THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP
IN THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS
AND THE SYNOPTICS

BY

WILLIAM L. PETERSEN

A recent article by F. SCHNIDER ¹ has reinforced the currently accepted opinion concerning the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Mt. xviii 12-14; Lk. xv 3-6), namely, (1) that the Gospel of Thomas (logion 107) has turned the parable into an esoteric gnostic saying; (2) that Thomas's version is dependent upon the synoptic recensions; and (3) that Luke has preserved the most primitive version of the parable.

This article will argue that the opposite is the case. (1) Thomas's logion is not intrinsically gnostic. Rather, (2) it preserves a tradition independent of the synoptics. Indeed, (3) it has numerous points in its favor as being more primitive than the synoptic versions.

I.

GÄRTNER has stated that "If the Gospel of Truth is reckoned as coming from Valentinian circles, the same ought to apply to the Gospel of Thomas since the resemblance between the two is so great" ². This alleged similarity between the Gospel of Truth and the Gospel of Thomas has led PERRIN to assert that

The Thomas version (of the Parable of the Lost Sheep) does not help us very much. We know from the Fathers, e.g. IRENAEUS Adv. Haer. II 24.6, that this parable was much used by Gnostics, and both in Thomas and the

¹) F. SCHNIDER, "Das Gleichnis vom verlorenen Schaf und seine Redaktoren," Kairos n.f. xix (1977), pp. 146-154. Another even more recent article is that by J. D. M. DERRETT, "Fresh Light on the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin," NTS, xxvi, #1 (1979), which appeared after this article was finished. DERRETT agrees with many of the conclusions I have reached regarding the original form of the parable, but, incredibly, he excludes Thomas from his analysis, dismissing it as "known to be a distortion of the parable in the interest of gnostic exegesis" (p. 51)! Yet it is Thomas's version which approximates most closely the textual form of the parable he himself envisions!

Gospel of Truth ... it has become so much a vehicle for expressing gnostic teaching that the versions do not help us to reconstruct the teaching of Jesus.

The reader is urged to compare for himself the passage in the Gospel of Truth with its counterpart in the Gospel of Thomas. (The synoptic versions are also presented.)

He (the beloved Son) is the shepherd who left behind the ninety-nine sheep which were not lost. He went searching for the one which was lost. He rejoiced when he found it, for 99 is a number that is in the left hand which holds it. But when the one is found, the entire number passes to the right (hand).

—Gospel of Truth, 31.35-32.9

Jesus said: The Kingdom is like a shepherd who has a hundred sheep. One of them went astray, which was the largest. He left behind the ninety-nine, he sought for the one until he found it. Having tired himself out, he said to the sheep: I love thee more than the ninety-nine.

—Gospel of Thomas, logion 107

"See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven. [For the Son of man came to save the lost.] What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."

—Mt. xviii 10-14, RSV, with v. II in brackets

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

—Luke xv 1-7, RSV

If one cannot detect a palpable difference between the Gospel of Truth (with its elaborate numerology, identification of the shepherd with Jesus) and Thomas (where these elements are absent), then there is little more to be said.

3) N. Perrin, Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus (New York, 1967), pp. 98 f. But if one reads Irenaeus critically, it is obvious that he knows the Gospel of Truth version, not Thomas's version!