

JESUS, THE MESSIANIC BANQUET, AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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Over the last century or so, historical scholarship on Jesus has become somewhat infamous for being a minefield of competing and contradictory claims. However, in the midst of all the confusion, at least two propositions are widely, if not universally, agreed upon. The first is that Jesus' words were centered on the coming of the Kingdom of God.¹ From this perspective, Jesus' declaration, "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand,"² is a faithful summary of his message. The second is that Jesus' actions were characterized by his practice of open table-fellowship, of eating and drinking with men and women otherwise outside the pale of acceptable table companions.³ Again, the Pharisee's response in Galilee, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"⁴ provides an accurate description of how some of his Jewish contemporaries reacted to one of Jesus' most characteristic activities.

In recent decades, scholars have created an enormous body of work devoted to exploring these two topics: Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom and his practice of table-fellowship. Curiously, the same cannot be said of their most obvious corollary: Jesus' teachings about *the messianic banquet of the Kingdom*. Again, many scholars agree that Jesus drew on the ancient Jewish expectation of the messianic banquet in order to describe the Kingdom of God.⁵ Nevertheless, there is a widespread tendency to study the Jewish evidence for the messianic banquet in a rather brief

¹ "The centrality of the Kingdom of God (*basileia tou theou*) in Jesus' preaching is one of the least disputable, or disputed, facts about Jesus." James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 383. See also John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols., Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1991–2009), 2:237. E. P. Sanders (*Jesus and Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 307) considers the fact that "Jesus taught about the Kingdom" to be "unquestionable." See also Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1971), 96; Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 54.

² Mark 1:14.

³ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 599–605; Jürgen Becker, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. James E. Crouch (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 155–169; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 174–211; Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 114–116.

⁴ Mark 1:16.

⁵ That Jesus "depicted the Kingdom in metaphorical terms, including that of a banquet" is "almost beyond the shadow of doubt." Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 307. See also Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 425–427; Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 143–144; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*

and superficial way, or not at all. Even more problematic, many major works on Jesus often neglect to examine the implications of his teaching on the messianic banquet. For example, even though Jesus explicitly ties the banquet to the coming of the Kingdom, scholars repeatedly fail to bring the banquet into the discussion when taking up the critical question: *What kind of kingdom did Jesus expect?*

In this essay, I will attempt to redress this imbalance by situating Jesus' teaching about the banquet of the Kingdom in its ancient Jewish context. First, we will explore the Jewish idea of the messianic banquet in more detail than is usually done, highlighting certain parallels with Jesus' own words in the gospels. Second, we will study Jesus' most explicit statements about it—his description of many coming "from east and west" to dine with "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" in the banquet of "the Kingdom."⁶ Third and finally, we will briefly examine Jesus' most significant sign of the Kingdom banquet: his actions at the Last Supper.⁷

As I hope to show, when Jesus' words and deeds are interpreted in their ancient Jewish context, they reveal several important but sometimes overlooked facets of the Kingdom Jesus expected. Indeed, they suggest that Jesus not only saw the Kingdom as an eschatological reality. He also saw it as a messianic kingdom, an international kingdom, and a heavenly kingdom. Moreover, when Jesus' teachings about the banquet are juxtaposed with his words and deeds in the Upper Room, together they also suggest that Jesus saw himself and his disciples as participating in the heavenly kingdom and anticipating the eschatological kingdom precisely by means of the liturgy of the Last Supper. In order to substantiate these claims, we need to turn to the ancient Jewish backdrop for Jesus' teachings.

Jewish Hope for the Messianic Banquet

As D. S. Russell points out in his exhaustive study of Jewish apocalyptic, "the idea of an eschatological banquet" is "a familiar one" in ancient Judaism.⁸ And as Dennis Smith writes, "the messianic banquet theme is especially prominent in the

(Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 254; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 308–309, 328–329.

6 Matt. 8:11–12; Luke 13:28–29.

7 Matt. 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:14–30; 1 Cor. 11:23–25.

8 D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic, 200 B.C.–A.D. 100* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 322, cited in Priest, "Note on the Messianic Banquet," 222. See also J. Priest, "A Note on the Messianic Banquet," in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 222–238; Lawrence H. Schiffman, "The Messianic Banquet," in *The Eschatological Community of the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Study of the Rule of the Congregation*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 38 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 53–67; Frank Moore Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies*, 3rd. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 168–170; Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.—A.D. 135)*, 3 vols., rev. and ed. Geza Vermes (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973–1987 [1891]), 2:534, n. 73; Raphael Patai, ed., *The Messiah Texts* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1979), 235–246; George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard

gospel tradition.”⁹ Nevertheless, in the study of Jesus, Jewish descriptions of the messianic banquet are often only mentioned in passing and not studied in detail.

Therefore, in order to situate Jesus’ teachings as much as possible in their ancient Jewish context, we need to look more closely at the shape of the messianic banquet in ancient Jewish literature. This survey is by no means exhaustive. Rather, the purpose is to select key texts and examine them in enough detail to throw some light on the wider context of Jesus’ teaching in the gospels.

Multiple passages in the Jewish Scriptures use the image of a banquet or feast to describe the joy of the coming age of salvation.¹⁰ By far the most explicit description is in Isaiah. In the midst of a series of images of the coming day of the Lord,¹¹ the prophet speaks of a future banquet for Israel and the nations:

*On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever, and the LORD God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, “Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.” (Isa. 25:6–9)*¹²

Because this passage is the foundational witness to the eschatological feast, several aspects of its description are worth highlighting. The coming feast is no ordinary banquet; it is an eschatological event. This eschatological dimension is evident from the fact that the banquet culminates in the overthrow of suffering and death: God will “swallow up death for ever” and wipe away “tears” from “all faces.” Indeed, just a few verses after describing the banquet, the prophet goes on to speak about the resurrection of the “bodies” of the “dead.”¹³ As Joseph Klausner suggests, the overall context of the banquet is Isaiah’s vision of “the cessation of death and the resurrection of the dead in the age to come.”¹⁴

University, 1927), 2:363–365; Kaufmann Köhler, “Eschatology,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 vols., ed. Isidore Singer (New York: KTAV, 1964), 5:218.

9 Dennis E. Smith, “Messianic Banquet,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols., ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:787–791, at 789.

10 See, for example, Isa. 49:9–12; 55; 65:13–16; Zech 9:9–17; Priest, “Note on the Messianic Banquet,” 234–237. For reasons of space, I will not focus on these texts in this article.

11 Isa. 24–27.

12 Unless otherwise noted, translations of the Bible are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

13 Isa. 26:19.

14 Joseph Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel: From its Beginning to the Completion of the*

Isaiah's eschatological banquet will be tied to the forgiveness of sins. At that time, God will take away "the reproach of his people" and give them salvation.¹⁵ In addition, the coming feast will be a liturgical banquet. This is the meaning of the strange imagery of "fat things" and "wine on the lees." This is technical terminology for sacrificial offerings of the Temple cult, as when Deuteronomy speaks of "the fat of their sacrifices" and "the wine of their drink offering."¹⁶ This liturgical dimension is important to stress; although he does not explicitly say so, the prophet appears to presume that the banquet will take place in the Temple. Finally, Isaiah's eschatological banquet will be international, including both the restored tribes of Israel and the Gentile nations. The feast will be "for all peoples" and will result in the "veil" that is cast over all the "nations" or "Gentiles" (*goyim*) being lifted. This is a startlingly universal vision of salvation, nestled right in the heart of one of the most widely read prophets of the Old Testament.

The Messianic Banquet in Early Jewish Literature

When we turn outside the Old Testament to early Jewish literature such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the pseudepigraphal works, we find that expectation of the messianic banquet is even more pronounced. By far the most explicit witness is found in the Dead Sea Scroll known as the *Rule of the Congregation*. This document presents itself as a "rule" for righteous Israelites living "in the final days,"¹⁷ a kind of eschatological charter. It closes with a striking depiction of a great banquet at which the Messiah will be present:

At [a ses]sion of the men of renown, [those summoned to] the gathering of the community council, *when [God] begets the Messiah* with them: [the] chief [priest] of all the congregation of Israel shall enter, and all [his] br[others, the sons] of Aaron, the priests [summoned] to the assembly, the men of renown, and they shall sit be[fore him, each one] according to his dignity. *After, [the Mess]iah of Israel shall [enter]* and before him shall sit the heads of the th[ousands of Israel, each] one according to his dignity, according to [his] po[sition] in their camps and according to their marches. ... And [when] they gather [at the tab]le of community [or to drink the n]ew wine, and the table of the community is prepared [and the] new wine [is mixed] for drinking, [no-one should stretch out] his hand to the first-fruit

Mishnah, trans. W. F. Stinespring (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956), 180.

15 Isa. 25:10.

16 Deut. 32:37–38.

17 *1QRule of the Congregation* [1QSa] 1:1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls are from Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

of the bread and of [the new wine] before the priest, for [he is the one who bl]esses the first-fruit of the bread and of the new win[e and stretches out] his hand towards the bread before them. *Afterwar[ds,] the Messiah of Israel [shall str]etch out his hands toward the bread.* [And afterwards, they shall ble]ss all the congregation of the community, each [one according to] his dignity. And in accordance with this precept one shall act at each me[al, when] at least ten me[n are ga]thered.¹⁸

The first thing to be said is that this banquet is certainly eschatological in character, since the Rule is set during “the final days.” Moreover, although we saw no explicit mention of a Messiah in Isaiah’s description of the banquet, the “anointed one” (*mashiah*) is quite prominent here. Although scholars continue to debate whether this text describes one Messiah or two (one priestly and one royal), there is no doubt about the messianic character of the meal.¹⁹ Given our interest in the Last Supper and the messianic banquet, it is also worth noting that the main elements of the messianic banquet are none other than bread and wine. Finally, the banquet is liturgical. There are set places, set rules, and special blessings that accompany the meal. The messianic banquet is no haphazard celebratory feast, but a deliberately orchestrated liturgy, led by “the sons of Aaron,” the “priests of the assembly.” As Frank Moore Cross suggests, “the meal must be understood as a liturgical anticipation of the messianic banquet.”²⁰

When we turn to the pseudepigrapha from the first century A.D. and earlier, the concept of the eschatological feast is equally prominent. For example, *1 Enoch* describes the age of salvation as a time when the righteous will be allowed to dine in the heavenly Temple on the fruit of the Tree of Life:

And (as for) this fragrant tree, no flesh has the right to touch it until the great judgment, in which there will be vengeance on all and a consummation forever. *Then it will be given to the righteous and the pious, and its fruit will be food for the chosen.* And it [the Tree of Life] will be transplanted to the Holy Place, by the house of God, the King of eternity. *There they will rejoice greatly and be glad and they will enter into the sanctuary.* Its fragrances will be in their bones, and they will live a long life on earth, such as

18 1QSa 2:11–22.

19 “The meal is messianic in the most literal sense because it is eaten in the presence of the Messiah of Israel. ... It is also explicitly eschatological, as the first words state: ‘This is the Rule for all the congregation of Israel in the last days.’” James VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 175. See also J. F. Priest, “The Messiah and the Meal in IQSa,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1953): 95–100.

20 Cross, *Ancient Library at Qumran*, 168.

your father lived also in their days, and torments and plagues
and suffering will not touch them.²¹

Later in the same book, the future banquet is described again. But this time it is explicitly messianic. At that time, the “Son of Man” will host the banquet, and it will be tied to the resurrection of the dead:

And the righteous and the chosen will be saved on that day; and the faces of the sinners and the unrighteous they will henceforth not see. And the Lord of Spirits will abide over them, and *with that Son of Man they will eat, and they will lie down and rise up forever and ever*. And the righteous and the chosen will have arisen from the earth, and have ceased to cast down their faces, and have put on the garment of glory. And this will be your garment, the garment of life from the Lord of Spirits; and your garments will not wear out, and your glory will not fade in the presence of the Lord of Spirits.²²

Finally, along the same lines, another Jewish work describes the future feast in these glowing terms:

And he [the priestly Messiah] shall open the gates of paradise;
he shall remove the sword that has threatened since Adam,
and *he will grant the saints to eat of the tree of life*.²³

All of the features we have seen before reemerge in these texts. The eschatological banquet is liturgical, insofar as it takes place within the eschatological Temple sanctuary. Significantly, the banquet is also supernatural, either because it is tied to the return to Paradise and the eating the protological fruit of the Tree of Life or because it coincides with the eschatological resurrection of the dead.²⁴ Finally, in the early Jewish literature, the banquet is frequently explicitly messianic: it is either hosted by the Messiah himself (whether priestly or royal) or tied to his advent at the consummation of time. Once again, the awaited feast is no ordinary banquet. In at least one text, the banquet has the same effect as in Isaiah: those who partake of it will no longer taste the fruit of Adam’s sin: suffering and death. Not only will

21 1 *Enoch* 25:4–6. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of 1 *Enoch* are from George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, 1 *Enoch: A New Translation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

22 1 *Enoch* 62:13–16. Text also in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols., Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1983–1985), 1:44.

23 *Testament of Levi* 18:10–11. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the pseudepigrapha are from Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*; here at 1:795.

24 Priest, “Note on the Messianic Banquet,” 223.

God “wipe every tear from their eyes,” but the divine power will reside in “their bones,” so that no “suffering” will touch them.²⁵ In the words of Genesis: they will “eat, and live for ever.”²⁶

The Rabbis and the Messianic Banquet

We can conclude our brief overview of the messianic banquet in ancient Judaism with a consideration of some of the evidence in later rabbinic literature. Curiously, references to the eschatological feast are somewhat infrequent in early rabbinic writings.²⁷ Nevertheless, as George Foot Moore points out in his massive study of Judaism, there is no doubt that the eschatological banquet was “part of popular expectation” in the rabbinic period.²⁸ For one thing, it is referred to in passing in the Mishnah:

All is foreseen, but freedom of choice is given; and the world is judged by grace, yet all is according to the excess of works ... the judgment is a judgment of truth; and *all is made ready for the banquet*.²⁹

Although no details about the messianic banquet can be gleaned from this brief text, it is still significant. For one thing, it shows that “the banquet” had become such a staple of Jewish eschatology that it could be assumed that a Jewish audience would know what was meant by the expression. It also links the banquet with eschatology, since the context in which the reference occurs has to do with the final judgment of the world.

In addition to this fleeting reference in the Mishnah, we find a more detailed description in the ancient rabbinic commentary on the book of Numbers known as the Midrash Rabbah. In this text, we find yet again that the banquet is described as a return to Eden:

In the hereafter the Holy One, blessed be he, will prepare *a feast for the righteous in the Garden of Eden*, and there will be no need either of balsam or of choice spices, for the north wind and the south wind will sweep through and sprinkle about all the perfumes of the Garden of Eden, and they will exhale their fragrance. ... The Holy One, blessed be he, will therefore in the

²⁵ 1 Enoch 25:6. Text in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:26.

²⁶ Gen. 3:22.

²⁷ See Priest, “Note on the Messianic Banquet,” 232, n. 17. For other references to the banquet in rabbinic literature, see Köhler, “Eschatology,” 5:218.

²⁸ Moore, *Judaism*, 2:365.

²⁹ Mishnah, *Aboth* [The Fathers] 3:16–17. All translations of the Mishnah are from Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1933).

hereafter give them to drink of *the wine that is preserved in grapes since the six days of Creation*.³⁰

Although this text probably comes from much later than the time of Jesus, it stands in strong continuity with what has already been seen in earlier post-biblical texts. First, the banquet is clearly eschatological: it will take place “in the hereafter.” Second, the banquet will not merely consist of an earthly celebration, say, in the Jerusalem Temple. Instead, it will take place in the restored Garden of Eden, the protological Paradise of old. Finally, it is worth pointing out that this rabbinic tradition has the added element of drinking the “wine” that has existed since “the six days of creation.” This parallels earlier evidence we have seen in which the righteous eat from the fruit of the Tree of Life. By doing so, it shows that some Jews expected the eschatological feast to consist of supernatural food and drink—in this case, the wine of Paradise.³¹

These are by no means the only rabbinic references to the messianic banquet; we will look at a few more below. But these should suffice to give the reader a basic idea of what some ancient Jews believed about the future feast. For now, we can simply sum up the results of our brief survey.

In the Old Testament, there is clear evidence of belief in an eschatological banquet that would take place in the age of salvation. Along with the future banquet will come the restoration of Israel, the conversion of the Gentiles, their pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship, and the overthrow of death itself. In later Jewish literature, the idea of the future banquet is even more explicitly messianic and supernatural. The banquet was not only expected to be a feast of joyful celebration; it was directly tied to the coming of the Messiah, the overthrow of suffering and death, and even the resurrection of the dead. In some cases, the banquet even consists of supernatural food and drink—the fruit of the Tree of Life and the wine of Paradise.

With these ancient Jewish texts in mind, we can now turn to those words and deeds of Jesus that appear to be rooted in this Jewish hope for the messianic banquet and see what it reveals about his vision of the Kingdom of God.

30 *Numbers Rabbah* 13:2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the Midrash Rabbah are from H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, 10 vols. (London: Soncino, 1983).

31 A similar idea is attributed to Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who is said to have interpreted Isaiah's passage about a mystery that “eye has not seen” (Isa. 64:3) as referring to “the wine which has been preserved in its grapes from the six days of creation.” Babylonian Talmud, *Berakoth* [Benedictions] 34b. Text in *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*, 32 vols., trans. and ed. Maurice Simon (London: Soncino, 1960–). Maurice Simon, editor of this document, states that this wine is “to feast the righteous in the future world.”

Eating and Drinking with the Patriarchs

When we turn to Jesus' teaching in the gospels, by far the most explicit description of the eschatological banquet are his words about the coming feast in "the Kingdom" where the patriarchs will be present.³² The key texts are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke:

I tell you, many will come from east and west and *sit at table* with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. (Matt. 8:11–12)

There you will weep and gnash your teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God and you yourselves thrust out. And men will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the Kingdom of God. (Luke 13:28–29)

Strikingly, both versions of Jesus' teaching directly tie the eschatological banquet to the coming of the Kingdom of God. Both texts describe the age of salvation as "sitting at table" in "the kingdom." In order to put this connection in its proper context, we need to ask and answer several exegetical questions. First, who are the multitudes coming from "east and west" to dine in the banquet? Second, when will this future banquet take place? In particular, how is it that the long-dead patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—will be present? Third, where does the banquet take place, where are the multitudes coming from, and to where exactly are they being gathered? Finally, what light do these texts shed on Jesus' vision of the Kingdom?

The first question is one of identity: Who exactly are the multitudes described by Jesus as coming "from east and west" to sit and feast in the banquet? In the scholarly literature, two contradictory opinions are usually put forward. Some scholars suggest the multitudes in question are exclusively Gentiles.³³ From this perspective, Jesus' words describe the salvation of the Gentiles and the condem-

32 For discussion, see Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission*, Library of New Testament Studies 331 (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007), 83–94; Brant Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile: Restoration Eschatology and the Origin of the Atonement*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament. 2:204 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005); Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 426–427; Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 143–144; Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 254; Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Jesus Tradition in Q* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 176–191; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 308–309, 328–29; Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 2:309–317; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 169–174; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 219–220, 394; Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 245–247.

33 See, for example, Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 219–220; Gerd Lüdemann, *Jesus After 2000 Years: What He Really Said and Did* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2000), 155–156, compare 356.

nation of all Israel. Others argue the exact opposite: that Jesus' words refer only to the ingathering of the Jewish exiles from the Diaspora to Jerusalem.³⁴ In this view, the salvation envisioned in these sayings is exclusively national: only Israelites come to the banquet; there is no pilgrimage of the Gentiles in view.

Both of these interpretations are beset by serious weaknesses. With regard to the first position, I strongly reject the suggestion that Jesus' words describe the salvation of the Gentiles and the condemnation of all Israel. Such an interpretation does not cohere with Jesus' express statements about being sent to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel,"³⁵ not to mention his vision of the disciples ruling over "the twelve tribes" of Israel.³⁶ Moreover, as we will see in a moment, this view utterly fails to recognize that the description of a multitude being gathered "from east and west" is used repeatedly in the Old Testament and ancient Jewish literature to refer to the eschatological restoration of *Israel*.³⁷ For this interpretation to be correct, Jesus would have to be using this biblical expression in the exact opposite way than it is used in the Jewish Scriptures.

Neither do I accept the second interpretation, which holds that Jesus' words only refer to the ingathering of those Jews scattered throughout the Gentile world, without any Gentiles in view. This position also fails to reckon with two key facts. First and foremost, as we saw above, Isaiah explicitly describes the eschatological banquet as a feast "for all peoples."³⁸ If Jesus' words referred to an exclusively Israelite affair, it would represent a serious departure from the most explicit description of the eschatological banquet in the Old Testament. Second, although some scholars have argued that the Old Testament does not use the image of being gathered "from east and west" to refer to the Gentile nations, this is in fact not true.³⁹ Indeed, in at least two places, we find that the ingathering of the lost tribes of Israel and the pilgrimage of the Gentile nations are inextricably intertwined:

Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, every one who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made. Bring forth the people who are blind, yet

34 This position is argued most strongly by Allison, *Jesus Tradition in Q*, 176–191.

35 Matt. 10:6; 15:24.

36 Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30.

37 Ps. 107:1–3; Isa. 43:5; Zech. 8:7; Bar. 4:37. See also the pseudepigraphal Psalms of Solomon 11:2; 1 *Enoch* 57:1; text in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:526; compare the Greek Septuagint translation (LXX) of Deut. 30:4.

38 Isa. 25:6–9.

39 Contrary to Allison, *Jesus Tradition in Q*, 186 and Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 170.

have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! Let all nations⁴⁰ gather together, and let the peoples assemble. (Isa. 43:5–9)

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Behold, *I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness. . . .* Thus says the LORD of hosts: Peoples yet shall come, even the inhabitants of many cities. . . . Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: *In those days ten men from the Gentiles of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."* (Zech. 8:7–8, 20–23)

I would suggest that these prominent Old Testament passages form the background of Jesus' words about the multitudes being gathered "from east and west" or "from east and west, and from north and south" to feast at the banquet with the patriarchs.⁴¹ Therefore, when placed against the backdrop of Jewish Scripture, Jesus' description of the gathering of the multitude to dine in "the Kingdom" is a very biblical vision of the eschatological restoration of Israel *and* the Gentiles. Neither a wholesale rejection of Israel nor an exclusively Israelite vision of salvation is in view. Those who are excluded from the banquet are neither the Jewish people as a whole nor the Gentile nations as a whole, but instead those who reject Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom. Read in light of the Old Testament, this teaching of Jesus strongly suggests that his vision of the coming Kingdom of God was international.

The Eschatological Banquet and the Promised Land

The second exegetical question is one of time: When will this future banquet take place? In particular, how is it that the long-dead patriarchs—"Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"—will be present?

Once again, ancient Jewish literature has the power to throw substantial light on Jesus' vision. For there is evidence that, like Jesus, other ancient Jews linked the coming of the Kingdom of God to the future resurrection of the patriarchs. Take, for example, the following passage from the *Testament of Judah*, in which the patriarch Judah describes how he and his brothers will rule in the eschatological kingdom:

40 Note that the Hebrew *goyim* means both "nations" and "Gentiles."

41 For fuller discussion, see Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile*, 279–283.

And after this *there shall arise for you a Star from Jacob* in peace. ... Then he will illumine the scepter of *my kingdom*, and from your root will arise the Shoot, and through it will arise the rod of righteousness for the nations, to judge and save all that call on the Lord. And *after this Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be resurrected to life* and I [Judah] and my brothers will be chiefs (wielding) our scepter in Israel: Levi, the first; I, second; Joseph, third; Benjamin, fourth; Simeon, fifth; Isaachar, sixth; and all the rest in their order.⁴²

This is a striking parallel to Jesus' teaching. For one thing, it explicitly mentions the resurrection of the same three patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moreover, it directly ties the resurrection of the patriarchs to the coming of the eschatological "kingdom." Significantly, the kingdom here is explicitly messianic: it will fulfill the biblical messianic prophecies of the "Star of Jacob"⁴³ and the "Shoot" from the stump of Jesse.⁴⁴ However, this ancient Jewish text and the gospels do differ on one key point. In the *Testament of Judah*, it is Judah himself who will rule as Messiah over the eschatological Kingdom with his brother patriarchs (as "chiefs"), whereas in the gospels, it is Jesus and his disciples who will "rule" over the twelve tribes of Israel.⁴⁵ Given the fact that Jesus takes the lead role in the Kingdom, such a parallel at least suggests that the banquet Jesus describes may not only be eschatological, but implicitly messianic.

In addition to the general hope that the patriarchs would be resurrected, we also find ancient Jewish texts that explicitly expect them be present at the eschatological banquet. For example, 2 *Enoch* describes Adam and the patriarchs dining at the banquet in "the Paradise of Eden."⁴⁶ A Midrash on the Psalms speaks of Jacob being invited to "the feast of redemption."⁴⁷ Still another says that the prophet Elijah had a vision of "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the pious" sitting and eating "delicacies" in "the middle of the Garden of Eden" at a banquet prepared by

42 *Testament of Judah* 24:1–25:2. Text in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:801. For a similar tradition, see the pseudepigraphal 4 *Ezra* 1:38–40: "And now, Father, look with pride and see the people coming from the east; to them I will give as leaders Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and Hosea and Amos and Micah and Joel and Obadiah and Jonah and Nahum and Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, who is also called the messenger of the Lord." Text in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:526.

43 Num. 24:17.

44 Isa. 11:1.

45 Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30.

46 2 *Enoch* 42:3–5. Text in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:168.

47 Midrash *Tehillim* [On the Psalms] 14:7; see Johannes Behm, "deipnon, deipneo ["meal" or "feast"]," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ed. Gerhard Kittel, ed., trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), 2:34–35.

God himself.⁴⁸ Perhaps the most detailed parallel to Jesus' words, comes from the tractate on Passover in the Babylonian Talmud:

The Holy One, blessed be he, will make a great banquet for the righteous on the day he manifests his love to the seed of Isaac. After they have eaten and drunk, the cup of blessing will be offered to our father Abraham, that he should bless, but he will answer them, "I cannot bless, because Ishmael issued from me." Then Isaac will be asked, "Take it and bless." "I cannot bless," he will reply, "because I married two sisters during [both] their lifetimes, whereas the Torah was destined to forbid them to me." Then Moses will be asked, "Take it and bless." "I cannot bless, because I was not privileged to enter the land of Israel either in life or in death." Then Joshua will be asked: "Take it and bless." "I cannot bless," he will reply, "because I was not privileged to have a son ..." Then David will be asked: "Take it and bless." "I will bless, and it is fitting for me to bless," he will reply, as it is said, "I will lift up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord" (Ps 116:13).⁴⁹

Curiously, these Jewish parallels often go undiscussed by New Testament commentators.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, they clearly show that Jesus' description of the Kingdom banquet is tapping into an ancient Jewish tradition. According to these traditions, the coming banquet is clearly eschatological: it will take place at the resurrection of the dead, when all of the famous figures of old—Abraham, Isaac, Moses, and others—will have risen. Moreover, in the text from the Talmud, the banquet may also be implicitly messianic. Note that none of the patriarchs, nor even Moses or Joshua, is able to host the banquet. Only King David himself is worthy to say grace. It is the Davidic king—that is, the messianic king—who will act as host of the final feast.

In sum, it appears that in ancient Jewish tradition there was a strong link between the messianic banquet and the eschatological resurrection of the dead. This link is important to emphasize, because it strongly suggests—if not demands—that for Jesus, the messianic banquet was not simply a metaphor for the joy of the coming age. It was an eschatological *reality* that he expected to take place alongside the bodily resurrection of the patriarchs. Jesus' teaching about the banquet with the patriarchs presupposes that the eschatological feast will be tied

48 *Sefer Eliahu* [The Book of Elijah], in *Bet haMidrash* 3:67. This translation is found in Patai, *Messiah Texts*, 238.

49 Babylonian Talmud *Pesahim* [Passovers] 119b. I have slightly adapted the translation of Simon, *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*.

50 An exception is R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 317.

to the miraculous resurrection of the dead. Hence, Jesus' vision of the Kingdom in these passages is not only international, but eschatological.

The third exegetical question is perhaps the most difficult of all. Jesus' words describe multitudes coming "from east and west" in order to "sit at table" in the eschatological feast of the kingdom. But where exactly does he envision the banquet taking place? Where are the multitudes coming from, and to where exactly are they being gathered? Does Jesus' description of the ingathering presuppose an earthly pilgrimage to the land of Israel? Should we think of the messianic banquet as "taking place inside the borders of Israel"⁵¹? Or do Jesus' words envisage something else?

Unfortunately, I simply do not have the space to address this question in the depth it deserves. The answer is bound up with the very complicated issue of exactly how Jesus conceived of the restoration of Israel and the coming of the Kingdom of God. I have already written a whole book on the subject, and am currently writing another that attempts to sketch an answer to the question.⁵² In this essay, I can only make a few brief suggestions about what Jesus may have meant when he spoke about the ingathering of Israel and the Gentiles "from east and west" to the messianic banquet in an ancient Jewish context.

On the one hand, there should be no doubt that some ancient Jews, perhaps even many, understood the ingathering of the exiles described in the Old Testament in terms of an *earthly* restoration to the Promised Land. Over and over again, the prophets clearly describe the restoration of Israel in terms of a return to the land, to the city of Jerusalem, and to the Temple.⁵³ It is reasonable to assume there were many who interpreted these passages in strictly mundane terms. Indeed, even some ancient Jews who recognized that this return from exile would coincide with the resurrection of the dead still envisioned an earthly return to the land of Israel. One memorable rabbinic tradition actually speaks of the bodies of the righteous Israelites rolling through underground caves in order to be resurrected in the holy land!⁵⁴ It is this kind of earthly interpretation which has, of course, been one of the motivating factors for various movements throughout the centuries which have

51 W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988–1997), 2:29.

52 See Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile*, especially 31–40. I will continue to explore the same issue in my next work, tentatively titled *Jesus and the Last Supper* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

53 See, for example, Isa. 2, 56, 65–66; Jer. 3, 30–31; Ezek. 36–37; Zech. 9–10; Tob. 13–14.

54 See Babylonian Talmud *Kettubot* ["Marriage Contracts"] 111a: "Now according to Rabbi Elezar, would not the righteous outside the Land be revived? [i.e., resurrected] Rabbi Elai replied: '[They will be revived] by rolling [to the Land of Israel].'¹ Rabbi Abba Sala the Great demurred: 'Will not the rolling be painful to the righteous?'—Abbaye replied: 'Cavities will be made for them underground.'" Any doubts about the belief in a bodily resurrection in ancient rabbinic Judaism should be buried by this text.

tied the eschatological consummation to the earthly return of the people of Israel to the Holy Land.⁵⁵

On the other hand, this is not the only view of the restoration from exile in ancient Judaism. There is another stream of ancient Jewish tradition, not sufficiently emphasized, that speaks not only of the earthly Promised Land, but of its heavenly counterpart.⁵⁶ This place can be described in different ways: sometimes as a *heavenly* Promised Land that has existed for all eternity and will be revealed in the last days, other times as an *eschatological* Promised Land that will be part of the new creation, what the Rabbis called “the World to Come.”

For example, one ancient Jewish writing probably from the first-century, declares that the true Promised Land is in the “upper world,” where God’s throne dwells. Strikingly, this heavenly Promised Land will exist forever, and is identified as the “Kingdom” of God:

[Job said to his friends:] “Quiet! Now I will show you my throne with the splendor of its majesty, which is among the holy ones. *My throne is in the upper world*, and its splendor and majesty come from the right hand of the Father. The whole world shall pass away and its splendor shall fade. ... But *my throne is in the holy land*, and its splendor is in the world of the changeless one. Rivers will dry up, and the arrogance of their waves goes down into the depths of the abyss. But the rivers of *my land, where my throne is*, do not dry up nor will they disappear, but they will exist forever. These kings will pass away, and rulers come and

55 See Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, “Ingathering of the Exiles,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 8:1374–1375; and Stephen Sitzler, “The Temple in Contemporary Christian Zionism,” in *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Simon Gathercole (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), 247–266. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 141, rightly points out that we may assume that many Jews of Jesus’ day viewed the hope for the return of the exiles “no less literally than the German Jews who, in 1096, started for Palestine and expected to be met on their way by the ten lost tribes, who were thought to live beyond the distant mountains.” However, when he goes on to say that “the expectation should not be spiritualized or turned into a metaphor,” one wonders why he shifts from speaking descriptively to speaking prescriptively. Whether the hope should be spiritualized is not the issue. The question is whether there were Jews at the time of Jesus who *did* interpret the eschatological ingathering in heavenly or supermundane terms, as something which would not constitute a merely earthly return to the land. And the answer to this question is, “Yes.” Nor would such “transcendentalization” of the land necessarily be merely “metaphorical.” As we will see, there is good reason to believe that some ancient Jews believed that the eschatological Promised Land actually *existed* in heaven. It was no mere metaphor.

56 See especially W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California, 1974), 121–127. On the wider question, see also Karen J. Wenell, *Jesus and Land: Sacred and Social Space in Second Temple Judaism*, Library of New Testament Studies 334 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2007); and Charles R. Page II, *Jesus & the Land* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

go. ... But *my kingdom* is forever and ever, and its splendor and majesty are in the chariots of the Father."⁵⁷

This is a striking text. In it, the Promised Land is not merely an earthly reality, but is equated with the heavenly realm of God ("the upper world").⁵⁸ Even more significant, this heavenly promised land also seems to be identified with the heavenly "Kingdom" of God!⁵⁹ From this perspective, the earthly promised land appears to have been viewed as a visible sign of an invisible reality. The ultimate dwelling place of God's people is not the earthly realm, but the heavenly "holy land" of God's eternal kingdom. In addition to this ancient witness, we also find similar ideas in the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud—the two most authoritative texts in rabbinic Judaism. In these texts, the earthly promised land is treated as a sign of the ultimate dwelling place of Israel, the future world to come:

All Israelites have a share in *the world to come*, for it is written, "Your people also shall all be righteous, they shall inherit *the land* for ever; the branch of my planting, the work of my hands that I may be glorified (Isa. 60:21)."⁶⁰

Our Rabbis taught: *The ten tribes have no portion in the world to come*, as it says, "And the Lord rooted them out of *their land* in anger, and in wrath, and in great indignation" (Deut. 29:27). "And the Lord rooted them out of *their land*" refers to *this world*; "and cast them into *another land*"—to *the world to come*: this is Rabbi Akiba's view. ... Rabbi Simeon ben Judah said ... "If their deeds are as this day's, they will not return; otherwise they shall." Rabbi said: "*They will enter the future world*, as it is said, "[And it shall come to pass] in that day, that the great trumpet shall be blown, [and they shall come which were ready to perish in the

57 Testament of Job 33:1–9. Text in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 1:855–856.

58 This is all the more remarkable in that one can presume that the ancient Jews who held these views—in particular, Rabbi Akiba—"certainly revered the geographic land." Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 125. In other words, the affirmation of some transcendent Promised Land did not necessarily entail a negative attitude toward the earthly land.

59 "This symbolism appears with a different connotation in the *gemara* of Mishnah *Sanhedrin* [The Council] 10:3, where the land is interpreted, not as Palestine, but as 'this world,' and where the holy mount of Jerusalem is the equivalent of the future world, the Age to Come." Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 124. "'The holy mount of Jerusalem' is understood here to mean the future world." Note by H. Freedman to tractate *Sanhedrin* 110b, n. b9, in *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*.

60 Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 10:1.

land of Assyria, and the outcasts in the land of Egypt, and shall worship the Lord in *the holy mount of Jerusalem*] (Isa. 27:13)."⁶¹

As W. D. Davies has pointed out, in these Rabbinic texts, "'inheriting the land' is equated with having a share in 'the world to come.'"⁶² This equation of the Promised Land with the world to come is significant, for it shows that even rabbinic Judaism—which is often characterized as "this-worldly" in its hopes for the future—saw that the earthly promised land was a sign of a *future* creation, the "new heaven and new earth" spoken of by the prophets.⁶³ Given our interest in the restoration of the lost tribes of Israel, this is extremely significant, for it suggests that for some ancient Jews, there was more to the restoration of Israel than a merely earthly return to a holy land.

However, should there remain any doubt that Jesus may be speaking of a transcendent ingathering of the exiles, one final Jewish parallel should lay it to rest, for it not only describes a banquet with the resurrected patriarchs; it also *explicitly places that banquet in the heavenly promised land*. In the ancient rabbinic commentary on the book of Exodus, we find this tradition:

Another explanation of "He shall dwell on high" (Isa. 33:16). *It is written, "For the LORD your God brings you into a good land" (Deut. 8:7)—to see the table that is prepared in Paradise, as it says, "I shall walk before the LORD in the lands of the living" (Ps. 116:9). He [God], as it were, sits above the patriarchs, and the patriarchs and all the righteous sit in his midst, as it says, "And they sit down at your feet" (Deut. 33:3), and he distributes portions to them. Should you wonder at this, then recall how even in this world he placed himself between the two cherubim for their sake ... then how much more will this be so in Paradise? He will bring them the fruit from the Garden of Eden and will feed them from the Tree of Life. Who will be the first to say Grace? All will respectfully request God to order one to say Grace; He will bid Michael say it; and he will bid Gabriel, and Gabriel the patriarchs, and they will give the honor to David, saying, "It befits an earthly king to bless the Heavenly King." They will hand over the cup to David, who will say, "I will lift up the cup of salvation*

61 Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin*, 110b.

62 Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 123.

63 See Isa. 64–66. Note that this is no case of misinterpretation, for the prophecy from Isaiah cited by the Mishnah is a description of a new Jerusalem, in which "the sun shall be no more" because "the LORD" will be its "everlasting light" (Isa. 60:19–21). Is this a prophecy of a mere earthly return to Canaan? Or is it about "the new heavens and the new earth" that Isaiah himself prophesies (Isa. 64–66)?

and call upon the name of the Lord." ... Hence "For the LORD your God brings you into a *good land*," and for this reason does it say, "*He shall dwell on high*."⁶⁴

This is a stunning description of the messianic banquet. Its explanatory power lies in the fact that it makes very explicit where at least some Jews thought the eschatological banquet would take place—"at the table that is prepared in Paradise," in the "good land" "on high," where God sits on his glorious throne. In other words, at least some Jews expected the messianic banquet to be a heavenly banquet in a heavenly promised land. At this supernatural banquet, the righteous would not only dine with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they would also all eat from the heavenly "Tree of Life."

In light of these ancient Jewish parallels, we can now posit an answer to the question. Where did Jesus think the banquet will take place? When he spoke of many being "gathered from east and west" to dine at the messianic banquet of the Kingdom, did he envisage an earthly return to the land? As W. D. Davies and Dale Allison concluded in their study of Jesus' teaching:

Should one then think of a literal pilgrimage by Jews or Gentiles to Palestine? While this cannot be excluded ... one is inclined to think that ... the eschatological promises are to find their realization not in this world as it is but in a *re-created world, an old world made new, in which the boundaries between heaven and earth will begin to disappear*. If so, any mundane or literal interpretation ... would seem to be excluded.⁶⁵

I could not put this any better, although John Meier does:

With the affirmation that the Gentiles will join the long-dead patriarchs of Israel at the banquet, Jesus indicates that this fully realized Kingdom of God is not only future but also in some way *discontinuous with this present world*. ... In particular, the depiction of the three great patriarchs as alive and participating in a heavenly banquet implies both *the transcendence of death* and *the regathering of the people of Israel not only from all places but also from all times*.⁶⁶

In other words, for Jesus, the eschatological banquet and the eschatological ingathering of the righteous will both be transcendent events. Together, they will signal

64 Midrash *Exodus Rabbah* 25:8.

65 Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 2:29; emphasis added.

66 Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 2:317; emphasis added.

the redemption not only of those living at the time of Jesus, but of all Israelites from all periods of the covenant, as well as the Gentiles. This makes sense, for the simple return of the Diaspora to the land of Israel would do nothing to aid the many generations of Israelites who had lived and died in exile, outside the Land; nor would it do much to help any righteous Gentiles who may want to partake of the feast.⁶⁷ In sum, Jesus appears to have expected the eschatological banquet of the Kingdom of God to transcend both space and time. For him, the banquet of Kingdom was not only international and eschatological, it was supernatural. In the words of James Dunn, what Jesus expected was a “heavenly banquet.”⁶⁸

The Last Supper, and Banquet of the Kingdom

If we ended our study here, we would have gleaned several important points about Jesus, the messianic banquet, and the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, we would be missing one very critical piece of the puzzle. For Jesus not only *spoke about* the messianic banquet and the Kingdom of God as a future reality. He also performed a prophetic *sign* of the banquet of the Kingdom at the Last Supper. Therefore, in order to round out our study, we also need to look at Jesus’ actions at the Last Supper, as recorded in all three of the synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke.⁶⁹

Scholars of many different stripes agree that the Last Supper was no mere farewell meal between Jesus and his disciples. Instead, it was a sign of the messianic banquet expected by many ancient Jews. The statements of Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz are representative: “The meals which the historical Jesus held”—including his final one—“were a foretaste of the great eschatological meal.”⁷⁰ Even

67 This problem was vividly felt by the later rabbis. See again their discussion of the fate of Israelites who have died outside the Promised Land (Babylonian Talmud, *Kethuboth* 111a).

68 Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 427: “Here [in Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:28–29] the Kingdom seems to be equivalent to heaven or at least to the idealized future state following the final consummation.” See also Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 2:317, although he admits that questions still exist regarding whether “Jesus is thinking in this logion more of the resurrection of the dead or of the saved in heaven.”

69 Matt 26:28–29; Mark 14:24–25; Luke 22:15–30. Some of the more significant studies of the Last Supper are as follows: Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2005); Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 229–231, 512–513, 771–773, 795–796, 804–805, 815–818; Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 405–436; Kim Huat Tan, *The Zion Traditions and the Aims of Jesus*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 91 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1997), 197–220; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 554–562; Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 3:302–309; Barry D. Smith, *Jesus’ Last Passover Meal* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1993); I. H. Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord’s Supper* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981); Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1977), 217–219; Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. Norman Perrin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); H. Patsch, *Abendmahl und historischer Jesus* [The Last Supper and the Historical Jesus], Calwer Theologische Monographien 1 (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1972).

70 Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 405.

more directly, N. T. Wright argued that the Last Supper was not just any kind of action, but a prophetic sign:

Jesus' actions with the bread and the cup—which there is excellent warrant to regard as historical—must be seen in the same way as the symbolic actions of certain prophets in the Hebrew scriptures. Jeremiah smashes a pot; Ezekiel makes a model of Jerusalem under siege. *The actions carry prophetic power, effecting the events (mostly acts of judgment) which are then to occur.*⁷¹

Although Wright is certainly not the first, nor the last, scholar to see the Last Supper as a prophetic sign, he does give the suggestion a certain prominence in his study.⁷² In particular, he points out that in the Old Testament, prophetic signs effect what they signify. That is, they are not merely symbolic; they are also efficacious. As he puts it, they “carry prophetic power.” The implications of this suggestion are manifold when applied to the Last Supper. If Wright is correct—and I think he is—then it is certainly significant that in all three synoptic accounts of the Last Supper, Jesus performs a prophetic sign of both the coming of the Kingdom of God and the eschatological banquet:

“[F]or this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine *until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.* (Matt. 26:28–29)

And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine *until that day when I drink it new in the Kingdom of God.* (Mark 14:24–25)

And he said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you that *I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.* And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, “Take this, and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you *that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes.*” (Luke 22:15–18)

71 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 558, citing as examples Jer. 19:1–13; Ezek. 4:1–17, among other texts.

72 Wright himself cites N. A. Beck, “The Last Supper as an Efficacious Symbolic Act,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1970): 192–198. The idea goes as far back as the work of Rudolf Otto, *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man: A Study in the History of Religion*, trans. F. V. Filson and B. L. Woolf (London: Lutterworth, 1938), 300, and Vincent Taylor, *Jesus and His Sacrifice: A Study of the Passion Sayings in the Gospels* (London: Macmillan, 1959), 118–125.

What are the implications of these texts for our query? What light do they shed on Jesus' vision of the messianic banquet, not to mention what kind of kingdom he expected and proclaimed? How might the first disciples have understood these words if they saw Jesus' action as a prophetic sign of the messianic banquet? Although, once again, we lack the space for a thorough analysis, I would make three basic observations.

First, although it is sometimes overlooked, Jesus' words at the Last Supper do suggest that he envisioned a universal kingdom. He not only expected the sons of Israel to be gathered into the banquet of the kingdom; he also awaited the conversion and ingathering of the Gentile nations spoken of by the prophets. Two aspects of the Last Supper point in the direction of a universal kingdom.

For one thing, there is the prominence of the Twelve disciples at the Last Supper.⁷³ Given the importance of the ancient Jewish hope for the restoration of the lost tribes of Israel, the presence of the Twelve at the Last Supper is not incidental. Rather, it is an eschatological sign of the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel. Just as ancient Jews expected the twelve tribes to be gathered in to the Messianic banquet,⁷⁴ so too Jesus celebrates the Last Supper with the twelve as a prophetic sign of restoration of Israel.⁷⁵ In fact, in Luke's account of the Last Supper, Jesus makes explicit the link between the twelve disciples, the restoration of Israel, and the eschatological banquet:

You are those who have continued with me in my trials; as my Father appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and *sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.* (Luke 22:28–30)

Here we see Jesus forging a direct link between the Last Supper and the restoration of "the twelve tribes of Israel." Apparently, his actions at the Last Supper will somehow both symbolize and set in motion this long-awaited ingathering, in which the twelve disciples will be exalted as rulers in the eschatological kingdom. How will this take place? Like some other ancient Jews, Jesus' words to the Twelve elsewhere strongly suggest that the envisioned restoration will take place in the "new creation" (*palingenesis*).⁷⁶ That is, Jesus did not merely expect a mundane return to the land, but rather that the righteous will be gathered into the eschatological promised land.⁷⁷ And he signified this connection by symbolically linking the restoration

73 Matt. 25:20; Mark 14:17, 20; Luke 22:13.

74 Isa. 25:6–9; 27:12–13; see also the Dead Sea Scrolls text discussed above, 1QSa 2:11–27.

75 See Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile*, 439–451. For similar conclusions, see Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, 218–219.

76 Matt. 19:28.

77 Indeed, one could even mount the case that the eschatological restoration being described has a heavenly dimension to it, given Jesus' allusion to the "throne" of the Son of Man (Matt. 19:28). In

of the twelve tribes of Israel with his actions at the Last Supper. In short, Jesus not only expected the resurrected patriarchs to participate in the banquet of the Kingdom, but the restored people of Israel as well.

But what about the non-Israelite peoples? Are the Gentile nations in view at the Last Supper? Joachim Jeremias—whose work on the Last Supper still stands as the most significant modern treatment of the subject—has made a strong case for an affirmative answer.⁷⁸ For one thing, as we saw above, the most detailed description of the messianic banquet in the Old Testament explicitly states that it would be a feast “for all peoples.”⁷⁹ If Jesus’ vision of the banquet failed to include the Gentiles, it would entail rejecting the prophet Isaiah. Moreover, as Jeremias points out, Jesus speaks of his body and blood being offered for “many” (*polloi*).⁸⁰ Why not simply say “for Israel,” or “for the twelve tribes”? As Jeremias points out, Jesus appears to be drawing on the terminology of “the many” (Hebrew: *rabbim*; Greek: *polloi*) from Isaiah 52–53, in which the term refers to the eschatological remnant that is gathered both from Israel and the Gentile nations. It is inclusive language, referring to “both the Jews and the Gentiles.” As Jeremias puts it:

The “for many” of the eucharistic words is therefore, as we have already seen, not exclusive (“many, but not all”), but, in the Semitic manner of speech, inclusive (“the totality, consisting of many”) ... Translating according to the sense, therefore, *to ekchunnomenon hyper pollōn* is to be rendered “which will be shed for the peoples of the world.”⁸¹

Long before Jeremias, the ancient Jewish work known as 3 *Enoch* described just such a banquet:

At once Israel shall be saved from among the Gentiles and the Messiah shall appear to them and bring them up to Jerusalem with great joy. Moreover, *the Kingdom of Israel, gathered from the four quarters of the world, shall eat with the Messiah, and the Gentiles shall eat with them.*⁸²

Daniel, the “thrones” of the Son of Man sequence are most certainly not located in the earthly Jerusalem, but rather in the heavenly court (Dan. 7:13–14). By promising the disciples that they will sit on “thrones” in the immediate context of speaking about when “the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne,” Jesus seems to be speaking of the heavenly kingdom of Daniel.

78 See especially Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 228; Jeremias, “*polloi* [“many”]” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6:536–545. So also Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, 217.

79 Isa. 25:6–8.

80 Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24.

81 Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 227–228; compare Mark 14:24.

82 3 *Enoch* 48A:10, citing Isaiah 52:10; text in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:301–302.

In short, when situated in their ancient Jewish context, Jesus' words at the Last Supper cohere perfectly with his teaching about both Israel and the Gentiles coming from east and west to dine with the patriarchs in the eschatological banquet of the Kingdom.⁸³ In both texts, Jesus envisions a universal kingdom that will be directly tied to participation in the messianic banquet. As Isaiah had foretold, in the age of salvation, it was the banquet that would ultimately unite the peoples of the earth. As a sign of that banquet, Jesus speaks at the Last Supper not only of "the salvation of Israel" but also of "the salvation of the nations."⁸⁴

In addition to this universal dimension, at the Last Supper, Jesus' words and deeds also suggest that he envisaged a specifically messianic kingdom. In all three accounts, Jesus expressly links his act of drinking the wine of the Last Supper with a not-yet-fulfilled act of drinking new wine in "the Kingdom" (*basileia*).⁸⁵ The precise wording is somewhat different in each account, the basic thrust is the same: Jesus' act of drinking wine at the Last Supper will be completed by a similar action "in the Kingdom of God / heaven" (Mark and Matthew) or when "the Kingdom of God comes" (Luke). This is a significant connection. It suggests a real sense in which the banquet of the Kingdom is being *inaugurated* at the Last Supper, but is not yet completed, and will not be completed until Jesus "drinks" again. Moreover, in Luke's account, it is not only Jesus' act of drinking, but his act of eating, that is tied to the coming of the Kingdom. He will not "eat this Passover" again until it is "fulfilled" in "the Kingdom of God."⁸⁶ Again, in light of these words, the coming of the Kingdom seems to be both inaugurated, and yet incomplete.

But is this Kingdom banquet specifically *messianic*, or only eschatological? To my mind, two aspects of Jesus' actions at the Last Supper suggest that the banquet is not merely tied to the coming of the Kingdom, but also to the coming of the Messiah.

First and foremost, in all three synoptic accounts of the Last Supper, Jesus refers to himself as the Danielic "Son of Man."⁸⁷ As I have argued elsewhere, in the book of Daniel, the figure of "one like a Son of Man" is in fact a messianic figure, who stands in contrast to the wicked kings of the nations who are symbolically depicted as beasts.⁸⁸ Hence, Jesus' reference to the Son of Man at the Last Supper

83 Matt. 8:11-12; Luke 13:28-29.

84 Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, 217.

85 Matt. 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18.

86 Luke 22:15-16.

87 Matt. 26:24; Mark 14:21; Luke 22:22.

88 Dan. 7:14. See Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile*, 53-62. See now Michael F. Bird, *Are You the One Who is to Come? The Historical Jesus and the Messianic Question* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 83-87.

sets the entire meal in a messianic context.⁸⁹ Second, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus explicitly refers to feasting “in my Kingdom” (*te basileia mou*), and claims the royal authority to bestow upon the apostles the roles of chiefs over each of the twelve tribes.⁹⁰ Clearly, such words envisioned a restored Israel, with Jesus as the royal head. Just as the “kingdom” is delivered to the messianic Son of Man in the book of Daniel,⁹¹ so too is Jesus given the kingship and authority to lead the royal banquet of the Kingdom in the restored Israel.

The final reason for thinking the Last Supper is messianic is the most intriguing of all. All commentators recognize that Jesus’ most memorable action at the Last Supper is his identification of the bread and wine with his “body” and “blood” and his command to the disciples to eat and drink them.⁹² I would suggest that even these actions may be tapping into the ancient Jewish concept of the messianic banquet. *A close study of the sources reveals that, remarkably, Jesus is apparently not the only ancient Jew who spoke about eating the Messiah in such a context.* According to the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Hillel, who lived shortly before Jesus himself, also used similar language.⁹³ Compare what he said with Jesus’ words:

Rabbi Giddal said in Rab’s name: “*Israel is destined to eat in the days of the Messiah.*” Rabbi Joseph demurred: “Is this not obvious; who else then should eat—Hilek and Bilek?”—This was said in opposition to Rabbi Hillel, who maintained that there will be no Messiah for Israel, since *they have already eaten him* during the reign of Hezekiah.⁹⁴

89 See especially the chapter on “The Eucharistic Words of Jesus as the Words of the ‘Son of Man,’” in Seyoon Kim, “*The Son of Man*” as the Son of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 38–73.

90 Luke 22:28–30.

91 Dan. 7:14.

92 Matt. 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–25.

93 For a book-length study of Jesus and Hillel, see James H. Charlesworth and Loren L. Johns, eds., *Hillel and Jesus: Comparative Studies of Two Major Religious Leaders* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). To say the least, it is strange that Hillel’s teaching about eating the Messiah is never referred to once in the book.

94 Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 98b. The translation is that of Maurice Simon in the *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*, slightly altered and corrected. Compare a parallel tradition: “Rabbi Hillel said: ‘There shall be no Messiah for Israel, because they have already eaten him in the days of Hezekiah.’” Rabbi Joseph said: May God forgive him [for saying so]. Now, when did Hezekiah flourish? During the first Temple. Yet Zechariah, prophesying in the days of the second, proclaimed, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem; behold, your king comes unto you! He is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass” (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 99a).

Although some English translations of the Talmud obscure this reference by translating the Hebrew word for “eat” (*akal*) as “enjoy,” it literally means to “eat” or “consume.”⁹⁵ What exactly did Hillel mean by this teaching? Unfortunately, there can be no certitude about the answer to that question. Even so, the tradition is still important, because it bears witness to the language of “eating” the Messiah. Curiously, although New Testament scholars sometimes cite Hillel’s comments about “eating” the Messiah in their discussions of the Last Supper, they consistently fail to note the wider context of Hillel’s remarks: *a rabbinic discussion of the messianic banquet*.⁹⁶ Given this context, this passage strongly suggests that, at least for Rabbi Hillel—who lived shortly before Jesus himself—the messianic banquet was somehow tied to feasting on the Messiah himself.

The Heavenly Banquet and the Kingdom of God

I would also contend that Jesus’ words at the Last Supper also appear to envision a heavenly kingdom—a transcendent reality, somehow discontinuous with the mundane world—that is somehow made present precisely through the prophetic sign of the Last Supper.

At first glance, no such heavenly dimension may appear to be present in Jesus’ words. However, there is a very telling allusion to the Old Testament embedded in them. When Jesus identifies the wine of the Last Supper as the “blood of the covenant,”⁹⁷ he is drawing that expression from the Old Testament. In that exact form, it only occurs *once*: when Moses says to the Israelites at Mount Sinai: “Behold the blood of the covenant.”⁹⁸ Although this fact is widely recognized by commentators, they invariably fail to note that the *context* of Moses’ reference to the “blood of the covenant” is *the liturgical prelude to a heavenly banquet*.⁹⁹ Reread the text in context:

95 *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud* translates this as “enjoy,” even though the same word (*akal*) is translated “eat” in the immediately preceding sentence, where it refers to Israel “eating” during the days of the Messiah. Jacob Neusner’s translation is more literal: “There will be no further Messiah for Israel, for they already consumed him in the time of Hezekiah.” See Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*, 22 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2005), 16:527.

96 See, for example, Craig Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary 34b (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 391, following David Daube, *He That Cometh* (London: Diocesan Council, 1966), 2, who sees the tradition as rooted in the messianic interpretation of the broken bread of the Passover known as the *aphikomen*.

97 Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; compare Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25.

98 Exod. 24:8.

99 See, for example, Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 27a (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), 958: “Our saying most directly recalls Exod. 24:8”; McKnight, *Jesus and His Death*, 287–289; Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, 393: “The foundational passage is Exod. 24:1–8,

And [Moses] rose early in the morning, built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the sons of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. ... And Moses took the blood and threw it upon the people, and said, "*Behold the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.*" *Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel; and there was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.* (Exod. 24:1–11)

It is hard to overestimate the significance of this biblical background for understanding Jesus' words at the Last Supper regarding the relationship between his banquet and the Kingdom of God. It strongly suggests that for Jesus, as for Exodus, *although the sacrificial liturgy begins on earth, it climaxes with a heavenly banquet.* After going up the mountain, Moses and the elders enter into God's own transcendent realm, where they not only see the "pavement of sapphire" in the heavenly court; they also behold God, and eat and drink. Unless we start by assuming that Jesus is wrenching the expression from Exodus entirely out of its context, then we have to conclude that he is deliberately drawing a parallel between the sacrificial liturgy of Moses and the elders of Israel and his own actions at the Last Supper. In the liturgy of Sinai, although the "blood of the covenant" was certainly poured out on the earth (as well as on the altar, and on the people), the covenant banquet was consummated in heaven, where they "beheld God, and ate and drank."

In light of these connections, it seems safe to conclude with C. H. Dodd that at the Last Supper, "[t]he scene" of the Kingdom "is placed in *the transcendent order*. ... The 'table' at which the disciples are to 'eat and drink' recalls the 'new wine' which Jesus is to drink 'in the Kingdom of God,' as well as the feast of the blessed 'with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of heaven.'¹⁰⁰ The Kingdom is thus not merely an eschatological reality that will be present at the end, but a heavenly reality that one can participate in already, by means of the sacrificial messianic banquet.

in which the story is told of God's establishment of his covenant with Israel through Moses." These expositors see the connections, but fail to draw out the implications of the wider context to which Jesus is alluding.

100 C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (New York: Scribner's, 1961), 72. Emphasis added; compare at 40.

One reason this link between the liturgical and heavenly dimensions of the Kingdom banquet is important is because it poses a possible solution—in however preliminary a fashion—to a question that has perplexed Jesus scholarship for decades. How is it that some sayings of Jesus appear to envision a future kingdom, while others seem to speak of it as already present? How can the Kingdom be both present and future? Or must we choose between these two options?¹⁰¹ Significantly, by focusing on the *heavenly* nature of the eschatological kingdom, we may touch upon the answer. As Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz have pointed out, in ancient Jewish texts regarding the kingdom (which we surveyed above), statements about the “present / timeless” kingdom and the “future” Kingdom of God are juxtaposed when the context is liturgical:

At the time of Jesus the notion of God’s present and at the same time future kingly rule was anchored in prayer and liturgy. ... In these contexts cultic-present statements often occur about the eternal, heavenly kingdom of YHWH in which a share can be gained through *participation in the cult*. ... It can be inferred from the examples given that in a *liturgical context* Jews at the time of Jesus could equally praise the present rule of God and ask for its coming without seeing an irresolvable contradiction. Evidently the eternal Kingdom of God must be regarded as a presupposition and basis for the future realization of the Kingdom.¹⁰²

Given Jesus’ references to the heavenly banquet of Exodus 24, it seems plausible to suggest that this is exactly what is going on at the Last Supper. The heavenly kingdom, which exists now in the transcendent realm, and which will soon appear, is being made present now through Jesus’ sign of the messianic banquet of the Kingdom at the Last Supper. Just as the “blood of the covenant” in the liturgy of Sinai enabled the Israelites to enter into God’s heavenly realm, so too at the Last Supper “the blood of the covenant” that is poured out as wine enables the twelve disciples to eat and drink with Jesus in his kingdom.¹⁰³ Just as Moses and the elders of Israel were enabled to participate in the heavenly banquet of the Exodus, so too Jesus now gives the disciples a foretaste and a share in the messianic banquet of the heavenly kingdom of God.

101 For a full discussion of the issue with all the relevant secondary literature, see Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 2:237–454.

102 Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 251, 252; emphasis added.

103 Compare Exod. 24:8; Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24.

The results of this study can be summed up as follows. First, we saw that both the Old Testament and ancient Jewish literature outside the Bible bears witness to a vibrant expectation of a great eschatological feast that would take place in the age of salvation. In Scripture itself, this banquet would consist of the ingathering of Israel and the Gentiles, the forgiveness of sins, and the overthrow of death. In later Jewish literature, the banquet became directly tied to other ancient hopes, such as the coming of the Messiah, the resurrection of the dead, and even the return to Paradise or to a heavenly promised land. In short, the ancient Jewish hope for the eschatological banquet was evidently an important part of Jewish eschatology.

Second, we studied Jesus' most explicit teaching about the messianic banquet: his statements about multitudes coming "from east and west" to dine with the patriarchs in "the Kingdom" of God. When interpreted in light of the Old Testament and ancient Jewish parallels, these statements led to the conclusion that Jesus not only shared the Jewish expectation for the future banquet, but explicitly tied the banquet to the coming of the Kingdom of God, the resurrection of the patriarchs, and the ingathering of Israel and the Gentiles into the eschatological promised land.

Third and finally, we briefly analyzed Jesus' words and at the Last Supper regarding the banquet and the Kingdom. Once again, by comparing these words to other statements of Jesus, as well as ancient Jewish traditions about the banquet, we came to the conclusion that the Last Supper was a prophetic sign of both the coming Kingdom of God and the long-awaited messianic banquet. We concluded by suggesting that Jesus' allusion to the heavenly banquet in Exodus 24 suggests that he saw the Last Supper as an efficacious means of participating in the heavenly banquet of the heavenly kingdom.

The implications of these conclusions are also threefold. For one thing, they strongly suggest that the tendency of many scholars to depict ancient Jewish eschatological hopes in strictly "this-worldly" terms, may in fact be something of a caricature. When we look closely at the ancient Jewish hope for the messianic banquet, we discover a rich tapestry of expectations that are not infrequently tied to a supernatural vision of salvation, in which the righteous will not simply be gathered to the earthly promised land, but to the heavenly kingdom of God's eternal dwelling.

Moreover, this study suggests that more attention needs to be paid to Jesus' own expectation of the banquet and how it might shed light on his understanding of the Kingdom of God. If the Kingdom was in fact the center of his mission and message, and if he directly tied the coming Kingdom to the messianic banquet in both his teaching and at the Last Supper, then Jesus' own hope for the banquet does not appear to have stood at the periphery of his vision, but at the center.

More scholarly work needs to be done on the banquet in order to see what untrod avenues of discovery might be uncovered.

Finally, if our analysis of the function of the banquet in Jesus' preaching and teaching is correct, then the evidence in the gospels help us to paint a more concrete picture of exactly how Jesus, as a first-century Jew, may have understood the coming Kingdom of God. Anyone familiar with the mountain of secondary literature on the Kingdom of God knows that one can often come away from reading it even more confused about exactly what the Kingdom is than when one began. However, by tracing out the various connections between the Kingdom and the messianic banquet, the picture of the Kingdom comes into slightly sharper focus. By focusing on the universal nature of the banquet, we were able to see that Jesus' vision of the Kingdom not only included the restoration of Israel, but the conversion and ingathering of the Gentile nations. Just as Isaiah had spoken of a future "feast" for all peoples, so too Jesus envisioned a feast of redemption to which both Israel and the Gentiles would be gathered "from east and west."

By focusing on the messianic nature of the banquet, we discovered a plausible explanation for why Jesus not only performed a prophetic sign of the banquet at the Last Supper, but took the role as chief host. Just as the Dead Sea Scrolls envisioned "the Messiah" presiding at a feast of bread and wine, so too Jesus promised the disciples at the Last Supper a share in his kingdom as messianic "Son of Man." And just as the rabbis once spoke, however obscurely, about "eating" the Messiah, so too Jesus identified his own flesh as the food of the messianic feast. Lastly, by highlighting the heavenly nature of the banquet in certain Jewish texts, we uncovered a possible solution to the vexed question of the relationship between the present kingdom and the future kingdom in Jesus' teaching. Just as it was the blood of the covenant that enabled Moses and the elders of Israel to partake of the heavenly banquet atop Mount Sinai, so now it is the new blood of the covenant—offered in the liturgy of the Last Supper—that enables the disciples to partake of the banquet of the Kingdom of God, present now in heaven and to be fully revealed in the last days.