήτε (rejoice with) (vs. 6)	συγχαρήτε (rejoice with) (vs. 9)	εὐφρανθῶμεν (let us be merry) (vs. 23)
	εὑρον (found, vs. 6)	εὑροῖ (found, vs. 9)	ἀνέζησεν (alive again) (vs. 24)
			εὐρέθη (was found) (vs. 24)
Application	χαρά (joy, vs. 7)	χαρά (joy, vs. 10)	ὠργίσθη (anger, vs. 28)

These classifications may be justified in the following way.

The parallel between the first ἄνθρωπος (verse 4) and γυνή (verse 8) is well recognized.¹ The inclusion of the second ἄνθρωπος (verse 11) as a literary parallel should be unobjectionable to all those who hold to the integrity of this chapter.

Creed recognized the correspondence of the secondary characters as prescribed in this study.² This correspondence is plain to see.

¹Plummer, Luke, p. 368.

²John Martin Creed, The Gospel According to St. Luke (London: Macmillan and Company, 1930), p. 197.

A comparison of the elements grouped under crisis is made by many commentators.¹ Again, this comparison is natural.

The relationship of the elements of the first two parables are not questioned by those holding to the unity of this passage, but the classifying of them with εἶδεν (verse 20) and ἐσπλεγχνίσθη (verse 20) might be challenged. This writer could argue that εἶδεν (verse 20) implies watchfulness or a pasture of seeking, but he believes there is a better argument. The action of seeking by the first ἄνθρωπος (verse 4) and the γυνή (verse 8) are predicated upon their knowledge that the objects sought were indeed lost. In the case of the second ἄνθρωπος he evidently did not know the condition of his younger son until he saw him. The story does not indicate that the younger son had a prior record of debauchery. Therefore the εἶδεν is the beginning of the father's awareness of his son's desperate conditions, while the ἐσπλεγχνίσθη (verse 20) describe the father's reaction to the loss of his son in the same way that καταλείπει and πορεύεται (verse 4) describe the shepherd's reaction to the loss of the sheep. The difference lies within the chronological framework of each story. The sheep was missed within hours, but it took the prodigal more time to manifest his "lostness."

¹Plummer, Luke, p. 367; Marshall, Luke, p. 601; Alford, "Luke," p. 591; etc.

The union of shepherd with lost sheep is touching, but pales with the reunion of the prodigal and his father. There is no reason why these elements should not be equated on a literary basis. The absense of a parallel element in the second parable is striking. It should be pointed out that if Jesus had desired to speak a parallel element here He could have easily spoken of the γυνή clutching or polishing her δραχμήν. The possible reasons for this omission will be discussed later.

No defense is really needed for the classification of these elements are described as epilogue for they are obviously parallel in literary function.¹ The key words in the epilogues of the first two parables are in fact identical.

The final category is made somewhat more difficult by the Lord's expansion of the application in the third parable. The elder son's anger seems to be in correspondence with the χαρά (verses 7,10) of the previous parables. Anger is the dominant emotion of the third parable's application. It is evidently unmoved by the father's kindness. Therefore, it is complementary to the χαρά (verses 7,10) of the first two parables.

¹A. F. Walls, "In the Presence of Angels," Novum Testamentum 4 (1950), p. 315.

Selected Exegetical Comments and Arguments

It is not the purpose of this writer to interact with every grammatical, lexical, or syntactical issue in these verses, but simply to support and use his interpretive model.

The Main Character

Marshall indicates that the first *ἄνθρωπος* is unnecessary, but is present to contrast with the *γυνή* (verse 8).¹ Plummer agrees.² The contrast is heightened by seeing the *γυνή* (verse 8) between the two occurrences of *ἄνθρωπος* (verses 4,11). The *ἐξ ὑμῶν* (verse 4) directly involves the hearers and especially the Pharisees in the first parable.³

The Secondary Characters

The downward movement of the size of the numbers is one of the most obvious features of this comparison. As Summers points out, this progression unites the chapter and brings it toward a climax as a whole.⁴ Rather than see a progression of worth from *πρόβατα* to *υιού* perhaps it would be better to acknowledge that they are each of equal importance as well as having a literary function within their

¹Marshall, Luke, p. 601.

²Plummer, Luke, p. 368.

³Pentecost, Parables, p. 100.

⁴Ray Summers, Commentary on Luke (Waco: Word Incorporated, 1972), p. 182.

respective story. Consideration ought to be given to the concept that they all represent the same thing. It is of importance that the secondary characters in the first two parables are introduced by a participial clause while in the third story this introduction is made by use of an indicative finite verb. Undoubtedly this is partially due to the expansion from similitudes to a story-parable.¹ It may also be true that this latter form seems to place a greater emphasis on the secondary characters as a group. This is fitting because there is an expansion of the roles of all the secondary characters in the third parable.

The Crisis

The most significant factor within this classification is the matter of how the secondary characters become separated both from each other and the main character. In the first parable καὶ ἀπολέσας is included as additional information about the man. No irresponsibility on his part is implied or inferred.² Because all three of these stories are parables, they are by definition removed somewhat from reality. The presence of ἐάν and the subjunctive ἀπολέσῃ heightens the air of contingency in the second parable. The use of the subjunctive in this parable gives it an increased air of tentativeness. The subjunctive should be viewed as a deliberative rather than a futuristic

¹Hunter, Parables, p. 9.

²Plummer, Luke, p. 368.

subjunctive although the perplexity is truly not shown on the part of the speaker.¹

The Climax of the Parables

All seven elements within this classification describe the reaction of the main character to the crisis. Even so they may be further broken down. The first subdivision would consist of preparations for the primary activity. The confusion regarding the morality or wisdom in leaving of the ninety and nine has been pretty well settled² and there is a good explanation for how this was done.³ The majority of the secondary characters are not ignored because of the plight of the one. The shepherd prepares systematically for the search. The same practical approach is found in the second parable as the $\gamma\upsilon\nu\eta$ (verse 8) does those things which would make her search effective. Although the aorist $\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\delta\epsilon\nu$ (verse 20) implies nothing of the father's seeing except that he saw, yet the fact that he saw the prodigal at a great distance may imply the father's eagerness to see him.

The other sub-section of the grouping describes the primary activity. The connective $\kappa\alpha\iota$ (verses 4,8,20) joins

¹William Douglas Chamberlain, An Exegetical Grammar of the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1941), p. 83.

²Marshall, Luke, p. 603.

³F. Bussby, "Did a Shepherd Leave Sheep Upon the Mountains or in the Desert?" Anglican Theological Review 45 (January 1963):93-4.

the four elements in the second sub-section closely to those three elements in the preceding sub-section. The leading verbs are all in the indicative mood and the activity contained in those verbs is emphasized. The passive form ἐσπλεγχίσθη focuses on an internal action and emphasizes its external impetus. The movement from the present to the aorist tense may indicate that the father had not previously been aware of the son's condition or that the reaction of pity was not nearly so constant as the shepherd's going or the woman's seeking but in fact another emotion had quickly replaced it.

The Resolution of the Parables

Here only the first and third parables are involved. This appears to be intentional (as stated in the last section). For an explanation of the omission see the section on the interpretation of the lost coin.

These two portions are remarkably parallel considering the difference between the objects of the stated attention. The function of the participles εὖρών (verse 5) and δραμών (verse 20) is noteworthy because in the former the emphasis is not on the finding of the sheep which is described in the modifying participle, but on the care of the sheep after contact is made. The latter participle is subordinate in the same way for the process of the father getting to the son is grammatically inferior to his treatment of the son at their meeting. The physical contact of

ἐπιτίθησεν (verse 5) surely corresponds to that of ἐπέπεσεν (verse 20) as do the verbal forms. It is not too far-fetched to recognize χαίρων (verse 5) as parallel to Κατεθίλησεν αὐτόν (verse 20) for certainly the latter is predicated upon the joy of the father.

The Epilogue of the Parables

The social nature in this part of the parables is one of the strands which holds the chapter together.¹ As the chart indicates the epilogue has three parts. In the first part, the most noticeable difference is that while the social occasion in the first two parables is quite simple, the feast in the Prodigal Son is far more elaborate. Again the third parable provides the contrast in the third part for the festivity there is the result of both the father's work, and of the prodigal's repentance. (This is not to imply that his repentance was a result of human goodness or initiative).

The Application of the Parables

Walls is correct when he speaks of χαρὰ ἐνώπιον τῶν ἀγγέλων τοῦ θεοῦ (verse 10) as being an expansion and explanation of χαρὰ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ (verse 7).² The omission of the contrasting clause in the second parable seems to be significant and will be discussed under the interpretation

¹Walls, "Presence," p. 315.

²Ibid., p. 316.

of that parable. The ninety-nine righteous persons are obviously parallel to the sheep who did not stray.

The application of the third parable is much more complex. It has an obviously different tone from the first two. The reason for the different atmosphere displayed in this application is that the first two were focused on that which was lost, but the third application focuses on that which is lost,¹ for the younger son was now united with his father, but the elder, although close by, had no real fellowship with his father.

The Interpretive Model and the "Lost Son"

The goal of this sub-section is to apply the interpretive model to the third parable as a tool to be used in understanding the parable. It is the intent of the writer to allow the model to suggest the shaping of the interpretation rather than to cause it to dictate its meaning. The challenge of this interpretation is to give the details of the parables their proper weight, while not being pedantic. Before the element by element analysis of the parable, the historical background will be examined for its interpretive significance.

¹Norval Geldenhuys, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, in the New International Commentary on the New Testament, edited by F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 409-10.

Interpretive Significance of the Historical Setting

The primary reason for discussing this topic is the establishment of the original audience and the establishing of the relationship of that audience to the parable. This is not a new discussion. Almost a hundred years ago David Brown wrote that "The true key to this parable is to be found in the scene which gave occasion to the utterance of it."¹ As Barclay says the scene was "a perfectly definite situation."² Guthrie describes the theological aspects of the scene well.

The parable was an answer to the murmuring of the Pharisees who found it inconceivable that God would bestow grace apart from any merit on man's part. The merit-conscious elder son was in fact incapable of even recognizing his father's grace toward his brother.³

Hunter also sees the origin of the parable in Christ's clashes with the Pharisees and comments on His skill. "Yet its artistry should not make us forget that it originated in Jesus 'warfare with the Pharisees.' But if it is polemic, it is polemic at its finest; polemic armed with the gentleness of love."⁴

¹David Brown, "The Elder Brother of the Prodigal Son," Expository Times 7 (1895-96), p. 325.

²William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke, in the Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963).

³Guthrie, Theology, pp. 605-6.

⁴Hunter, Parables, p. 61.

It is appropriate at this stage to ascertain what the focal point of this parable is. Surely this study of the background of the story should at least give the interpreter some clues. It does. First it tells the exegete who at least some of the original hearers were. It is impossible to know who else was present. Very possibly some of the disciples were, but that hypothesis cannot be confirmed. Most importantly, as Guthrie pointed out, the parables in this chapter were spoken in response to specific actions. These actions concerned the proper attitude toward those who were obviously out of fellowship with the people and law of God. The focal point of this parable is then the place of the outwardly unregenerate and degenerate. Harrington delineates the point well: "The 'Lost Boy' is his [Christ's] defense of his good news for the poor rather than an actual proclamation of it."¹

Some might object that this emphasis is robbing the church of one of the greatest evangelistic passages to be found in Scripture, but this is not true. This is an affirmation that the primary intent of the passage is the rebuttal of the position of "the Scribes and Pharisees." The Lord provides an excellent and moving explanation of His grace even as He rebukes them. It is the position of this writer that the "evangelistic" intent of the parable is present and secondary. Consider the situation. Christ

¹Wilfrid Harrington, "The Prodigal Son," Furrow 25 (1974):434.

had no need to correct the "publicans and sinners." They had already come to him. It was the religious leaders who were in need of instruction. Therefore, this writer will hold to the primacy of the "Scribes and Pharisees" in the interpretation of this chapter.

Yet the significance of this parable was not limited to one segment of Christ's audience. The publicans and sinners had the front row seats. Leon Morris brings the setting of the parable out concerning its multiple significance.

And in the situation in which Jesus found Himself, while it was important to make the point that God welcomes sinners, it was also important to emphasize that those who reject repentant sinners are out of line with the Father's will. The parable says something to 'the tax-collectors and sinners,' but it also has a message for the Pharisees and scribes.¹

While remembering that the parable was spoken to a varied audience, the characters will now each be studied in turn. Two writers have grasped the relationship of the three characters well. Kistemaker describes them in this way.

By means of these three characters Jesus reflected the composition of his audience. Each person listening to Jesus had to look into the parabolic mirror and say, 'That's me.' The prodigal son portrayed the moral and social outcast, his brother the self-righteous Jew, and the father was a reflection of God.²

¹Leon Morris, The Gospel According to St. Luke in The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), p. 240.

²Kistemaker, Parables, p. 216.

Notice Kistemaker's own figure of speech, a "parabolic mirror." His description of the father as a "reflection of God" is also instructive. Kistemaker does clarify the characters in the parable, but he does so by a clearer figure of speech. A. M. Hunter writes more strongly about the characters. "Yet beyond doubt, in the mind of Jesus, the father stood for God, the elder brother the Scribes and Pharisees, and the prodigal for the publicans and sinners."¹ In a later book Hunter describes all three as having a "representational significance."² Few commentators who have any respect for the text would deny a correspondence between the attitude of the father and God's attitude so this writer will proceed to the characters of the two sons.

The two sons have been represented in more than one way in the annals of interpretation. Connecting them with the two major groups in the audience is not limited to "conservatives" like William Arndt,³ but is also done by "moderates" like Malcolm Tolbert⁴ and even liberals like John Creed who states his position in this manner.

Luke's interpretation of the immediate intention of the parable is given by his opening verse: the younger son represents the publicans and sinners, and the older

¹Hunter, Parables, p. 61.

²Archibald M. Hunter, The Parables Then and Now (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), p. 59.

³Arndt, Luke, p. 350.

⁴Tolbert, Luke, p. 125.

brother the self-righteous Pharisees. And this no doubt is true to the mind and attitude of Jesus.¹

There is perhaps more opposition to the connection of the Pharisees to the elder son than of the linking of the sinners to the younger. However, the view was espoused in the last century by David Smith,² in the first half of this century by A. T. Robertson,³ and recently by I. Howard Marshall.⁴ This is not an allegorical view for in no way is the older brother said to be a Pharisee or that everything about him can be equated to the Pharisees. Marshall says that "He reflects the outlook of the Pharisees."⁵ Dakin speaks not of the Pharisees' persons, but of murmuring as a "plain parallel" to the elder son's murmuring.⁶ Guthrie is firm in his viewpoint but also stays clear of charges of allegory. "With the Pharisees still in mind, Jesus introduced another character into the story. With a few

¹Creed, Luke, p. 197.

²David Smith, The Days of His Flesh (New York: George H. Doran Company, n.d.), p. 312.

³Archibald Thomas Robertson, "The Gospel According to Luke," in vol. 2 of Word Pictures in the New Testament (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), p. 213.

⁴I. Howard Marshall, "Luke," in the New Bible Commentary, revised edition, edited by Donald Guthrie, et al. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), p. 912.

⁵Marshall, Luke, p. 612.

⁶Arthur Dakin, "The Elder Brother," Expository Times 19 (1907-8), pp. 141-2.

descriptive words, He made the elder brother come alive as a vivid symbol of the Pharisees."¹ Derrett makes perhaps the strongest statement of all concerning the relationship of the two sons and the two groups of listeners named in the text. "There is no doubt but that the elder brother represents the pious Jew and the younger represents the Jew who has fallen away from Jewish observance."²

This writer appreciates Derrett's remarks concerning the younger son. However Derrett errs when he relates the elder brother to "pious Jews," for many pious Jews accepted Christ. The problem with the elder son and the "Scribes and Pharisees" whom he represented was not piety, but self-righteousness.

Therefore, the three characters of the Prodigal Son had real meaning to the audience who first heard the parable. Each character was a figure of speech. This is of significance to the interpretation of all three parables. Before the study proceeds with that interpretation, Giblin would caution us in this way:

We would rather submit that the question of 'strict identification' conceived as a 'point by point application' clouds one's appreciation of the parable as essentially a 'characterization.' The line between this sort of application and the appreciation of the parable as a character portrayal seems to be a thin one. But it is a true line of demarcation between tendencies of interpretation where further expansion reveals fundamentally

¹Guthrie, Theology, p.

²J. Duncan M. Derrett, "The Parable of the Prodigal Son: Patristic Allegories and Jewish Midrashin," Studia Patristica 10 (1970):219-224.

different exegetical positions. The former becomes didactic and allegorical; the latter, we feel, preserves the tone of the parable as it appears in the text and looks to the theological viewpoint of the sacred author himself, not directly to the applicability of pastoral usefulness of the passage.¹

Giblin is not saying here that the passage has no pastoral usefulness, but that the exegetical scale by which an interpretation is made should not be the homiletical effectiveness of that interpretation. In other words, just because an interpretation preaches well does not mean it's right.

In summary, the historical setting of this parable performs three specific functions within the narrative. These functions are: (1) listing of certain members of the audience to which the parable was spoken (scribes and pharisees), (2) the identification of the particular cause of Christ's speaking of the parable (the murmuring of the Scribes and Pharisees), and (3) the establishment of the subject of the parable (the proper attitude toward those obviously out of fellowship with God).

Analysis of the Elements of the "Lost Son"

The Main Character

This character was associated with God the Father in the preceding section. Correlating this identification with those to whom the parable was primarily addressed (the Scribes and Pharisees) and with the subject of the parable

¹Charles Homer Giblin, "Structural and Theological Considerations on Luke 15," Catholic Biblical Quarterly 24 (January 1962), p. 16.

brings the interpreter to the conclusion that the focal point of the parable is not merely the proclamation of God's love for the sinner, but his justification of that love predicated upon his love of the self-righteous as well and, thus, on all sinners and all men.

The Secondary Characters

The relationship of the elder and younger sons with the Pharisees' grouping and the publicans' grouping was established in the section on the historical setting of the parable. This parable portrays God as loving them equally yet their response to that love is quite different. The antagonist of this story is clearly the elder son. In keeping with the subject and focal point of this parable it was necessary for Christ to show the pharisees and scribes that they were not advancing the work of God, but were in fact opposing it. In addition to this the younger son and by extension the publicans and sinners are presented as cooperating with the Father.

The Crisis

It is plain that the responsibility for the separation of the family unit lies squarely on the younger son. He was not lost, rather he lost himself. This emphasis is clearly in line with both Old Testament¹ and New Testament²

¹Isaiah 53:6.

²Romans 3:12.

conceptions of human depravity and responsibility. The past actions of neither the prodigal nor the publicans and sinners are excused.

The Climax

This element of the story describes the main character's reaction to the breaking of fellowship with one of the secondary characters. The reaction of the father in the parable demonstrated to the hearers in general the attitude of God toward such as the prodigal and to the Pharisees in particular the contrast between their "religious attitude" and a "godly" attitude.

The Resolution

This element of the story shows the re-establishment of fellowship between the main and secondary character. In this parable the expressions of affection symbolize the depth of that fellowship.

The Epilogue

In this story element is a description of the restored fellowship as well as the feast which is descriptive of the proper inclination of God's servants toward repentant sinners. This is immediately contrasted with the following element in the attitude of the Pharisees and Scribes who claimed to be the servants of God.

The Application

It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully inspect this long section (verses 25-32). In truth this section has a crisis and a climax of its own. Yet unlike the previous applications and indeed the preceding element in this story the motif of this literary segment is not joy, but anger. Joy in heaven is contrasted with anger in Israel. This in itself is not the primary emphasis of this section for that is the explanation of how God can love the prodigal. It is because he can also love the hypocrite. "For all have sinned and are coming short of the glory of God."¹

The discussion in this part of the paper has been to see the parable of the "Lost Son" in the light of its historical setting and its dramatic structure. The next part of this section will be to attempt a similar interpretation of the other two parables while carefully considering the parallel elements within the "Lost Son."

The Interpretive Model and the "Lost Sheep" and the "Lost Coin"

It is better to approach the former parable before the latter one. There are two reasons for this. First it is longer and somewhat fuller. Secondly, it has a clear link to the Old Testament revelation. Because of these two reasons it would serve the would-be interpreter of this text

¹Romans 3:22b,23.

more ably than the latter parable of which there is less interpretive material available.

"The Lost Sheep"

Here is the interpretation of the first parable element by element. The greatest emphasis by far will be on the characters of the story because a proper understanding of their role is essential to a right interpretation of the parable.

The Main Character

The main character seems to undoubtedly represent Christ himself. Alford writes that he was "plainly the Son of God, the Good Shepherd. This had been his prophetic description, and that in this very connection."¹ It seems certain that the Pharisees and Scribes recognized this allusion to the Messiah.

The Secondary Characters

There are two units within this parable as also the parable of the "Lost Son." The ninety-nine are parallel to the elder son while the lost sheep seems to be a rather obvious parallel to the prodigal. Bishop supported the former identification with these words. "While it may be generally true that an oriental parable does stick to its

¹Alford, Greek Testament, p. 558.

central points, in this case the ninety-nine are as necessary to the ultimate picture as the elder brother in the story of the 'Prodigal Son.'¹ The latter identification is well recognized as its extension to the publicans and sinners.² Derrett has called the publicans and sinners the "lost sheep of Israel."³

The Old Testament identification of both the main and secondary characters is to be found primarily in Ezekiel 34. Hickling writes that the parable is a "clear allusion to Ezekiel 34 where the (divine) good shepherd is bitterly contrasted with the negligent ones."⁴ In this statement correspondence is established between the sheep and the nation of Israel and between God (or his Son) and the shepherd. The latter identification is elaborated on by Marshall. "The parable takes up the theme of God's care for his flock (Ezk. 34:12,23f.) which is now fulfilled in the Messiah (Grandman, 307)."⁵ Therefore within these two elements (the main and secondary characters) you have represented the

¹E. E. F. Bishop, "The Parable of the Lost or Wandering Sheep," Anglican Theological Review 44 (January 1962), p. 49.

²Geldenhuis, Luke, p. 402.

³J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Fresh Light on the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin," New Testament Studies 26 (Fall 1979), p. 43.

⁴C. J. A. Hickling, "A Tract on Jesus and the Pharisees? A Conjecture on the Redaction of Luke 15 and 16," Heythrop Journal 16 (1975), p. 379.

⁵Marshall, Luke, p. 601.

Messiah and Israel divided into two groups. It is possible the pharisees may have seen another messianic reference in Psalm 149:76,¹ but Ezekiel 34 appears to be the canonical setting of the parable.

The Crisis

This element is not as well defined as in the "Lost Son," but it is a powerful picture of what Isaiah said: "We all, like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6).

The Climax

Here, in the first parable, there is the work of the Son which is justified by the attitude of the Father in the third parable. Christ is acting correctly in His reaching out to the publicans and sinners because His Father loves those publicans and sinners as He loves the prodigal son.

The Resolution

There is a gentle restoration to fellowship, not a severe one.

The Epilogue

This element stresses the joy of reunion. It is to be shared. This is greatly elaborated on in the prodigal son.

¹Derrett, "Fresh Light," p. 39.

The Application

The key word to this element in this parable is approval, heavenly approval. Thus heavenly approval of the Messiah and his ministry is contrasted with the murmuring of the scribes and the Pharisees which is reflected in the murmuring of the elder son in the third parable.¹

The Interpretive Model and the "Lost Coin"

The interpretation of this parable is very difficult although some commentators dispense with it in a minimum of words. As in the discussion of the "Lost Sheep" primary emphasis is placed on the possible representational significance of the characters in the story.

Before the elements of the story are examined individually it is wise to examine the interpretation of this parable as a whole. The majority of modern commentators seem to find this parable devoid of the kind of audience identification which is set forth in the other parables (i.e. Hendriksen²). This writer finds it strange that Christ would use two parables so directly involving those before him and place between them a parable which applies to his primary hearers (the Scribes and Pharisees) only indirectly. Errors have been made in the past to identify the main character as the Holy Spirit for theological

¹Dakin, "The Elder Brother," pp. 141-2.

²William Hendriksen, Luke, in the New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 749.

reasons¹ and as the church for similar reasons.² Neither of these suggestions arise from the historical context within which this parable was first told. This writer will attempt solutions more consistent with that context.

The Main Characters

If the father is a reflection of God and the shepherd represents the Messiah, then who or what corresponds to the woman? The Holy Spirit would make a nice picture which would be doctrinally pleasing. The Church was not yet in existence. A viable option would be to see the woman representing the Godhead. This would not seem to be as faithful to the Old Testament setting as it could be. Where is God represented in a feminine manner with Israel appearing in the same picture? The normal situation is to see Israel as the Bride and God as the Husband. It might be suggested that the woman represents no one at all, but would three so intricately constructed parables be so fashioned that the first and third speak directly to the audience and the second give only a general axiom? Perhaps, but this writer would like to suggest an alternative identification.

The possibility which best satisfies the prophetic background and makes sense of the historical setting is that the woman corresponds to the nation of Israel, as

¹Alford, Greek Testament, p. 590.

²Plummer, Luke, p. 370.

represented by its religious leaders. Is it not likely that all of the segments of the nation were represented in the audience? There were conceivably Scribes, Pharisees, Publicans, Sinners, Disciples, and probably a number of others.

This solution ties in exceedingly well with the picture given in the previous parable. The Pharisees had been reminded in an allusion from Ezekiel 34 that they were remiss in their shepherding duties. What better course to follow than to exhort them immediately afterwards? Even Hendriksen sees this exhortation here.¹ The religious leaders of Israel should have welcomed their Messiah. They should have encouraged the people, all of the people, to flock to Him, but they did not so Christ presented himself as the Divine Shepherd sent from God in the first parable who reaches out to those whom the human shepherds (the Scribes and Pharisees had neglected. In this parable Christ is inviting them to join with him and support him in his mission to the people. God had left these leaders in charge of the house of Israel. Would they not, as the woman in this parable, seek out the lost treasures of their house? If they would and through their ministry some of the chosen people would come to their God, then there would indeed be rejoicing above, and the feminine figure is certainly in keeping with the Old Testament concept of Israel.

¹Hendriksen, Luke, p. 749.

The Secondary Characters

The relationship of the two sons and the ninety-nine has already been established. The nine coins obviously perform the same function as the ninety-nine sheep and the elder son. Even those who would reject the interpretation of this paper see these elements as representing the same objects.¹ If the identification proposed here is accepted there is an apparent logical difficulty in that the woman represents the totality of Israel while the coins do likewise. This is not a difficult problem. The nation of Israel was always responsible for the well being of all of its members. Ezekiel 34 is itself a good example of this principle.

This identification is thoroughly consistent with the historical setting. The Old Testament background of the "Lost Sheep" identifies the flock as the nation Israel. The identification of the two sons in the "Lost Son" as the major elements of the Jewish nation is derived directly from the historical setting as given by Luke at the beginning of the chapter. This writer is simply maintaining that the secondary characters in each parable represent the same group.

¹Frederic Louis Godet, Commentary on Luke (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1981 reprint), p. 372.

Crisis

The crisis represents the current dichotomy which existed within the Jewish Nation. Although they had never been a perfect unity (what group made up of sinful human beings ever has been?) they had at times in their history been united in purpose to serve their God.¹ The segments of Israel present at the telling of this parable were not in fellowship together under the Mosaic Covenant. One group disdained the covenant outwardly while the other group stifled it inwardly.

The Climax

The crucial question in interpreting this element of the story is Christ's placing of the parable into a hypothetical form. Why did He do so? Were there no women present? Possibly, but if this were an important key to the interpretation of this parable would not their absence have been noted by Luke? It seems more likely that Christ used such a device to cause his primary hearers to form an answer in their minds as to what a woman would do. What the principle of such action should be. Christ was in effect allowing the Scribes and Pharisees to formulate a principle which they would in retrospect have to apply to themselves. This is especially true if in fact He is showing them that they have a responsibility like unto the woman's responsibility.

¹Exodus 19:8; Joshua 24:24; Nehemiah 9:38-10:39, etc.

The Resolution

The second parable has no resolution, if the parallelism proposed in this paper is accurate. It might be argued that such a display of emotion would be improper with regard to a coin. This is not the case. How normal it would have been for the woman to have clutched the coin for safekeeping or to have shined it. It is significant that this element of the story is absent from one of three so very parallel parables. If the interpretation presented in this paper is accepted then there is a clear reason for the omission. The case was hypothetical until after it was presented more clearly to the Pharisees and Scribes in the following parable. In that parable the outcome of the issue was no longer in doubt. If there is no resolution in this parable it is because there was no resolution in Israel, rather there was division.

The Epilogue

The interpretation of this element does not affect the meaning of the parable as a whole.

The Application

The meaning is very similar to the meaning of the same part of the previous parable and neither supports nor denies the proposed identification.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary

Christ was provoked by the murmuring of the Scribes and Pharisees to correct their misconception of the publicly reprobate. He did so first by presenting his own ministry in a messianic light approved by heaven. He then showed them what the covenant community ought to be like using an illustration of that community, a happening of everyday life, which should have indicated to them their responsibility. Finally he gave full exposure to his love for all sinners, even seemingly the worst of them, and in so doing demonstrated to the Pharisees and Scribes that they were not only opposing His prophetically sanctioned ministry and going against the accepted standards of behavior, but they were also out of fellowship with God and his true servants.

Following this interpretation the first parable is seen to be instructive, the second one motivational, and the third descriptive and in the end prophetic.

Conclusion

This writer believes that the proposed interpretation is the correct one because of the four following

reasons:

1. The identifications proposed arise from a study of the text itself.

2. The interpretation does justice to the prophetic background of the parables.

3. The interpretation is based upon the divinely recorded incident which sparked the parabolic discourse.

4. The interpretation is theologically sound.

The writer believes these reasons have been established and the proposed interpretation of the parables vindicated.

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