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The Banquet Invitation Parables in Matthew and Luke

The image of a feast is a commonly used in the Christian tradition to describe the reward of eternal life that is our hope as Christians. This image is found in a parable told by Jesus in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. The two versions of the parable are very similar, but there are also some distinct differences, which make for an interesting study. In this paper I will compare and contrast the two accounts of the parable looking first at their location and context in each gospel. Then I will compare the two accounts in regards to basic structure, story details, and wording. Finally, I will look at interpretations of the parables, noting that they have the same basic message, but differ in their emphasis.

In both versions of this parable, there is some kind of dinner to which guests are invited. In both cases, the original invitees refuse to come, so others are invited in their place. In general, both versions warn of the danger of rejecting Jesus' invitation to the kingdom. However, Matthew and Luke place the parables in different contexts, and have different details, which affect the specific meaning and emphasis of the parables.

First, we will compare the location and context of the parables in each gospel. The parable of the wedding feast in Matthew occurs in 22:1-14, which is within the Jerusalem ministry of Jesus preceding his passion. Chapter 21 begins with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in the

midst of a crowd shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David” (1-11). Jesus then proceeds to enter the temple, drive out the moneychangers and merchants, and heal the blind and lame (12-14). When the chief priests and scribes see all of this, they are indignant (15). Jesus returns to Jerusalem the next day, enters the temple, and begins teaching. At this point, the chief priests and elders come up to him and challenge him saying, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (23). Jesus turns the question back on them, asking them if the baptism of John came from man or from heaven (24-25). Afraid to answer either way, they say that they do not know (26-27).

It is at this point that Jesus counters their challenge of his authority with three parables that describe the current religious leaders as disobedient and rejecting of God’s authority over them. The result of the leaders’ disobedience is their removal from authority.¹ The first parable is about two sons, one who appears that he will obey his father, but does not, and the other who appears that he will disobey, but then ends up obeying (28-32). The second parable is about the owner of a vineyard who leases it out to tenants. When the owner sends servants to collect the fruit of the vineyard, the servants are beaten, killed, and stoned by the tenants. Finally the owner sends his son, whom the tenants also kill. Jesus questions the audience on what the owner will do in response, and they answer that he will kill the tenants and lease the vineyard to others (33-41).

Jesus then follows up with a quotation from Psalm 118:22, “The very stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” and then says, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it” (42-44). The chief priests and Pharisees clearly understood that Jesus was speaking about them, but were unable to do anything because of the crowds (45-46).

¹ R. T. France, *Matthew, Evangelist and Teacher* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1989), 139-140.

This is the backdrop of our parable at the beginning of chapter 22. It is clearly connected with the previous two parables not only because of its position, but it also shares some elements that are parallel with the second parable. In both parables, servants are sent out, in one case to the tenants, and in the other case to those invited to the feast. In both cases, the servants are mistreated and killed. Finally, those who killed the servants end up being put to death themselves.²

The context of the parable in Luke 14:15-24 is very different. This version of the parable occurs during Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, several chapters before his entry into Jerusalem. Chapter 14 begins with Jesus dining at the house of a ruler who is a Pharisee. It was the Sabbath and the Pharisees were watching him (1). Jesus heals a man at the dinner with dropsy, starting out the dinner with controversy (2-6). Next he tells them a parable about humility in the context of a marriage feast (7-11). He then speaks to the host telling him that when he gives a dinner or banquet, he should not only invite those who can repay him in this life, but he should also invite the "poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind," and then he will be repaid at the resurrection (12-14).

All of this talk about dinners and the resurrection appears to inspire one of the dinner guests to say, "Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Jesus uses this connection of the kingdom of God and eating bread to segue to his parable of a banquet.³ In addition to the dining connection, the parable in Luke also has a connection to Jesus' preceding

² Daniel J. Harrington, "Matthew." In *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, edited by Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris, 861-902 (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1989), 893.

³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, Vol. 28A, in *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985), 1049.

teaching with its specific invitation to “the poor and maimed and blind and lame” in verse 21, echoing the mention of those four kinds of guests in verse 13.⁴

The two parables have structures that are similar to each other. There is the description of the banquet, followed by servants going out to call those who were invited. The invitation is rejected. Next the host sends servants out to invite others to fill the banquet hall. To this structure, Matthew adds an extension to the story, and then they both end with a concluding statement.

Comparing the details of the two passages, the first thing we see is that both are related to the kingdom that Jesus has been preaching. In Matthew, Jesus begins the parable with “The kingdom of heaven may be compared...” (2). In the Lucan version, Jesus does not himself explicitly refer to the kingdom in the parable, but he tells the parable in response to the man saying “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (15). After this commonality, we immediately see a divergence. In Matthew, we have a “king” giving a “marriage feast for his son,” (2) but in Luke, we have a “man” giving a “great banquet,” with the identity of the man and the purpose of the banquet not given (16).

In Matthew, more than one servant is sent out (3), but in Luke, a single servant is sent (17). Matthew records initially that those who were invited “would not come” (3), so the king sends out more servants to those who were invited with a more passionate invitation: “Tell those who are invited, Behold, I have made ready my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves are killed, and everything is ready; come to the marriage feast” (4). Luke has the one servant go out once to those who were invited, with the simpler message, “Come; for all is now ready” (17).

⁴ Fitzmyer, 1052.

The responses of those invited are similar in Matthew and Luke, but not exactly the same. In Luke, there is a focus on the excuses given by the invitees, which include inspecting a newly purchased field, examining newly purchased oxen, and a recent marriage. The invitees' excuses are explicitly quoted in Luke (18-20). Matthew has the invitees involved in similar preoccupations, but does not quote them. Instead, he just says that they made light of the invitation and went off to their farm or business (5). However, Matthew also adds a violent response from some of the invitees who "seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them" (6). The violent reception provokes a violent response from the king, who destroys the murderers and burns their city (7).

In both versions, the host responds to the rejection of the invitees by extending the invitation to a larger group in order to have a full number of guests. In Matthew, the king says that the original invitees turned out to not be worthy of the feast (8), so he tells his servants to go "to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find" (9). The result is that the wedding hall was filled with guests, "both bad and good" (10). In Luke, the master sends his servant out twice after the original invitees do not respond. The first time he is sent to the city streets to bring in "the poor and maimed and blind and lame" (21). The servant does this and reports that there is still room for more at the banquet, so the host sends him outside of the city, "to the highways and hedges" in order to fill the house.

Note that both versions have the servant or servants going out three times. In Matthew, the servants go out twice to the original invitees, and then once to the others. In Luke, the servant goes once to the original invitees, and then twice to the others.

Finally, the two versions end differently. The Lucan version ends with a declaration by the host that "none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet" (24), reinforcing the

point of the parable. Matthew, however, adds another phase to the story. Now that the wedding hall is filled with guests, “both bad and good,” the king comes in to see the guests, and he finds one of them not dressed in wedding garments (10-11). When the guest cannot give an explanation for his condition, the king has him thrown out (12-13). The parable then ends with the concluding remark, “For many are called, but few are chosen” (14).

After examining the details of the two texts, let's look at how their differences affect their meaning. The two versions of the parable have the same basic meaning. The host invites the kinds of people whom the listener would expect to be invited, either the subjects of the king, or the friends of the man giving the banquet. In both cases, the event is a special occasion, and the expectation is that those who were invited would accept. What is surprising is that they are more interested in their own everyday affairs and make light of the invitation. This lack of regard is insulting to the host. The host then invites the unexpected, the poor and outsiders, and these are the ones who end up enjoying the banquet. In both versions, there is a connection made with the kingdom (Mt 22:2, Lk 14:15), so the following interpretation is very natural for both versions. Jesus' preaching of the kingdom is analogous to the dinner invitation. Those who reject Jesus' preaching, especially the Jewish religious leaders, are like the first group invited to the dinner. They are the group who would be expected to be invited to the kingdom of God and to respond positively, but they do not recognize the value of Jesus' invitation, and are more interested in other things. Therefore, Jesus' invitation to the kingdom is extended to others who will respond and take the place of those who do not. Although this basic meaning is the same in both versions, there are differences in emphasis.

In Matthew, the connection between the parable and the “kingdom of heaven” is very explicit. Jesus begins by saying “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to...” and then he

goes on to make the host a king and to make the banquet a “marriage feast for his son” (2). “The marriage feast or banquet was a popular way of imagining what life in the coming kingdom would be like. The king and his son clearly represent God the Father and Jesus respectively.”⁵ When the invitees reject the summons, not only are they missing out on a good meal, but they are also rejecting their own ruler and refusing to honor his son. The invitees look even worse because servants are sent out to them twice, and the second time the efforts of the king to prepare the dinner are stressed. They should be well aware of the significance of their rejecting the dinner.

The stakes in Matthew’s version are higher since some of those invited mistreat and kill the servants, and then the king sends troops to destroy the murderers. This aspect of the parable reminds us of how some of the prophets and John the Baptist were treated by those who rejected their message, as well as the fate awaiting Jesus in a few days. The king’s response is a warning that God’s judgment awaits those who so violently reject the message. The intensity of the Matthean version reflects the intense conflict that is going on between Jesus and the authorities in Jerusalem. The violence in the Matthean version may also reflect the future destruction of Jerusalem.⁶

Luke’s version begins with a dinner guest responding to Jesus’ talk about the resurrection by saying, “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God” (15). Such a remark might not ordinarily require a response, but perhaps “Jesus discerns a complacent attitude among the Pharisees and the lawyers toward their share in salvation.” Jesus thus tells a parable about those

⁵ Harrington, 893.

⁶ John L. McKenzie, *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Vol. II, in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, edited by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy, 62-114 (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 100.

who take the invitation to a banquet too lightly.⁷ The host in the Lucan version is not a king, and there is no explicit judgment. The highly charged confrontational atmosphere surrounding the Matthean parable is not the setting of Luke's version. This version is less intense and less condemning of the original invitees, but places more emphasis on the people who will replace the original invitees: the poor and the outsiders. This change of emphasis is first of all indicated by the number of times the servant is sent out. He goes out once to the original invitees, but twice to the replacements. This two-stage invitation of the replacements represents the two types of people who are invited, and implies a temporal separation between their invitations. The first replacements come from the streets of the city, so they are people of the city, but they are outcasts within the city. The first group of replacements fit the poor and the outcast to whom Jesus ministers, in contrast to the rich and powerful who reject him. The second group of replacements appears to come from outside the city, from the highways, which would be the connecting roads between the city and other cities, and from the hedges, which may refer to something that keeps people out of the city. This second group represents the Gentiles who come into the Church after Jesus' resurrection.⁸

While the rejection of the invitation in the Lucan version does not appear to be quite as egregious as the Matthean version, there is more attention paid to the excuses. The invitees go to pains to justify their rejection of the invitation, but closer examination shows their excuses to be hollow. The text says that the servant was sent to "those who had been invited," with the message "Come; for all is now ready" (17). This wording implies that the guests had already

⁷ Jerome Kodell, "Luke." In *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, edited by Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris, 936-980 (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 963.

⁸ Fitzmyer, 1053.

received an invitation, and were now being notified that everything was ready. “A second invitation is required by ancient Near Eastern etiquette (See Est 5); to refuse it is a serious breach of friendship.”⁹ If they already had been invited, and they valued their friendship with the host, then they should not have involved themselves in the other business of buying a field or oxen that would interfere with them being able to attend the banquet. The fact that they were busy with other activities when the banquet was ready shows that they did not value the friendship. Finally, the third excuse of “I have married a wife” (20) hardly seems like a reason to cause “a serious breach of friendship.”

Finally, the biggest difference between the two versions is the extended ending in Matthew, which is practically a second parable.¹⁰ The setup for this extended ending is the fact that the servants “gathered all whom they found, both bad and good” (10), which tells us that there is a mixture of kinds of people at the wedding feast. Since Matthew’s parable has a theme of judgment, and we have both good and bad at the wedding feast, this extended ending shows us how the mixture of good and bad is sorted out. “The point of this second parable is that the reign contains wicked as well as righteous, the same point that is made in the parables of the tares and the net... In these parables the mixed condition of the Church endures until the Judgment.”¹¹

The king comes into the wedding hall and looks at the guests. He sees that one of the guests is not wearing a wedding garment (11). This guest has come to the feast, but he is not dressed for the occasion. The king questions him on how he got in without a wedding garment,

⁹ Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Gospel According to Luke*. Vol. II, in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, edited by Raymond S. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy, 115-164 (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 148.

¹⁰ Alexander Jones, ed. *The Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), 51.

¹¹ McKenzie, 100.

and the man is speechless (12). Therefore, the king has the man cast into the outer darkness, a clear sign of judgment (13). One interpretation of this ending is that it is a depiction of the Last Judgment. Coming to the feast without wedding garments is analogous to a kind of faith without works.¹² “Mere acceptance of the invitation, however, does not guarantee participation in the banquet ... one must receive Jesus’ invitation to the kingdom and act upon it so that when the banquet actually begins, one will be properly prepared to participate.”¹³

The last line of the Matthean parable, “For many are called, but few are chosen” is taken by some to be an indication of some kind of predestination¹⁴, but there does not appear to be any limitation of the invitation at the beginning of the parable. The call goes out to many, but various people, apparently by their own choice, either don’t accept the invitation, or neglect to prepare. The king is very generous, but only a few respond appropriately. In the context of this parable, the choosing appears to be based on the response and actions of the many who are called.

In conclusion, these parables illustrate the generosity of God and the good news of the gospel that Jesus preached. Most of the Jews to which Jesus preached, especially among the leaders, either took the invitation lightly, or were outright hostile. Most of the Jews that did respond were among the poor, the sick, and the outcasts. After the Jews for the most part rejected Jesus, the apostles carried the message of the gospel into the Gentile world, where it continues to be preached to this day. Even though the Church has spread throughout most of the world, it has always been a mixture, including both the good and the bad. It will not be until the final judgment when all will be revealed, and it will be clear who fully accepted the invitation, and

¹² Jones, 51.

¹³ Harrington, 893.

¹⁴ Fitzmyer, 1054.

who was only going through the motions. Then the blessed will dine together at the wedding supper of the lamb.

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