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## Building a Fence Around the Vineyard: The Shepherd of Hermas's Fifth Parable in Light of Comparative Parable Research

Martijn J. Stoutjesdijk

According to Bart Ehrman, “the Shepherd of Hermas was one of the most popular books of early Christianity. Judging from the manuscript remains, it was copied and read more widely in the second and third centuries than any other non-canonical book, even more than many of the books that later came to be included in the New Testament.”<sup>1</sup> In some churches it was part of the canon, and the Muratorian Canon mentioned it as a book that could be read in church.<sup>2</sup> The book consists of three parts: five visions (chapters 1–25), ten commandments or mandates (chapters 26–49), and twelve parables or similitudes (chapters 50–114).<sup>3</sup> It is the last part—i.e., the twelve parables or similitudes (παράβολαι)—that is the focus of this article. Despite the ancient popularity of the Shepherd of Hermas, its parables have not received much attention in the modern field of parable research. Often they have been denounced as “visions,”<sup>4</sup> “allegorical tales,”<sup>5</sup> or “not real parables.”<sup>6</sup> To the best of my knowledge, the parables of the Shepherd of Hermas have never been discussed in light of parable research, even though they might form proof of a tradition, admittedly short-lived, of parable-telling after Jesus.<sup>7</sup> By way of

- 1 Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, *Epistle of Barnabas. Papias and Quadratus. Epistle to Diognetus. The Shepherd of Hermas*, LCL 25 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 162; cf. Carolyn Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 1.
- 2 Muratorian Canon 73–80; Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 6.
- 3 Joseph Verheyden, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” in *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Paul Foster (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 65.
- 4 Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 48.
- 5 Project description “Parables and the Partings of the Ways,” 4. See also the discussion below of Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Mohr, 1899), 1208–209.
- 6 George A. Barton, “Parables Outside the Gospels,” *TBW* 33 (1909): 308.
- 7 However, recent times have witnessed a growing interest in the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas, which is also the focus of this chapter. See Mary Ann Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard: An Early Christian Freedman’s Narrative (Hermas Similitudes 5.2–11),” *CBQ* 80 (2018): 655–669; Marianne B. Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor and*

case study, we will discuss the fifth parable in the third part of the Shepherd of Hermas (Herm. Sim. 55 [5.2]<sup>8</sup>), of which it has been said that, “despite ... many intertextual echoes, and the early date of the Shepherd, it is rare to see this story cited as an early Christian slave parable.”<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of this article is twofold. On the one hand, it will demonstrate that the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas is a genuine parable and, even more so, a parable that makes use of one of the classical topoi of ancient storytelling and parable telling, namely that of *absente ero*: the absent master. On the other hand, I will argue that it is an innovative parable that adds new elements to well-known story patterns. As we will see, by combining old and new parable elements, the parable teller managed to create a powerful new message. Since the Shepherd's fifth parable so elegantly integrates both new and old elements, it truly is a parable worth studying. As the article title indicates, I do so in light of comparative parable research, meaning that I not only take the breadth of the Christian parable tradition into consideration, but also engage with early rabbinic parables and Graeco-Roman literature.

The present article first introduces the social and rhetorical setting of the Shepherd of Hermas. Then it provides a summary of the fifth parable and its applications. On the basis of this summary, we briefly review why Shepherd of Hermas's story is rightly defined as a parable. Afterwards, the *absente ero*-theme is used as a lens to recognize elements in the fifth parable that are common to the early Christian and early rabbinic parable traditions, as well as elements in which the Shepherd deviates from these traditions. After a brief look at Pauline slavery metaphors, a final section presents a number of conclusions.

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*Gendered Enslavement in Early Christian Discourse: Double Trouble Embodied* (London: Routledge, 2018), esp. chapter 5; Kartzow, “*παραβολή* and Parabolic Language in the Shepherd of Hermas,” in *Gleichnisse und Parabeln in der frühchristlichen Literatur. Methodische Konzepte, religionshistorische Kontexte, theologische Deutungen*, ed. Jens Schröter, Konrad Schwartz and Soham Al-Suadi, WUNT 456 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 181–196; Jennifer Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 105; and cf. Maxime Hermaniuk, *La Parole Évangélique. Enquête exégétique et critique* (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1947), 359–362, esp. 361–362. I discuss the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas extensively in my PhD dissertation; see Martijn J. Stoutjesdijk, “Not Like the Rest of the Slaves? Slavery Parables in Early Rabbinic and Early Christian Literature” (PhD diss., Tilburg University, 2021), 166–180.

8 For the sake of convenience, I use both the old and the new reference system for the Shepherd of Hermas.

9 Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard,” 657.

## 1 Social and Rhetorical Setting of the Shepherd of Hermas

Following the majority of modern scholarship, I assume that the Shepherd of Hermas was written between the end of the first century and the first half of the second century<sup>10</sup> by one author (possibly in multiple stages)<sup>11</sup> who calls himself Hermas and identifies as a former slave.<sup>12</sup> The text was probably written in Rome, or at least in central Italy.<sup>13</sup> The text refers to places in Rome, uses imagery that can be traced back to the rural area surrounding Rome,<sup>14</sup> and—as I shall argue below—shows signs of Roman socio-historical and literary influences. The Shepherd of Hermas was originally written in Greek and has as its social location the Christian community of Rome, which was characterized by its “deep Jewish theological roots”; Hermas himself was most likely

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- 10 Verheyden, “The Shepherd of Hermas,” 63; Mark R.C. Grundeken, “The Shepherd of Hermas and the Roman Empire,” in *People under Power: Early Jewish and Christian Responses to the Roman Empire*, ed. Michael Labahn and Outi Lehtipuu (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 187 n3; Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 20.
- 11 See Grundeken, “The Shepherd of Hermas and the Roman Empire,” 188 n5; Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 10. The most notable examples of a multiple author theory can be found in Stanislas Giet, *Hermas et les pasteurs: Les trois auteurs du Pasteur d'Hermas* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), and in Lambartus W. Nijendijk, *Die Christologie des Hirten des Hermas exegetisch, religions- und dogmengeschichtlich untersucht* (PhD diss., Utrecht University, 1986), 175ff.
- 12 Kartzow devotes a lot of attention to the “special connection” between Hermas’s autobiography and the fifth parable (“παραβολή and Parabolic Language in the Shepherd of Hermas; I am indebted to the author for sharing her paper with me when it was still unpublished). Kartzow asks in her paper “what kind of connections the various first readers and readers” (13) made when they saw how slavery is present at three levels in the Shepherd of Hermas: Hermas’s self-identification as slave, the slave parable, and the oft-used title “slave of God” (3). Was Hermas’s own life story the key to understanding the parable? What we see both in Hermas’s own life and in the parable is a slave who—because he is able to control a household/vineyard—deserves to be free, and even gets more than he expected: the slave in the parable becomes an heir and son of his former master, Hermas inherits the title “slave of God” (13–14). For the connection between Hermas’s biography and the parable, see also Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard.” Cf. Alexander Weiss, “Hermas’ ‘Biography’: Social Upward and Downward Mobility of an Independent Freedman,” *AS* 39 (2009): 185–202.
- 13 James S. Jeffers, “Jewish and Christian Families in First-Century Rome,” in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 137; Carolyn Osiek, “The Oral World of Early Christianity in Rome: The Case of Hermas,” in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 152–153; cf. Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 18.
- 14 Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 18.

a Jew.<sup>15</sup> Hermas's mixed Christian-Jew-Roman identity<sup>16</sup> might be helpful in explaining the peculiarities of the fifth parable, as we will detail later.

## 2 Text and Application of the Fifth Parable of the Shepherd of Hermas

In the introduction to the fifth parable, two characters play a role: a shepherd and an I-figure, Hermas. Hermas meets the shepherd while he is fasting (Herm. Sim. 54 [5.1]), and the shepherd disapproves of his way of fasting, since he claims that the right way is comprised of observation of the commandments and service of God with a "pure heart" (ἐν καθαρᾷ καρδίᾳ).<sup>17</sup> Thereafter, the shepherd tells Hermas a parable (Herm. Sim. 55 [5.2]).

In this parable, a certain man goes on a journey, entrusting his vineyard to a "very reliable and pleasing" (πιστότατον καὶ εὐάρεστον) slave. The only assignment given to the slave is to fence the vineyard. If the slave fulfils this task, the master promises to set him free. So, when the master is away, the slave starts to build fences around the vineyard, but when he is finished, the slave decides also to pull out the weeds and to take care of the garden generally, so that the vineyard will become more attractive and flourish. When the master comes back and sees how the slave has not only fenced his vineyard but also has removed the weeds, he is very pleased with him and decides to assemble his son, his friends, and his advisors. He then declares in their presence that he will make the slave his joint-heir together with his son, "because when he thought of the good [deed], he did not ignore it, but completed it." The son approves of this action.

Then, as a coda,<sup>18</sup> the parable adds an extra scene that follows the structure of the first part (i.e., the slave does something—his deed is evaluated positively—his reward is announced publicly by his master in front of his

15 Osiek, "The Oral World of Early Christianity in Rome," 155.

16 Note also his "rich allusions" to a variety of Jewish, Graeco-Roman, and Christian writings (Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 24; cf. Verheyden, "The Shepherd of Hermas," 69–70).

17 Greek text from Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 3, *Epistle of Barnabas, Papias and Quadratus, Epistle to Diognetus. The Shepherd of Hermas*, LCL 25 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 321. All translations of the Shepherd of Hermas are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

18 Scholars like Carolyn Osiek and Martin Dibelius considered this "coda" a later addition. See Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas*, 171, and Martin Dibelius, *Der Hirt des Hermas* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1923), 564–565. According to Dibelius, the coda is a separate story that has been merged here with the parable of the vineyard to connect that parable with the theme of fasting and sharing from the introduction.

family and friends): A few days later, when the good slave is sent the leftovers of a party he himself does not attend,<sup>19</sup> he only takes what he needs and shares the rest with his fellow slaves. His fellow slaves appreciate this act and pray for him. When the master hears of this, he calls his son and friends together again. He tells them what the slave has done, and they confirm that it is a good thing for the slave to be made fellow heir of the master's son.

The text of the parable is immediately followed by a series of applications or explanations, whose precise number remains the subject of scholarly debate today.<sup>20</sup> I will argue that there are three. Since Hermas indicates that he does not understand the parable, the shepherd offers a rather straightforward explanation (the *first explanation*), namely that he who keeps God's commandments pleases God, but that he who does good beyond the commandments shall gain even more glory (Herm. Sim. 56.2–3 [5.2.2–3]). Despite this rather clear explanation, Hermas again states that he does not understand the parable. The shepherd is reluctant to offer a further explanation of the parable: "He answered me: 'You are very arrogant in asking questions. You should not ask anything at all,' he said, 'for if it is necessary that something is explained to you, it will be explained.'"<sup>21</sup> In the end, the shepherd does give in, and a *second explanation* follows (Herm. Sim. 58 [5.5]). Schematically, this second explanation looks as follows:

19 It is worth noticing that the slave is absent during the meal mentioned in Herm. Sim. 55.9 (5.2.9). Is that because a) he is already released, but not entitled to a place at the meal, being only a freedman (this is not probable, since he is still designated in the story with the title "slave" and since the parable speaks of his fellow slaves); or because b) he was still a slave, but not needed at the meal to serve, since he was an agricultural slave, and not a house slave? Whatever the reason for his absence, the fact that the master sent his slave a special envoy with food shows the master's high esteem for his (former) slave. In tractate Berakhot of the Babylonian Talmud, we read of a similar gesture, when the blessed cup of wine is sent to the wife of Rav Nahman, who—apparently—stayed in a different room (b. Ber. 51b). We should take notice of the way the slave in the parable mimics his master's generosity in sharing food, thereby increasing his master's honour and consequently receiving abundant praise. This brings to mind the parable of the Unforgiving Slave (Matt 18:23–35), in which the slave is similarly expected to imitate his master; the slave's failure to reproduce his master's forgiveness earns him a severe penalty.

20 See below, e.g., footnote 26.

21 The theme of secrecy with respect to the explanation of parables is a theme we find in the New Testament as well (see Matt 13:10–17). On the theme of secrecy regarding parables in early Christianity, see, e.g., Marcel Poorthuis, "Origen on Parables and Prayer: Tensions between the Esoteric and the Universal," in *Prayer and the Transformation of the Self in Early Christian Mystagogy*, ed. Hans van Loon, Giselle de Nie, Michiel Op de Coul, and Peter Van Egmond, LAHR 18 (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 95–110.

TABLE 1 Second explanation

Parable	Application
Vineyard	This world
Owner of the vineyard	God
Slave	Son of God <sup>a</sup>
Vines	People planted by God himself
Fences	Angels "who keep his people together"
Weeds	Transgressions of the slaves of God
Dainties	Commandments which God gave to his people
Friends and advisers	Angels who were created first
Absence of the master	Time remaining until God's return

- a Note how in this explanation the son in the parable does not have a counterpart in the application. The Old Latin translation of the Shepherd of Hermas adds: "and the son is the holy spirit." See Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers. Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 578–579. See also footnote 27 below.

In spite of this, Hermas still does not understand the entire parable. As a follow-up question, he asks the shepherd why the Son of God is represented as a slave. The shepherd does not agree:

'Listen,' he said, 'the Son of God is not presented in the guise of a slave (εἰς δούλου τρόπον), but he is presented in great power and lordship.' 'How can it be, lord?,' I asked, 'I do not understand.' 'Because,' he said, 'God planted the vineyard—that is, he created the people and gave them over to his son. And the son placed the angels over them, to protect them ...'

Herm. Sim. 59.1–2 [5.6.1–2]

The shepherd's interpretation takes yet another turn with a discussion of the way the slave and the master's son will join in the master's heritage (Herm. Sim. 59 [5.6]). As Bogdan G. Bucur has shown, drawing on the work of Henne,<sup>22</sup> the only way to make sense of this section is to assume that a new level of interpretation has been reached, a phenomenon which Henne has called "allegorical polysemy,"<sup>23</sup> and is described by Bucur as "ascribing to

22 Philippe Henne, *La christologie chez Clément de Rome et dans le Pasteur d'Hermas*, Paradosis 33 (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1992).

23 Henne, *La christologie*, 181.

the elements of a narration several levels of allegorical interpretation that are coherent in themselves, yet oftentimes incompatible among themselves.”<sup>24</sup> According to Herm. Sim. 59 (5.6), the parable can be summarized with the following scheme (the *third explanation*):

TABLE 2 Third explanation

Parable	Application
Owner of the vineyard	God
Slave	Flesh
Son	Holy Spirit
Advisers	Angels

This new level of interpretation does not concern Jesus, but the Christian believer: “The election refers to any individual (any ‘flesh’) that has faithfully served the holy spirit and has not defiled it in any way.”<sup>25</sup> On the basis of this explanation, the final section (Herm. Sim. 60 [5.7]) adds the exhortation not to defile the spirit or the flesh, so that one can and shall live with God.

Given these different applications, we might wonder about the original parable and its original meaning. As Lambartus Nijendijk rightly observed: “Die Lektüre von Sim. verweckt bereits auf den ersten Blick den Eindruck, dass Gleichnis und Deutungen nicht als ein einheitliches, durchgehendes Stück entstanden sind, sondern sich vielmehr aus mehreren Teilen zusammengesetzt haben, die nur lose miteinander verbunden sind.”<sup>26</sup> The complexity of the explanation can be partly explained “as the unfortunate result of squeezing a Christological meaning out of a parable that was initially about fasting.”<sup>27</sup>

24 Bogdan G. Bucur, “The Son of God and the Angelomorphic Holy Spirit: A Rereading of the Shepherd’s Christology,” *ZNW* 98 (2007): 133. We find this way of allegorizing also in the work of the (early) church fathers. See, for example, Archibald M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960); David B. Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus: Their Imaginative Receptions across Two Millennia* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

25 Bucur, “The Son of God and the Angelomorphic Holy Spirit,” 136.

26 Nijendijk, “Die Christologie des Hirten des Hermas,” 84–85. Some scholars also doubt the unity of the parable itself. Dibelius, for example, divided the parable into two parables: a parable about a vineyard and a parable about a banquet with three meanings (Dibelius, *Der Hirt des Hermas*, 564ff).

27 Bucur, “The Son of God and the Angelomorphic Holy Spirit,” 132, with reference to Henne. One reason to reject a christological explanation of the parable as original is that such an interpretation would imply the presence of two sons of God in the parables: the slave



Wilson proposes that there was an “original” parable from oral tradition that was taken up, appropriated, and reinterpreted by Hermas.<sup>28</sup> Wilson does not indicate whether that “original parable” dealt with fasting, and, given the tradition of parables with an *absente ero*-theme, I have my doubts about that possibility. First, the theme of fasting only appears—if at all—in the slave eating only a little from the banquet.<sup>29</sup> Second, if we compare this parable to other *absente ero*-parables, from both rabbinic and Christian literature,<sup>30</sup> we may see some obvious resemblances among them. There is an absent master, there is a slave with a certain responsibility, there is a moment of reckoning (now only positive), and there is a reward. That reward consists of freedom and adoption (see below for the promise of freedom in Graeco-Roman literature). These elements do not point to a parable about fasting, but to a parable about good behaviour in the absence of the (heavenly) master.

### 3 The Fifth Parable and Parable Definitions

Before we turn to the *absente ero*-theme, we have to decide whether the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas can be classified as a parable, since—as we remarked in the introduction—the parables of the Shepherd have often merely been seen as visions or allegories. By way of example, we will take a look at Adolf Jülicher’s discussion of this fifth parable in his classic *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*. According to Jülicher, the fifth parable is not a parable, but an allegory “vom reinsten Wasser.”<sup>31</sup> His reasoning can be roughly summarized in two arguments, one that pertains to the application(s) of the parable and one that pertains to flaws in its plot. With regard to the latter, Jülicher observes that, for

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and the son of the vineyard-owner (Nijendijk, “Die Christologie des Hirten des Hermas,” 87). In his study on the Christology of the Shepherd of Hermas, Nijendijk concludes that “die eschatologische Deutung des Gleichnisses, von der wir ... Spuren gefunden haben, verträgt sich nicht mit der Deutung des Sklaven als ‘Son Gottes’ in v,5,2b-v,6,4a” (“Die Christologie des Hirten des Hermas,” 89). The alternative is that the slave represents the believer, the vineyard God’s people, the vineyard-owner God, and his son God’s Son (89–90). Nijendijk also thinks that the identification of the fence with the angels is secondary, and that the weeds do not represent sins. Nijendijk’s simple summary of (at least the first part of) the parable’s message is: “mehr Tun als das Gefragte” (90).

- 28 Bucur, “The Son of God and the Angelomorphic Holy Spirit,” 132; John C. Wilson, *Toward a Reassessment of the Shepherd of Hermas: Its Date and Pneumatology* (New York: Mellen Biblical Press, 1993), 131.
- 29 Nijendijk has argued that the focus of the parable seems to be more on the copious banquet than on the fasting (“Die Christologie des Hirten des Hermas,” 85–86).
- 30 For an overview of relevant parables, see Stoutjesdijk, “Not Like the Rest of the Slaves?,” 135–200 (chapter 5 “When the Master is Away: Obeying the Master’s Orders”).
- 31 Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1:208.

example, the journey of the master is not motivated, that the manumission of the slave is too big a reward given “der Geringfügigkeit des Auftrags,”<sup>32</sup> and that the faithfulness of the slave vis-à-vis his owner (part one of the parable) has nothing to do with the kindness he shows to his fellow slaves in part two of the parable. With regard to the parable’s applications, Jülicher argues that it has no didactical or rhetorical value on its own; the parable is only designed in view of its application.<sup>33</sup> However, in my view both of the arguments enunciated by Jülicher deserved to be held up for scrutiny. When it comes to the parable’s applications, I have argued above that they are the product of a process of allegorical polysemy and that it might be assumed that the parable originally had a simple(r) application. Moreover, one could easily argue that many parables were only composed in view of certain applications or rhetorical goals. When it comes to the plot holes allegedly discovered by Jülicher, I find that he does not wield the same criteria for the New Testament parables, which are also often elliptical and sometimes not completely logical. Moreover, his argument is actually about the *quality* of the parable and not about its genre.

In my opinion, the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas can quite straightforwardly be categorized as a parable. First, it is important to observe that the author introduces the parable as such: “Listen to this *parable* that I am about to tell you” (Ἀκουε τὴν παραβολήν, ἣν μέλλω σοι λέγειν). Moreover, from Herm. Sim. 56 (5.3) onwards the parable is given explanation(s) or application(s) (“I will explain everything to you” [πάντα σοι ἐπιλύσω]), as is usual with parables. From a more formal point of view, we might want to know whether Hermas’s parable matches parable definitions.<sup>34</sup> If we use the influential definition of Ruben Zimmermann, for example, we see that Hermas’s fifth parable meets all of his criteria. It is a short,<sup>35</sup> narrative, realistic,<sup>36</sup> and fictional text with

32 Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1:208.

33 Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 1:208.

34 For the scholarly debate on the parable genre, see, e.g., Eric Ottenheijm and Marcel Poorthuis, “Parables in Changing Contexts: a Preliminary Status Quaestionis,” in *Parables in Changing Contexts: Essays on the Study of Parables in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism*, JCP 35 (Brill: Leiden, 2020), 1–11; for an overview of parable scholarship with a focus on rabbinic parables, as well as another definition, see Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilot: An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, TSAJ 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 11, 20–64.

35 With 437 Greek words, the fifth parable is, arguably, long, but only slightly longer than the longest parable of the New Testament, which is that of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32; 391 words).

36 Although the son’s elevation to heir might be surprising (see below), the staging of the parable is realistic and references to a supernatural world are absent.

clear transfer signals and an appeal structure (cf. Herm. Sim. 56.9 [5.3.9]; 60.4 [5.7.4]). Co-text and context are needed for the reader to interpret the parable correctly. This context does not consist only of the immediate textual context in the Shepherd of Hermas itself, but also of the well-known parabolic images and motives it evokes, together with the associations that these images carry with them. An exploration of its key theme, *absente ero*, in the next section will show how the content of the fifth parable closely resembles New Testament and early rabbinic counterparts.

#### 4 *Absente Ero* in Social Reality and Parables

If we look solely at the narrative itself, we see that the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas relates to a greater group of Christian and rabbinic *absente ero*-themed parables, but also adds something significantly new to that theme. The term “*absente ero*” denotes a category of stories in which the master goes away (often abroad) while his slaves stay at home and have to take care of their master’s property.<sup>37</sup> When the master returns, a moment of reckoning occurs: is the master satisfied with the work that the slaves have done? The fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas fits this pattern perfectly. As Chris de Wet writes, “the *Shepherd* is part of a longstanding Christian tradition in which agricultural slavery functions to highlight the workings of God and his kingdom.”<sup>38</sup>

##### 4.1 *Absente Ero* in Social Reality as Reflected in Agricultural Handbooks

It is clear from ancient agricultural manuals that the topos of *absente ero* had firm roots in social reality. With the rise of an elite that owned many estates in different locations, owners only visited their property several times a year to see whether the farms were being led effectively.<sup>39</sup> The manuals describe how the daily supervision of the estates (*latifundia*) lay in the hands of the *vilicus*

37 For this term, see Kathleen McCarthy, *Slaves, Masters, and the Art of Authority in Plautine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 71, and its later adoption by J. Albert Harrill, “The Psychology of Slaves in the Gospel Parables: A Case Study in Social History,” *BZ* 55 (2011): 71–73.

38 Chris L. de Wet, *The Unbound God: Slavery and the Formation of Early Christian Thought* (London: Routledge, 2018), 82. De Wet also points to a difference between this tradition and the parable of the Shepherd of Hermas (“this parable exhibits a far more complex metaphorical layering than any of those in the New Testament”), but I would argue that the parable proper does not show these layers; rather, its application does.

39 Cf. Cato, *Agr.* 1.1.

(Gk. ἐπίτροπος), a slave who was set aside for this task and received additional rewards for it. The manuals offer a painstaking description of the capabilities that such a man should have.<sup>40</sup> The general idea was that these slaves could not be trusted,<sup>41</sup> an idea also found in popular culture of the time, like the Plautine comedies.<sup>42</sup> This made a firm and strict moment of reckoning imperative. In Cato the Elder's (234–149 BCE) *De Agricultura*, the first steps of a master's visit to his farm are meticulously described:

When the master arrives at the farmstead, after paying his respects to the god of the household, let him go over the whole farm, if possible, on the same day; if not, at least on the next. When he has learned the condition of the farm, what work has been accomplished and what remains to be done, let him call in his overseer the next day (*postridie eius diei vilicum vocet*) and inquire of him what part of the work has been completed, what has been left undone; whether what has been finished was done betimes, and whether it is possible to complete the rest; and what was the yield of wine, grain, and all other products. Having gone into this, he should make a calculation of the labourers and the time consumed.

CATO, *Agr.* 2.1–2 [Hooper and Ash, LCL]

Elsewhere we read how slaves who are sickly or grow old form a liability and should be sold (Cato, *Agr.* 2.2–7). Slaves who turned criminal or insubordinate were to be judged and punished (Columella, *Rust.* 1.8.16–19). In the end, the values of discipline (*disciplina*), watchfulness (*custodia*), and productivity govern the evaluation of the slaves in the absence of their master (Columella, *Rust.* 1.8.19–20).

The ancient agricultural manuals also paid attention to the effect of rewards. Given his position as his master's representative, a *vilicus* enjoyed some privileges, like choosing his own wife and having his own quarters (Varro, *Rust.* 1.17.4–7). Furthermore, good behaviour could be rewarded with a variety of rewards: food, clothing, time off, permission to keep one's own animals, etc. Next to those more "material" rewards, Columella describes the possibility of inviting a good slave to dinner (Columella, *Rust.* 1.8.5). Of course, the ultimate

40 Columella, *Rust.* 1.8.2ff.; Cato, *Agr.* 5.1–2; Varro, *Rust.* 1.17.4–7.

41 Columella, *Rust.* 1.1.20.

42 E.g., Plautus, *Pers.* 28–31 (for this reference see Harrill, "Psychology of Slaves," 71).

form of reward was manumission,<sup>43</sup> but that was probably only limited to those Moses Finley famously called “faithful slaves.”<sup>44</sup>

#### 4.2 Absente Ero in the Parables

The theme of the absent master not only occurs in agricultural manuals, Plautine comedies, and—as I will discuss later—Graeco-Roman novels, but is also present in early Christian and early rabbinic slavery parables. The frequent appearance of this theme made it one of the core foci of my PhD research on slavery parables.<sup>45</sup> New Testament examples are the parable of the Talents (Luke 19:11–27//Matt 25:14–30), the Faithful Slave (Luke 12:35–38), the Wise and the Unwise Slave (Luke 12:42–46//Matt 24:45–51), the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1–8), and the Doorkeepers (Mark 13:33–37). In rabbinic literature we also find parables (*meshalim*) with absent masters, for instance in Mekh. R. Ishm. Beshalah 5:58–79 (The Stubborn Guard) and Mekh. R. Ishm. Shirata 2:130–133 (the Blind and the Lame Guard).<sup>46</sup> When it comes to absent masters in an explicit agricultural context, we should mention Sifre Deut. 8 (A Master Gives His Slave a Field), and, of course, the Shepherd of Hermas. What all these parables have in common is the occurrence of slaves who have to work unsupervised and masters who come back at a certain moment in time to reward and/or punish their slaves.

As an example, I would briefly like to discuss a parable in Sifre Deut. 8 (a rabbinic commentary on the book of Deuteronomy; final redaction in the late third century).<sup>47</sup> Although the parable speaks about a gift,<sup>48</sup> and the element of reward is missing, the parable might help us in making a proper assessment of the fifth parable of Hermas. The parable in question is a response to Deut 1:8:

43 See, e.g., Henrik Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

44 Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1980), 103–104.

45 See Stoutjesdijk, “Not Like the Rest of the Slaves?,” 135–200.

46 Cf. b. Sanh. 91a–b, Lev. Rab. 4:5, Apocr. Ezek., frag. 1.

47 Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 273.

48 This is rather problematic, since in Roman law it was officially not possible for a slave to own money or property. That is why I would like to suggest that the background to this parable is the *peculium*, a sum of money (a fund) that slaves earned themselves during their time as slaves, and with which (some) masters allowed them to buy their freedom. As Hezser remarks, “both Roman and rabbinic law allowed slaves to accept and make use of gifts they received from their masters or third parties.” (Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 166).

“See, I have set the land before you; go in and take possession of the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them.”<sup>49</sup> The textual problem facing the rabbis is why the verse speaks both about “your ancestors” and also mentions those ancestors (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) by name.<sup>50</sup> The answer of the midrash is that all the patriarchs were, *individually*, worthy of the holy land. Then this parable follows:

A parable (משל). It is like a king who gave his slave a certain field as a gift,<sup>51</sup> gave it to him as it was (למלך שנתן לעבדו שדה אחת במתנה לא נתנה לו אלא) (כמות שהיא עמד (מה בידי לא נתנה לי אלא כמות שהיא).” Again, he planted a vineyard, and he said, “What I have is only that which was given to me as it was (מה בידי לא נתנה לי אלא כמות שהיא).”

So, when the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Abraham, our father, the land, he gave it only like it was (לא נתנה לו אלא כמות שהיא), as it is said: *Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you* (Genesis 13:17). Abraham rose and improved it (עמד והשביחה), as it is said: *Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba* (Genesis 21:33). Isaac rose and improved it, as it is said: *Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold* (Genesis 26:12). Jacob rose and improved it, as it is said: *And he bought the plot of land* (Genesis 33:19).<sup>52</sup>

This parable compares the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to a slave who receives a field from the king as a gift.<sup>53</sup> In her interpretation of the parable, Catherine Hezser emphasizes the slave’s improvements of what was given to him, seeking a connection with the parable of the Talents: “What matters is the master’s/God’s endowment of his slave/human beings with something, a property or talent, that can be used and improved. Both parables stress the advantages of making good use of what one owns. To refrain from using what

49 All biblical quotations are from the NRSV. Other translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

50 See also Louis Finkelstein, “The Sources of the Tannaitic Midrashim,” *JQR* 31 (1941), 235n33.

51 Sifre as quoted in Midrash ha-Gadol reads מתנה instead of במתנה, resulting in: “who gives his slave a field. The gift was only given as it was.”

52 Saul Horovitz, *Sifre Deuteronomy* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 16 (Hebrew).

53 See also Reuven Hammer, *Sifre. A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, YJS 24 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 394 (note 3, under piska 8).

one has received from God is almost equalled to disobedience towards one's master in the gospel tale."<sup>54</sup>

Following this interpretation, I see the following similarities between the Shepherd of Hermas and the parable in Sifre Deut. 8:

1. A king (master) "gives" a field to his slave;
2. The presence of a vineyard (probably symbolising the land of Israel);
3. The slave improves the field;
4. A positive evaluation.<sup>55</sup>

An interesting difference with the Shepherd of Hermas is that the slave in Sifre is not rewarded for his work. In fact, to the best of my knowledge, we find no examples of slaves being rewarded in any parables from the rabbinic corpus.<sup>56</sup> A parable from Sifre Deut. 28 makes clear that it is a precarious, perhaps even dangerous, thing to do for a slave to go beyond his master's orders.<sup>57</sup> In the New Testament, the situation is different. There we find at least two parables in which slaves are rewarded, both in Luke 12: the parable of the Serving Master<sup>58</sup> and the parable of the Talents/Pounds.<sup>59</sup> However, this element of going beyond the master's wishes does not play a significant role in either one of these parables. Moreover, I do not know of any parable, whether in the Synoptic Gospels or in rabbinic literature, in which a slave obtains his freedom (for following his master's orders, or otherwise). This is why it has been noted that "for readers acquainted with the gospels, the parable [of the Shepherd of

54 Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, 358.

55 That these elements appear in both a rabbinic parable and an early Christian parable might lend credibility to Dibelius's claim that the fifth parable's story elements "zweifellos aus dem Judentum [stammen]" (Dibelius, *Der Hirt des Hermas*, 565).

56 A famous saying from m. Avot 1:3 might prove that this is not remarkable after all: "Antigonus of Soko received [the law] from Simeon the Just. He used to say: 'Be not like slaves that serve the master for the sake of receiving a ration (פֶּרֶט), but be like slaves that serve the master not for the sake of receiving a ration; and let the fear of Heaven be upon you'" (following ms Kaufmann [folio 169r]). Cf. the slave simile in Col 3:22.

57 A similar message is conveyed by a parable in Sifra Nedava 2:6, about a slave who brings more than he is ordered to, of whom it is said: "Behold, this is like transgressing his [i.e., God's] words." (Translation mine, on the basis of the text in Louis Finkelstein, *Sifra on Leviticus According to Vatican Manuscript Assemani 66 with Variants from the other Manuscripts, Genizah Fragments, Early Editions and Quotations by Medieval Authorities and with References to parallel Passages and Commentaries*, 5 vols. [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1983–1991], 2:22 [Hebrew]).

58 Luke 12:37: "Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them."

59 Matt 25:28–29 (//Luke 19:24–26): "So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance."

Hermas] starts on a familiar note, but ends surprisingly.”<sup>60</sup> That the slave is not only manumitted but also adopted is, according to Carolyn Osiek, “a narrative element that would have been as surprising to second-century hearers as to modern ones. Here the story could end.”<sup>61</sup> Jennifer Glancy has even called this reward “distinctive and countercultural.”<sup>62</sup> According to Mary Ann Beavis, this “unexpected outcome” may be due to “the author’s identity as a formerly enslaved person, real or fictionalized.”<sup>63</sup> In that case, “the many intertextual echoes of the synoptic parables in Hermas’ similitude suggest that this story is a reimaging of a slave parable by a formerly enslaved person.”<sup>64</sup>

Without wanting to discount this possibility, I would like to draw attention to another aspect, namely that of Graeco-Roman manumission stories versus Jewish-Christian manumission stories. Even though virtually no examples of early rabbinic or Christian parables or other stories in which slaves are freed are known to us (even Rabbi Gamaliel does not succeed in liberating his slave, although he clearly wants to!),<sup>65</sup> it was not an uncommon topos in Graeco-Roman stories.<sup>66</sup> We find the release of good slaves in several Plautine comedies (second century BCE), including *Rudens*, *Epidicus*, *Miles Gloriosus*, and *Persia*. Similarly, in *Vita Aesopi*, the famous slave and fable teller Aesop is manumitted. This might suggest that the manumission of slaves as a reward for their good work was more a Graeco-Roman literary topos than a Jewish(-Christian) one.

#### 4.3 Absente Ero in Graeco-Roman Novels

In support of this argument, I would like to offer a brief discussion of the story of *Daphnis and Chloe*, a Graeco-Roman novel. *Daphnis and Chloe* is a second-century pastoral prose romance written by the Greek novelist Longus, about

60 Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard,” 655.

61 Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 171. Osiek adds (note 9) that in comparable slave-son relationships from the New Testament (John 8:35–36; Mark 12:1–12; Gal 3:26–4:11), the relations between slaves and sons are rather “antagonistic.”

62 Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 118.

63 Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard,” 660.

64 Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard,” 661.

65 y. Ketub. 3:10; b. B. Qam. 74b. An exception is the story of Judith (Jdt 16:28). Another (possible) exception is a story in Mekh. R. Ishm. Pisch. 15, where a few slave women are “freed” by accident because they submerged in the mikveh—although they keep serving their mistress (cf. Elizabeth L. Gibson, *The Jewish Manumission Inscriptions*, TSAJ 75 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999], 87).

66 I would like to stress that I am talking about stories; the debate on actual manumission in antiquity falls outside the scope of this article. For that topic, see, e.g., J. Albert Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, HUT 32 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995); Gibson, *The Jewish Manumission Inscriptions*.



two exposed children who are raised by slaves and later discover that they are of noble blood and are then reinstated as their biological parents' children and heirs. In a number of scenes, *Daphnis and Chloe* shows similarities with the Shepherd of Hermas.

Inspecting the estate:

### Shepherd of Hermas

5. After some time the master of the field and of the slave came [back] and he went into the vineyard. And seeing that around the vineyard a fence was beautifully built, and that it was dug and that all the weeds were pulled out and that the vineyard was flourishing, *he rejoiced greatly over the deeds of the slave* (ἐχάρη λίαν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἔργοις τοῦ δούλου).

### Daphnis and Chloe

4.13.4 Dionysophanes (i.e., the master) was arriving with Cleariste ... The following days he spent inspecting Lamo's (i.e., the slave) work. When he saw the plains furrowed, the vines in shoot, the park in its beauty (for Astylus was taking responsibility for the flowers), *he was extraordinarily pleased* (ἦδeto περιττώς) ...<sup>67</sup>

This ancient tale precisely follows the order of a master's visit to his farm, as it is laid down in the ancient manuals. It also resembles the situation of the Shepherd of Hermas.

Promise of manumission:

### Shepherd of Hermas

6. Now he called his beloved son with him, who was to be his heir, and his friends, who were his advisors, and he told them what he had commanded his slave, and what he found done. These congratulated the slave with the testimony that the master had testified about him. 7. And he said to them: *"I promised freedom to this slave* (ἐγὼ τῷ δούλῳ τούτῳ ἐλευθερίαν ἐπηγγειλάμην) ..."

### Daphnis and Chloe

4.13.4 The following days he spent inspecting Lamo's work. When he saw the plains furrowed, the vines in shoot, the park in its beauty (for Astylus was taking responsibility for the flowers), he was extraordinarily pleased, complimented Lamo, *and promised to make him a free man* (ἐλεύθερον ἀφήσειν ἐπηγγέλλετο)."

67 Text and translation of *Daphnis and Chloe* are from Jeffrey Henderson, ed. and trans., *Longus, Xenophon of Ephesus. Daphnis and Chloe. Anthia and Habrocomes*, LCL 69 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 165ff.

In both stories, the reward for the job well done by the slave is manumission. It should be noted how the element of a promise plays a role in both stories. Manumission is not something that is implemented directly, but is used as an incentive by masters to stimulate their underlings in their enterprises.

Slave becomes son:

### Shepherd of Hermas

7. And he (i.e., the master) said to them: "I promised freedom to this slave, when he would carry out my command, that I commanded to him: and he has carried out my command and he added a good work to the vineyard, and he has pleased me greatly. *Now in return for the work that he has done, I want to make him joint heir with my son* (ἀντὶ τούτου οὖν τοῦ ἔργου οὗ εἰργάσατο θέλω αὐτὸν συγκληρονόμον τῷ υἱῷ μου ποιῆσαι), because when he thought of the good [deed], he did not ignore it, but completed it."

8. *The son of the master agreed with this intention, to make the slave fellow heir with the son* (ταύτῃ τῇ γνώμῃ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ δεσπότης συνηδύοκῆσεν αὐτῷ, ἵνα συγκληρονόμος γένηται ὁ δοῦλος τῷ υἱῷ).

### Daphnis and Chloe

4.22.3: [brother:] "Stop, Daphnis. Don't be afraid. I am your brother, and those who were your masters before are now your parents." ...

4.24.3–4: [father:] "And you, Astylus, *don't be upset at receiving part of my property instead of the whole; to sensible men nothing is more valuable than a brother.* (μέρος ληψόμενος ἀντὶ πάσης τῆς οὐσίας, κρεῖττον γὰρ τοῖς εὖ φρονούσιν ἀδελφοῦ κτήμα οὐδέν) ... For I shall leave you both a great deal of land, a large number of useful servants, gold, silver, and all the other possessions that rich men have."

What is perhaps surprising in both accounts is how the (other) son is involved in the decision to elevate the slave to the level of heir. In *Daphnis and Chloe*, this decision is explicitly addressed as being possibly disadvantageous to the other son, who loses property and money. A difference between the two stories is that the slave in *Daphnis and Chloe* is restored to his former, free, status as heir, while in the *Shepherd of Hermas* the slave really gains a new status.

Sharing food:

### Shepherd of Hermas

9. After a few days, the householder organized a banquet and he sent to

### Daphnis and Chloe

4.15: "They were all amazed, especially Cleariste [the master's wife], who

him (the slave) many foods from the banquet. *When the slave received the foods that were sent to him by his master, he kept [only] what was sufficient for him, and the rest he gave to his fellow slaves* (λαβῶν δὲ ὁ δούλος τὰ ἐδέσματα τὰ πεμφθέντα αὐτῷ ἀπὸ τοῦ δεσπότης αὐτοῦ τὰ ἀρκούντα αὐτῷ ἦρε, τὰ δὲ λοιπὰ τοῖς συνδούλοις αὐτοῦ διέδωκεν). 10. When his fellow slaves received the foods, they rejoiced and began to pray for him, so that he may find [even] greater favour with the master, because he had treated them like this.

swore that she would indeed give him the presents, since he was a fine musician as well as a fine goatherd. *They went up to the farm and had lunch and sent Daphnis some of what they were eating. He shared it with Chloe and enjoyed having a taste of urban cuisine ...*"

There is yet a final similarity that catches the eye. In both stories,<sup>68</sup> the slaves receive some food from their master's table—a reward in itself.<sup>69</sup> The way they deal with that food—the way they imitate the generosity of their masters—shows that they truly deserve to be lifted to the level of heirs.

To be clear, I do not want to argue that the author of the Shepherd of Hermas knew, or was even influenced by, the story of Daphnis and Chloe. What I do want to argue is that the aforementioned comparison shows that Hermas had a good knowledge of standard Graeco-Roman story elements and scenes, and that he fused that knowledge with his apprehension of Christian and Jewish parable motifs.

## 5 Pauline Slavery Metaphors

As such, the manumission of the slave in Hermas's fifth parable can be explained by his social location in (lower class) Rome, where manumission stories were more common than they were in the Christian and rabbinic literature of Roman Palestine. But there is also another factor that I would like to briefly take into consideration, which is that Hermas may have combined

68 Notice that the scene from Daphnis and Chloe displayed here, precedes in the novel the scene in which Daphnis is reinstated as son and heir.

69 Cf. Seneca's 47th letter, 15: "Invite some to your table because they deserve the honor, and others that they may come to deserve it" (Richard M. Gummere, *Seneca: Epistles, Volume 1: Epistles 1–65*, LCL 75 [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917], 309). See also footnote 19 above.

elements from synoptic and rabbinic slavery parables with Pauline slavery metaphors. The transition from slave to son described in the parable<sup>70</sup> may remind us (as well as Hermas) of Gal 4, especially 4:7: “So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.” It might also remind us of Rom 8:15–17 and, in a slightly different way, of Col 3:22–24. All these texts promise adoption and partaking—together with Christ (the biological son of the slave’s master in the Shepherd of Hermas?)—in the heritage of the master (God) to (faithful) slaves. It may be that Hermas was inspired by this imagery and took it up in the composition of his parable, perhaps also stimulated by his own biography. As has recently been claimed, “[e]ven if the freedman Hermas had not been adopted like the slave of the parable, he could well have regarded himself and others like him as adopted sons/heirs of God in the Pauline sense.”<sup>71</sup>

## 6 Conclusions

In the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas, the keeping of commandments is compared to the building of fences. With the title of this article, I am (playfully) suggesting that there is a connection with m. Avot 1:1, which says that one should build “a fence around the Torah (ועשו סִיג לַתּוֹרָה).” Whether or not this particular connection can be proven, I in any case hope this chapter has shown convincingly that the “deeply Jewish” Hermas relies for his parable imagery on its rabbinic and New Testament counterparts (*absente ero*/slavery parables) and is truly part of a parable-telling tradition. Considering its counterparts in rabbinic and New Testament literature, as well as its structural features, I see no reason not to consider the fifth parable of the Shepherd of Hermas a full-fledged parable. Finally, I would like to argue that this fifth parable is a good—perhaps even the best—example of Christian parable telling after Jesus; the parable has a complete narrative with an introduction and an application. It is clearly influenced and inspired by New Testament, and possibly Jewish, parables and metaphors, but its creator has also taken the creative liberty of

70 Herm. Sim. 55.7 (5.2.7): “And he (i.e., the master) said to them (i.e., his son and friends): ‘I promised freedom to this slave, if he carried out my command, which I commanded to him: and he has carried out my command and he added a good work to the vineyard, and he has pleased me greatly. Now in return for the work that he has done, I want to make him joint heir with my son, because when he thought of the good [deed], he did not ignore it, but completed it.’” See also Herm. Sim. 55.11 (5.2.11).

71 Beavis, “The Parable of the Slave, Son, and Vineyard,” 666.

adapting the parable to his own, Roman context, in which manumission was a greater possibility—at least literary, but perhaps also real life—than it was in the Jewish context, and, possibly, to his own biography. In this way, Hermas created a truly Christian as well as innovative and powerful parable, one that deserves to be studied.

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