# Matthew's Messianic Shepherd-king: In search of "the lost sheep of the house of Israel"

**Joel Willitts**[1]
**North Park University**
**Chicago, IL (USA)**

## Abstract
***The article intends to grasp the meaning of the phrase "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" in the Matthean logia of 10:5b-6 (and 15:24). It shows that in recent Matthean research the phrase has become an abstract salvation-historical category disconnected from narrative and historical particularity. However, generally seen, scholars have neglected a thorough treatment of the phrase within both Matthew's own presentation of the story of Jesus and a first-century Jewish eschatological context. In this article the context of the phrase is investigated at several levels. It argues that it should be read against the backdrop of the political-national framework of the Messianic Shepherd-King expectation with its attending expectations for territorial restoration.***

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper intends to grasp the meaning of the phrase "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" in the Matthean logia of 10:5b-6 (and 15:24).[2] The question utmost in this paper is: To what or to whom does the phrase refer? This

[1] Dr Joel Willitts (PhD, Cambridge, UK) is Assistant Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at North Park University, Chicago. This article was presented as a research report during the annual meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association in Chicago (USA) on 6 August 2006. Dr Willitts is a research associate of Dr Andries G van Aarde, Professor Emeritus, Department of New Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria. This article is an abbreviated presentation of Dr J Willitts's forthcoming published thesis: *Matthew's Messianic Shepherd-King: In Search of the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel.* September 2007. Berlin: De Gruyter. (BNZW 147.)

[2] Rusche (1979:107) notes that the repetition of the phrase signals its importance to Matthew's Gospel as with other important phrases: "Many who are first will be last, and the last first" (19:30; 20:15); "Stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (24:42; 25:13); see likewise Anderson (1994).

question has not been overlooked in recent Matthean research, but it is fair to say scholars have generally neglected a thorough treatment of the phrase within both Matthew's own presentation of the story of Jesus and a first-century Jewish eschatological context. Moreover, scholars have tended to generalise the phrase's meaning such that it becomes an abstract salvation-historical category disconnected from narrative and historical particularity.

The article seeks to contribute to the discussion on Matthew's Gospel by addressing the phrase in its first occurrence in the logion of Matthew 10:5b-6:

> Τούτους τοὺς δώδεκα ἀπέστειλεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς παραγγείλας αὐτοῖς λέγων εἰς ὁδὸν ἐθνῶν μὴ ἀπέλθητε καὶ εἰς πόλιν Σαμαριτῶν μὴ εἰσέλθητε· πορεύεσθε δὲ μᾶλλον πρὸς **τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραήλ.**[3]

From a straightforward reading of the logion, one is confronted with the difficulty of interpreting the phrase "the lost sheep of the house of Israel". For while the identities of the "Gentiles" (ἐθνῶν) and "Samaritans" (Σαμαριτῶν) are relatively straightforward, it is not nearly as evident who or what is being referred to by the metaphor. In fact, it seems that Matthew makes the assumption that the group who is referred to here is self-evident to his readers/hearers.[4] He makes no effort to explicate the reality to which the metaphor is pointing.

In view of this observation, a contextual study of the phrase within its immediate and broad literary context – not to mention the historical and scriptural background – is necessary in order to narrow the interpretive options for the meaning of the phrase. It is possible that a conclusive answer to the question of the exact identity of the phrase will remain elusive, given this state of affairs. Still, the present paper will seek to put forward, to the extent possible, a hypothesis that best accounts for the evidence.

The paper will follow a procedure consistent with the nature of the question. First, the context of the phrase will be investigated at several levels. The result of such an investigation, it is hoped, will provide something like constraints within which any plausible interpretation must convincingly fit. Next the phrase itself will be studied in light of the context discerned and a fresh interpretation of the meaning of the phrase will be offered. Anticipating the result of the following analysis, I will argue that the phrase must be read

[3] There are no exegetically significant textual variants for these verses. For insignificant variants see Swanson (1995:81).

[4] See similarly Rusche (1979:109).

against the backdrop of the political-national framework of the Messianic Shepherd-King expectation with its attending expectations for territorial restoration.

Furthermore, the phrase should be read in view of the widespread eschatological perspective of the expansive territorial dimensions of *Eretz Israel* among Jews in the first century. Admittedly, both of these points will be more asserted than developed in this paper given the constraints of time. Yet, when these backgrounds are factored into the reading phrase, the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" represents *a holistic political entity*.

With this designation, the Matthean Jesus refers to Jews living in rural areas of Galilee and the northern region of the ideal Land of Israel in the first-century who were remnants of the ancient Israelite population of the former *Northern Kingdom* of Israel. As the Messianic Shepherd-King, Jesus, the Davidic Son, sent his emissaries to announce the soon-coming political restoration of united Israel and dispense the concomitant blessings of that future kingdom.

Before moving into the investigation, it is crucial to state explicitly a few of the assumptions that significantly influenced the approach taken to the research question as well as the nature of the answer itself. These assumptions are viewpoints I have taken for granted in conducting my research. I will merely state them without defense. First, I think Matthew is a Jewish Gospel, written to a Jewish audience concerned with intra-Jewish matters. Second, the Gospel of Matthew, in the first instance, is a story about Jesus, not about a Matthean community; however, a general profile can be gleaned about the author and his community from the Gospel's interests and viewpoint.

Third, the opening line of the Gospel, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" reveals that Davidic Messianism is the touchstone of Matthew's presentation of Jesus. Matthew's Gospel represents, then, what L Schiffman has called "restorative" Messianism – that is, the view that the future among other things will involve the restoration of the Davidic Kingdom in the Land of Israel (Schiffman 1994:317-18).

## 2. "THE LOST SHEEP OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL" (Mt 10:6)

In order to gain an understanding of the meaning of the phrase "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" in Matthew 10:6 our first step is to place the logion in its context in the book of Matthew. Grasping the context involves at least three points of contact: the near context, the wider narrative context and the thematic context.

In Matthew 9:35-38, the narrative preamble to the Mission Discourse, the "crowds" (ὄχλους) Jesus is ministering to in this Galilean region are likened to "sheep without a shepherd" (πρόβατα μὴ ἔξοντα ποιμένα). Jesus then states that the harvest (i.e., "the crowds") is large and the workers are few. The response to this state of affairs, according to Matthew, is the subsequent mission of the Twelve conducted with the Messianic authority of Jesus to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 10:1-6) (see similarly Davies 1993:82; Garbe 2005:39; Sabourin 1977:591).

From this brief sketch, it becomes clear, because of the intentionally woven narrative, that "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" logion of Matthew 10:6 is contiguous with the "sheep without a shepherd" logion in Matthew 9:36, and, as J R C Cousland has usefully suggested, "[The relationship] indicates that the two verses are meant to inform one another" (Cousland 2001:88). Furthermore, he sensibly asserts that the "crowds" (9:25), the "sheep without a shepherd" (9:36), and the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:6) are to be understood as one and the same entity, although this cannot be demonstrated "categorically".[5]

This paper hopes to clarify the identity of that group. At the very least, I think we can affirm with Cousland that the group signifies Israel in not merely a religious sense, but rather a political-national sense (Cf Cousland 2001:91). The association of the two logia, then, suggests that "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" refers to national Israel, at least in some form. The limits of the national entity in view in this passage are an issue we will address shortly. There is reason to think, however, that the national entity has a more limited scope than ethnic Israel widely conceived. Thus, while signifying a national entity, both the "sheep without a shepherd" and the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" logia perhaps refer to a more *limited* entity, though no less national in its constituency.

Equally important, although often overlooked, is the overarching structural unit within which Matthew 9:36-10:6 is situated. Matthew's narrative unit (see table 1 below) comprises the ministry of Jesus in "Greater-Galilee" in the northern territory of *Eretz Israel* (4:12–19:1).[6] Matthew depicts the beginnings of Jesus' ministry in the northern territory in Matthew 4:12-17 with a series of three events: first, Jesus hears of the arrest of John the Baptist and "withdraws" (ἀναχωρέω) to Galilee (4:12). Next he leaves Nazareth and makes his home in Capernaum in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali (4:13-

[5] Cousland (2001:88-90) demonstrates this by an appeal to Matthew's redactional reworking in the conjoining of 9:36 and 10:5-6. There is, however, no need to appeal to the sources at this point since this conjunction is obvious from a straightforward reading of the text.

[6] For a historical survey of approaches to Matthew that stress the geographical-chronological structure see Bauer (1988:22-26); see also ch 6 above for a discussion of the widespread first-century view of the ideal Land.

16).[7] Then Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee preaching "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near" (4:17).[8]

Table 1. Matthew's Narrative Framework[9]

| 1:1; cf 4:11 | 4:12; cf 18:35 | | | | | | | | 19:1; cf 25:46 | | 26:6; cf 28:20 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jesus the Messiah's Origin and Preparat-ion for Ministry | Jesus the Messiah"s Activity in the North | | | | | | | | Jesus the Messiah"s Activity in Judea and Jerusalem | | The Passion and Resur-rection of Jesus the Messiah |
| | 4:12-25 Narr | 5:1-7:29 Disc | 8:1-9:35 Narr | 10:1-42 Disc | 11:1-12:50 Narr | 13:1-52 Disc | 53-17:27 Narr | 18:1-35 Disc | 19:1-23:39 Narr | 24:1 - 25:46 Disc | |

In the development of the narrative, Matthew 4:12-17 provides a transition between the material of Matthew 1:1-4:11 (Jesus' early life and preparation for ministry) and what follows, Matthew 4:18-19:1 (Jesus' activity in Galilee) (Beaton 2002:104-05). In Matthew 19:1 another transitional statement appears signaling movement away from the north toward the southern region

[7] The importance of the geographical addition of the tribal territories of Zebulun and Naphtali is perhaps found in circumstances of the Exile, vis-à-vis, they were among the first northern territories to be taken into captivity by Tiglath-pileser III and the Assyrians in 733/32 BCE: 2 Kings 15:29 states, "In the days of King Pekah of Israel, King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali; and he carried the people captive to Assyria" (cf Is 8:23-9:1). Importantly, both Ezekiel and Isaiah predict the future restoration of Naphtali (Ezk 48:3-4, 34; Is 8:23-9:1) and Zebulun (Ezk 48:26-27; Is 8:23-9:1).

[8] Note the important phrase: Ἀπὸ τότε ἤρξατο here (cf 16:21 and 26:16), which some have suggested marks a distinct division in the narrative (see Kingsbury 1975:7-25). However, Neirynck (1991:152; cf likewise Beaton 2002:105) and others have disputed this approach and noted the close links between 4:17 and 4:12-16.

[9] Matthew's Gospel may very well divide up around the topographical points of Galilee and Judea/Jerusalem (Bauer 1988:22-23). This division is scarcely followed today, as McKnight points out (1992:529), although that has not always been the case. For a historical survey of structural approaches that stress the geographical-chronological element see Bauer (1988:22-26). McKnight (1992:529) suggests that a "geographical-biographical" approach to the structure of the book "reflects a preoccupation of the nineteenth-century Gospel studies: how to compose a life of Jesus." While this may be true for most of the studies in the past, a geographically oriented structure places due emphasis on Matthew's portrayal of Jesus" Messianic activity in Galilee and its environs without taking away from the recent contributions in regard to the intricate symmetry of Matthew's Gospel (cf Davies and Allison 1988:58-72). Matthew's division of the Gospel topographically perhaps implies no more than his concern for the Land of Israel and its restoration. Clearly, Matthew is *not* concerned to describe the details of Jesus" life chronologically, as a biography might – this is the view McKnight (1992:529) critiques. Yet, in McKnight's (1986:10) earlier work he was correct to note that "to neglect the basic chronological-biographical plot, including geographical elements will weaken a structural proposal". Moreover, it seems Matthew is interested in the geography of the Land because of its theological significance (cf similarly Bauer 1988:26; Farmer 1982:138-39).

of Judea: "When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and *went to the region of Judea* beyond the Jordan". Hence, it appears that Matthew 4:12-17 is an introduction for the narrative unit 4:18-19:1 and provides the framework within which the interpretation of the whole narrative section should be conducted.

What is more, the *inclusio* formed by the nearly identical verses of 4:23 and 9:35 links the present pericope with the foundational description of the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry in 4:12-25. (Bonnard 1963:141-42; Davies and Allison 1988:411; Grundmann 1968:285; Lichtenberger 1997:269 make a similar observation.)

A study of 4:12-17 and the structure of the Gospel along geographical lines will not be conducted here,[10] but the focus of Matthew's Gospel on the Messianic activity in the northern territory of the Promised Land is reminiscent of the Jewish traditions concerning the appearance of Messiah in the north as well the general expectation of a new united Davidic Kingdom amidst a restored territory. S Freyne (2004:40), after describing Jesus' travels through the various sub-regions of Galilee, similarly comments:

> One plausible view of this [geographical] outline … is to recognize here the contours of a scheme that seeks to represent Jesus as having covered all the regions of the northern part of the inherited land of Israel, inspired by his ideas and hopes of Jewish restoration eschatology.

Moreover, R Beaton (2002:97-110) has recently provided a brief, but altogether careful study of this introductory paragraph and the reuse of Isaiah 8:23-9:1 in Matthew 4:15-16. The investigation considers both Matthew's text-type and the function of the quotation in Matthew's Gospel. With respect to the text-form of the citation, Beaton observes that Matthew's citation's relationship to known ancient versions, though complex, suggests his geographical emphasis: "Matthew appears to draw upon the *geographical specificity* of the MT in support of Jesus' movements and messianic ministry" (Beaton

[10] See Verseput (1995:110) who likewise not only notes the pivotal importance of Mt 4:15-16 as the foundation of the whole Galilean ministry of Jesus, but also the "geographical symmetry", to which the pericope points, of the Matthew's narrative framework. In outlining his understanding of the geographical significance of Matthew's structure, Verseput argued that although Matthew takes up Mark's geographical orientation, he presents a distinctive perspective of the material. Further, he divides the bulk of the Gospel into two geographically oriented sections (see Verseput 1994). His outline of the Gospel would look something like this: Birth and preparation 1:1-4:11; Galilean ministry 4:12-16:20; Pilgrimage to Jerusalem 16:21-25:46; Passion & resurrection 26:1-28:20. For a similar structural proposal see (Billingham 1982; Green 2000).

2002:104).[11] It is quite clear, then, that the surface level purpose of the citation is "to demonstrate how Jesus of Nazareth's geographical movements fulfilled Scripture" (Beaton 2002:102). Yet, Beaton asserts that given the inclusion of Isaiah 9:1 a mere "geographical validation" does not exhaust the import of the citation. He makes an astute observation about the possible import of Isaiah 8:23b-9:1 in Matthew 4:15-16 for not only the Gentiles who reside in the region, but perhaps just as, or more, importantly for *Israel* and the Land.[12] He writes: "Matthew's emphasis upon Jesus' move to Capernaum and the mention of Zebulun and Naphtalai [sic] may suggest a desire to demonstrate that the messiah went initially to the tribes of Israel who were the first to be taken into captivity (cf 10:5-6; 15:24)" (Beaton 2002:106).

Stuhlmacher (2000:27) states even more emphatically:

> The fulfilment quotation of Is 8:23-9:1 (ET: 9:1-2) in Mt 4:15-16 (its conformity to the Masoretic Text is not coincidental) points ahead, in my opinion, not to the mission to the Gentiles (as Ulrich Luz points out), but, rather, it prepares Mt 28:16-20 in a Jewish Christian manner: Jesus' going ahead to the "Galilee of the Gentiles", His appearance before the (eleven) disciples, and their commissioning have all to do with the setting up of the βασιλεία τῷ ʾΙσραήλ (cf Acts 1:6) by the exalted Messianic Son of Man.

Beaton's observation, which is an echo of an earlier insight of Freyne,[13] if correct, could provide the eschatological basis for the Galilean ministry. Significantly, it could also reveal that bound up in Matthew's portrayal of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and its environs is a concern for the restoration of *Eretz Israel* and the twelve tribe league of national-political Israel consonant with the Messianic Shepherd-King motif. And to that end the Matthean Jesus primarily conducted his mission within the former Northern Kingdom, the

[11] Emphasis added.

[12] Luz (2005:21; cf also Davies and Allison 1988:385; and most recently Nolland 2005:172-74) would be characteristic of the majority of commentators who see in the reference to "Galilee of the Gentiles" only a Gentile mission. Yet there is no obvious reason from Matthew's narrative to read a Gentile mission into this passage (see similarly Carter 2000:115).

[13] Freyne (1988:90): "The importance of Galilee … is not that Matthew exploits its gentile associations during the ministry as in Mark, but rather that as a part of Israel, a ministry that was conducted there once can now be justified as a Messianic visitation to Israel, which is *also* to encompass all the nations" (emphasis added.)

"Galilee of the Gentiles",[14] about which the original Isaianic prophecy is made.[15]

Stepping back from the discussion for a moment, the geographical scope of the narrative is perhaps significant for our understanding of the identity of "the lost sheep of the house of Israel". In spite of the indisputable observation that Matthew depicts Jews from all over the Land of Israel (idealized) coming to Jesus (Mt 4:23-25), see (Lohfink 1983:274-76; also Cousland 2001:63-65), he does *not* portray Jesus as either gathering them or going to them (contra Lohfink 1983:276; Trilling 1964:136; and most recently Chae 2004:321-24, 588). The Matthean Jesus' sending of his disciples (Mt 10:5b-6), which when viewed from the perspective of the whole Gospel reflects his own vocation (cf 15:24), suggests the possibility of a *limitation* of the geographical scope of his earthly mission, in view of the limitation of the geographical scope of the narrative.

So, contrary to a consensus of opinion on the question, the Matthean Jesus is *not* pursuing *all Israel* in his quest for "the lost sheep".[16] According to Matthew, there is a geographical limitation in Jesus' (and his disciples") Messianic activity which centres in the northern region of the Land.[17] One need only ask whether Jesus ever travelled to Hebron or Beer-sheba? Although an argument from silence, it is worth asking why the Matthean Jesus' activity was limited to the north if he was interested in all Israel? Perhaps this limited territorial orientation within the narrative of Matthew should exercise a definitive influence on our understanding of the "lost sheep"

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[14] Chancey (2002:31) notes that this is the only occurrence in the Hebrew Bible where the phrase גלִיל הגוים is used to designate the region. The phrase, although influential in shaping impressions of Galilee in the eighth-century BCE, could mean either that there was a mixed population or that it was a region surrounded by the nations. The latter reflecting the most literal rendering of the phrase.

[15] See likewise Chancey (2002:31). If this reading has any merit, and a more political-national hope for territorial restoration can be acknowledged, an interesting by-product is the continuity created with the Isaianic context of the citation in Matthew 4:15-16. Isaiah 9, as far as can be determined, addresses the political situation of the captivity and oppression at the hands of Tiglath-pileser III and the Assyrians during their military campaign in 733/32 BC (Emerton 1969:156). To this situation Isaiah speaks a word of consolation to the northern regions announcing future political independence (9:4-5) and the promise of a righteous government under the leadership of a Davidide (9:6-7) (see similarly Beaton 2002:103).

[16] E g Boring (1995:265); Chae (2004:318); Cousland (2001:91); Davies and Allison (1991:167); Gundry (1994:185); Hagner (1993:270); Harrington (1991:140); Hill (1972:185); Hooker (1971:362); Luz (2001:73); Overman (1996:150); Schnabel (2002:293).

[17] In view of the particulars of the Mission Discourse and Jesus' own missional focus, it is widely believed that Matthew has crafted his narrative so that the disciple's mission is a mirror image of Jesus (cf below with Davies and Allison 1991:160-61; Gundry 1994:185; LaGrand 1999:139-40).

logion. To be sure, a limitation of scope on the part of Jesus' mission according to Matthew need not imply that Matthew's Jesus was *not* interested in the restoration of "all Israel". To the contrary, it is likely that his mission in the north was a sign of the coming restoration of the whole. For a more thorough treatment see the discussion below.

A third point of contextual contact for the Matthean logion is a thematic (or better traditional), Jewish-scriptural one. Matthew uses the significant Messianic Shepherd-King motif from Jewish Scripture. Matthew 10:6 states, "but go rather to *the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραήλ)". This verse contains the Shepherd-King motif"s constituent elements: (1) the shepherding terminology is present with the two logia 9:36 and 10:6; (2) the political-national interests of the context are evident in the aforementioned narrative structure and in the constitutional significance of the Twelve. Along with the scriptural allusion of 9:35, 10:6 is also deeply allusive with connections to Davidic Shepherd-King texts.

While perhaps not exclusively dependent on any one passage in particular, there can be little doubt that the language of the phrase "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" in 10:6 is influenced by language from Ezekiel 34; 37:15-25 and Jeremiah 23:1-8 and 50:4-20 (esp 50:6).[18] In these Shepherd-King passages there is a strong national hope for the regathering and reunification of (the house of) Israel and Judah into a united nation under one new Davidic Shepherd-King (see also Jeremiah 31:2-22; Amos 9:7-14; Hunziker-Rodewald 2001:91-95; Rusche 1979:110).

Thus, Matthew uses the Shepherd-King motif here for polemical and political ends. Matthew's Jesus bemoans the negative condition of the people and implicitly critiques the current leadership establishment. While at the same time, he, as the Davidic Messiah, provides the solution to that condition by sending out with kingly authority emissaries to enliven hope through the proclamation of the coming of the restored kingdom of Israel bringing relief from oppression by healing disease and sickness.

The convergence of the narrow and wide contexts as well as the thematic-scriptural parallels, then, should perhaps predispose a modern reader to think in certain ways about the phrase "the lost sheep of the house

[18] Some recent interpreters, for example Chae (2004:319), have attempted to nail this allusion only to Ezk 34. However, this is not advisable since there is good reason to see the convergence of themes of several passages as background. One factor that seems to have gone unnoticed by most commentators is the setting of the activity of Jesus in the north. This setting should exercise significant influence on both the interpretation of the logion and its scriptural background. On whom is Jesus" activity focused? To whom does the description "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" apply? Those who take Ezk 34 as the *only* background may miss the significant limitation of the Jesus" interests with respect to Israel (cf Cousland 2001:90-92). See further discussion below.

of Israel". Conceivably it can be said that the context places something like constraints on the reader with regard to the meaning of the logion. While there maybe more than one plausibly legitimate referent for the phrase, it will need to fit within the parameters of the context. The foregoing contextual study suggests that "the lost sheep of the house of Israel", at the very least, must: (1) refer to a political-national entity; (2) encompass a group that is both a significant body in the expected restoration of territorial and political Israel and one that resides in the northern region of *Eretz Israel*; and (3) function to support a *concrete* eschatological expectation of national-political restoration for all Israel under one Davidic King.

With the contextual parameters in place to guide our investigation we will now address the question of the phrase itself. To what does this metaphor refer? Who are those characterized as "the lost sheep"? A handful of possibilities have been suggested by interpreters. First, A-J Levine argued that the group in view are the disenfranchised and marginalized of society: the poor, the sick and the outcasts (Levine 1988:14, 55-56). These marginalized are set in contrast to their faithless shepherds, the elite (Levine 1988:276). S McKnight similarly suggested that the phrase referred to those of Israel who have been "abused by the Pharisees" (McKnight 1986:204, 378). And more recently A von Dobbeler, wishing to bring out the social, religious and political aspects of the context, made the suggestion that "the lost sheep" were all those who were being led by Israel's abusive leaders (von Dobbeler 2000:30). These commentators take their cues for this interpretation in part from the link between 10:6 and 9:36. For these scholars the latter passage's depiction of the crowds, with the Matthean addition "harassed" and "helpless", points in this direction. Common to these views, also, is their conviction that the genitive phrase οἴκου Ἰσραήλ should be taken as a *partitive* (i.e., the lost sheep are a *subset* of Israel, but *not* all Israel). In support of the partitive genitive see most recently Nolland (2005:416-17).

In contrast to this minority of voices, a thorough-going consensus has formed which sees the group referred to by the phrase "lost sheep" as *all Israel*.[19] This group of interpreters takes the genitive to be *epexegetical* rather than partitive. See Wallace's (1996:84-86; 95-100) accessible discussion of these two types of genitive phrases. That is to say, the label "lost sheep" is a characterization of the *whole nation*. One variation of the "all Israel"

[19] E g Boring (1995:265); Cousland (2001:91); Davies and Allison (1991:167); France (1985:178); Gundry (1994:185); Hagner (1993:270); Harrington (1991:140); Hill (1972:185); Hooker (1971:362); Légasse (1972:32); Lichtenberger (1997:277); Luz (2001:73); Overman (1996:150); Senior (1998:115, 181); Weaver (1990:155, n 6; 192, n 63). See most recently Chae (2004:318) who, in spite of his study of the background material, surprisingly adds very little that is fresh to the discussion.

interpretation is the view of A S Geyser who suggested that "lost sheep" were "none other than the twelve tribes of Israel *in the Diaspora*".[20]

There are strengths on both sides of the question pertaining to the sense of the genitive as well as whether the group in view in the logion is to be narrowly or widely defined. Yet, not only is the sense of the genitive phrase significant for interpretation, but so also is the meaning of the phrase "the house of Israel". While we will soon turn to this genitive phrase, we can make some judgement of the views put forward thus far for the meaning of the head-nominal phrase.

First, the scholars that limit the scope of the "lost sheep" seem to be right as they perceive, to varying degrees and in perhaps contrasting ways, the limitations placed on the phrase by the narrative context of Matthew. For example, in agreement with Levine, it seems clear that Jesus' mission as Matthew (and the other synoptic Gospels) conceived it, was directed to the marginalised and oppressed of *rural* Galilee.[21]

The perception of the limitation notwithstanding, the consensus of interpreters who take the phrase to refer to corporate Israel seem also to be correct when they notice the nationalism in the context. Furthermore, Geyser indeed appears to be correct to stress the physicality of the reconstituted Twelve Tribe kingdom of Israel. For the early Jewish Christians, according to Geyser, the restoration would not suffice to be merely symbolic or spiritual and transcendent. He states:

> Sheep and shepherd images for the people in exile were coined by the prophets in their "ingathering" prophecies. Jesus adopted it from them to proclaim the launching of the process. He and his Twelve and the Judean church *expected its materialization daily and fervently.*
>
> (Geyser 1980:309-10 – emphasis added).

So, while there are strengths with each of these views, they lack the narrative contextual sensitivity that would allow any of them to be ultimately convincing. No view, of which I am aware, takes seriously the geographical implications of

[20] Geyser (1980:309-10), emphasis added. While others, like Hooker (1971:362), have been willing to suggest a symbolic interest in the regathering and reconstituting of political-national Israel, Geyser argues that Matthew's Jesus was not announcing a mere *symbolic* reconstitution of the nation, but a concrete one.

[21] Notwithstanding, scholars have observed the frequent use of πόλις in the First Gospel (26 times) in comparison to Mark; see Gale 2005:44; Kingsbury 1988:152. However, Luke/Acts uses the term more frequently (80 times). Further, the term πόλις itself implies nothing of size and merely designates a "enclosed place of human habitation" as distinct from uninhabited areas, pastures, villages and single homes" (Strathmann 1968:530).

the context for the interpretation. If Matthew's Jesus was concerned primarily for the disenfranchised and marginalized of Israel, if he was chiefly pre-occupied with those who were suffering under the leadership of the Pharisees or other such elites of the day, if Jesus was principally interested in the regathering of the Diaspora, then how does one explain the limitation of Jesus' and the Twelve's mission to a very narrowly defined region of the northern territory of *Eretz Israel*? It would seem that if his primary task, according to Matthew, were of this sort, then he would have wished to travel more broadly through the length and breadth of the Land or even among the Diaspora (see a similar critique of Geyser's view by Davies & Allison 1991:551). However, there are not even hints of such travels recorded in Matthew, or any other Gospel for that matter. The geographical orientation of the narrative suggests that there is something more going on.

The meaning of "the lost sheep", as has been widely noticed, is inextricably linked contextually to the shepherdless flock logion of Matthew 9:36 (see discussion above). Further, in the Jewish Scriptures the idea of the shepherdless flock and a lost or scattered flock are used interchangably. See similarly Cousland (2001:90). These concepts are well-known in the Jewish Scriptures. From a study of prophetic passages we can conclude that these attributes, biblically conceived, signify a condition of national Israel characterized by a vacuum of faithful, YHWH-sanctioned political leadership such that God's people are defeated, oppressed, occupied and scattered among foreign enemies. What is more, the categorization of Israel as the lost or scattered flock was used of Israel either narrowly to refer to the Northern Kingdom (1 Ki 22:17; 2 Chr 18:16; Jr 23:1-8; 31:1-22; cf also Mi 5:3) or widely referring to both Israel and Judah (Jr 50:4-7; 17-20; Ezk 34).[22]

While it is possible that Matthew intends to use the concepts differently hereby filling them with a unique significance, our brief contextual sketch above, reveals that the First Evangelist shared the prophetic outlook when he reflected on the present condition of the people of God. Not unlike the Sectarians at Qumran, Matthew has collapsed the historical distance between his time and the time of the exilic and post-exilic prophets, thereby linking the current condition of Israel with that of Israel's distant past.[23]

When the geographical orientation of the narrative is combined with this political-national interest, a possible geopolitical referent for "the lost

[22] Notice that the phrase was never applied to Judah, the Southern Kingdom, alone.

[23] See Talmon's (1987:117) observation that the Qumran community linked their own generation "directly" to the post-destruction generation and so "assumes the role that the postexilic biblical historiography (Ezra-Nehemiah, 2 Chr 36:22-23) and prophecy (Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) accord to the returnees from the Babylonian Exile in the early Persian Period".

sheep", not heretofore suggested, comes into view: the lost sheep are remnants of the former Northern Kingdom of Israel. Not only would this group fit the narrative-geopolitical constraints, but also the Northern Kingdom was expected to be a significant body in Israel's future redemption as Matthew himself has highlighted in his reuse of Isaiah 8:23-9:1. Thus, given these affinities with the constraints of the narrative, it seems reasonable to assert that the political-national entity in view in the nominal phrase "the lost sheep" is Israelites of the former Northern Kingdom of Israel who continue to reside in the northern region of *Eretz Israel*.

In this way, Geyser was correct in suggesting Jesus' mission to "the lost sheep" was at its heart about the reconstitution of the twelve-tribe league. However, it was not to the Diaspora that Matthew's Jesus went (and sent his apostles), but rather to those who were within the ideal Land awaiting their redemption and the restoration of the united kingdom of Israel under a Davidic crown (see Am 9:7-11).

As a test of the validity of the hypothesis just offered, as with any hypothesis, one must inquire whether it includes all the data (see Wright 1992:99-100 for the requirements of a good hypothesis). Here we have in mind the restriction in the immediate context in Matthew 10:5. Does the hypothesis illuminate the significance of the restriction?

In recent discussions concerning the meaning of the restriction the issue has come down to whether the phrases εἰς ὁδὸν ἐθνῶν and εἰς πόλιν Σαμαριτῶν have primarily a *geographic* or *ethnic* reference. The meaning of the phrase εἰς ὁδὸν ἐθνῶν (lit "into the way of the Gentiles") can be rendered "in the direction of the Gentiles" with the genitive phrase ὁδὸν ἐθνῶν possessing a directional sense (cf BDF §166:92; see likewise Jeremias 1958:20; Overman 1996:147-48). Davies and Allison have suggested that the phrase relates to entering a Gentile town. They assert, "[the first prohibition] probably refers to a road leading into a Gentile city" (Davies & Allison 1991:165; cf also Foster 2004:222). The meaning of εἰς πόλιν Σαμαριτῶν (lit. "into a city of the Samaritans") is either "a province …" or "a city of the Samaritans", since, as J Jeremias has pointed out, the Aramaic word that presumably underlies πόλιν can be understood either way (Jeremias 1958:20).

Some scholars, like R Gundry, take these phrases as a *geographic* prohibition implying that the disciples were not to go into any *territory* of Gentiles in the north or Samaritans in the south; thus, the mission was restricted to the region of Galilee (Gundry 1994:185; cf likewise Freyne 1988:143; Jeremias 1958:20; LaGrand 1999:137; Overman 1996:148. See also recently Garbe 2005:147). Gundry believes the basis for this prohibition

is in the example of Jesus. He writes, "In this way Matthew indicates that their ministry must follow the pattern of Jesus' ministry, which, he has already taken pains to show, began in Galilee (4:14-16)" (Gundry 1994:185; cf likewise Schnabel 2002:292-93).

Another approach taken by scholars is to see εἰς ὁδὸν ἐθνῶν and εἰς πόλιν Σαμαριτῶν as a synecdoche denoting the people groups in and around the people of Israel. This view is based on the relationship between 10:5b and 6. The expression "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" of 10:6 is the positive and emphatic side of the negative prohibition of 10:5b and the terms are antithetically parallel.[24] J A Overman, a representative of this approach, writes: "The dual terms 'Gentiles' and 'Samaritans' in 10:5 help us to see that Matthew is contrasting three *ethne*, groups, or ethnicities: Israel, Samaritans, and those people/lands that are not Jewish".[25]

Given our hypothesis a mediating position can be taken between the ethnic and geographic poles. If what we have argued is correct that "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" refers to remnants of the old Northern Kingdom residing in the Land, then both the ethnic and geographic approaches *together* help explain the significance of the restriction. On the one hand, the mission that Jesus sends the Twelve out on is clearly conceived as both ethnocentric and national and, thus, ethnically restricted. Such a mission would by definition exclude both the Gentiles and Samaritans.

On the other hand, the mission is also restricted geographically by the fact that its focus is on the northern Israelites. Matthew's Jesus restricted the geographical area of mission based on the object of the mission. The disciples were neither to go beyond the borders of ideal Israel to the Jewish Diaspora in Gentile regions in the north or east, nor were they to conduct their mission in the region of the Samaritans in the south. Jesus, as the Messianic Shepherd-King, was sent (and sent his disciples) to the northern elements of the former kingdom of Israel to prepare them for the coming restoration of national Israel reunited under his Davidic leadership.

[24] See Weaver (1990:84; 192, n 64); also Levine (1988:55) writes, "Because of the parallelism with 10:6 as well as its role in the construction of the temporal axis, the reference to the gentile roads and Samaritan cities is appropriately expanded to include the native inhabitants of these areas. Consequently, the first part of the exclusivity logion, Mt 10:5b, negatively defines the parameters of the mission: the disciples are not to evangelize among the non-Jews (gentiles and Samaritans)".

[25] Overman (1996:150; cf similarly Radermakers 1972:139) who states, "Qu'il nous suffise ici de souligner la progression note aux vv 5-6; chemin …, ville …, brebis …; les personnes important plus que l'aire géographique."

## 3. CONCLUSION

In summation, I have offered a fresh reading of the phrase "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" in Matthew 10:6 (15:24) which takes seriously the narrative context of Matthew's Gospel. Whatever one ultimately decides about the nature of the saying and the referent of the metaphor contained in it, the context required that the referent be a political-national entity, an important element in the expected restoration of Israel, a group located in the northern region of the Land and a body which formed an aspect of a concrete expectation of national restoration.

When read within these contextual constraints, "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" designates neither national Israel widely conceived nor merely a subset of the disenfranchised or oppressed within Israel. Rather the phrase refers to the oppressed and marginalised remnant of the former Northern Kingdom of Israel to whom Jesus sends his disciples to announce the soon-coming restoration of the political-national kingdom of Israel and to dispense the concomitant blessings of that kingdom.

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