

JESUS, THE MESSIANIC WEDDING BANQUET, AND THE RESTORATION OF ISRAEL

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Introduction

If there are any issues about which historical scholarship is in widespread agreement, they are that Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God was a central aspect of his message and mission, and that he used parables to teach about the mystery of the kingdom. For example, the comments of James D. G. Dunn regarding the kingdom of God are representative:

The centrality of the kingdom of God (*basileia tou theou*) in Jesus' preaching is one of the least disputable, or disputed, facts about Jesus.¹

With regard to the role of the parables, Craig S. Keener expresses the remarkable confidence of contemporary scholarship on Jesus when he writes:

By normal historical standards, then, we should give special attention to parables in the Gospels as among the least debatable, most securely authentic elements of the Jesus tradition.²

In short, although many areas of Jesus research are characterized by competing hypotheses and contradictory claims, these two conclusions—that Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God and that he used parables to do so—are accepted by almost all modern scholars.³

1 James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 383.

2 Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 188.

3 On the centrality of the kingdom, see also John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (3 vols.; Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1991, 1994, 2001), 2:237; E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 307; Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 54; Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: the Proclamation of Jesus*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1971), 96; Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; London: SCM, 1952), 1:4. On the importance of parables, see also Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 188–189; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 316–317, 337–339; Jürgen Becker, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. James E. Crouch (New York and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 143–144; C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), viii; Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 11.

However, where scholars do disagree—and disagree quite strongly—is in the *interpretation* of the parables of Jesus. In recent years a host of volumes on the parables of Jesus have appeared, offering quite divergent interpretations, from the counter-cultural aphorisms of a Cynic-like sage stringing his pearls of wisdom across the Galilean countryside, to the stories of a Jewish rabbi anticipating the teaching methods and traditions later preserved in the Midrash and the Talmuds.⁴

In this article, I would like to suggest that in order to unlock the meaning the parables would have had for Jesus' disciples in a first-century Jewish context, one must focus attention above all on *their Old Testament background*. To be sure, recourse to other sources besides Jewish Scripture, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Pseudepigrapha, and rabbinic parables is extremely helpful in shedding light on these often enigmatic statements of Jesus. However, given the popular character of the parables and Jesus' use of them in his public teaching, there seems to be a good *prima facie* argument in favor of focusing first on the common background of *Jewish Scripture* in the attempt to unpack their (often mysterious) meaning.⁵ In order to illustrate this approach, we will select one of Jesus' most memorable and difficult parables in the Gospels: the parable of the Royal Wedding Feast (Matt. 22:1–14). As I hope to show, by giving proper attention to the biblical backdrop of Jesus' startling tale, one can throw an extraordinary amount of light both on the meaning of this parable in particular and on the heart of Jesus' wider message: the mystery of the kingdom of God.

*The Parable of the Royal Wedding Feast*⁶

Although the basic contours of this parable are well known, it is worth citing it in its entirety before we turn to its exegesis:

- 4 On the one hand, John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (repr. Polebridge, 1992), and on the other, Brad H. Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables: Rediscovering the Roots of Jesus' Teaching* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1989).
- 5 In this regard, see especially Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), who makes ample use of Jewish Scripture in his exegesis. See also Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
- 6 On this parable, see especially Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 299–325; Peter-Ben Smit, *Fellowship and Food in the Kingdom: Eschatological Meals and Scenes of Utopian Abundance in the New Testament*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2:234 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2008), 229–236; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 820–828; Marianne Blickenstaff, "While the Bridegroom is with Them": Marriage, Family, Gender and Violence in the Gospel of Matthew *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* 292 (London: T & T Clark: 2005), 46–77; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 427; Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 341–351; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 517–522; Jürgen Becker, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. James E. Crouch (New York/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 163–165; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: An Introduction*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 266–267; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988, 1991, 1997),

And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast; but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, '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.' But they made light of it and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to those servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the streets and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find.' And those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen." (Matt. 22:1-14)⁷

Several exegetical questions swirl around this text: (1) Does the comparison of the kingdom with the royal wedding feast (Matt. 22:1-10) belong with the account of the king's examination of the guests (Matt. 22:11-14), or are these two separate parables? (2) What is the background of this parable? Are there any stories of royal banquets from the Old Testament or ancient Judaism that might shed light on the meaning Jesus' words? (3) What is the significance of identifying the kingdom of

3:193-209; Marius Reiser, *Jesus and Judgment: The Eschatological Proclamation in its Jewish Context*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 241-45; Richard Bauckham, "The Parable of the Royal Wedding Feast (Matthew 22:1-14) and the Parable of the Lame Man and the Blind Man (*Apocryphon of Ezekiel*)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996): 471-488; Robert W. Funk, Roy Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 234-235; Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, 113; Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 261-262; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 119-122; Crossan, *In Parables*, 70-73; Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 110-114; Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 67-70, 176-180, 187-189; Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 93-94; T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1949), 128-130; Johannes Behm, "deipnon," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 2:34-35; Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, rev. ed., trans. John Marsh (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 175, 197-198.

7 All translations are from the RSV unless otherwise noted.

heaven with not just any banquet, but a “wedding” banquet for the king’s “son”? (4) What is the meaning of the king’s inspection of the guests? In particular, what is “the wedding garment,” and why is lacking one so grave as to merit being cast out of the wedding feast and into “the outer darkness”? (5) What is the overall thrust of the parable? What is the meaning of the final declaration: “many are called, but few are chosen”? (6) Finally, once the parable has been interpreted, what does its overall message reveal about the nature of the “the kingdom of heaven”?

The Unity of the Parable of the Royal Wedding Feast

The first issue is whether the parable of the Royal Wedding Feast is one parable, comparing the kingdom of heaven to a banquet that climaxes with the advent of the king (Matt 22:1–14), or two separate parables—one focusing on the similitude of the kingdom (Matt 22:1–10) and another separate story of a king inspecting his guests (Matt 22:11–14).

Interpreters are divided on this point. On the one hand, some commentators insist that these are two entirely separate parables.⁸ Inevitably, scholars who hold this position do so because they view the Parable of the Royal Wedding Feast (Matt. 22:1–10) and the Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14:15–24) as two “versions” of the same hypothetical “original” parable. From this perspective, the inspection of the wedding garments is a separate parable primarily because it is absent from the other version of the parable found in the Gospel of Luke.⁹

On the other hand, other scholars hold that the text consists of a single parable, with two parts.¹⁰ In favor of this conclusion is the connection between the royal “wedding feast” (*gamos*) of the first half (Matt. 22:2–3) and the “king’s” inspection of the “wedding garment” (*enduma gamou*) in the second half (Matt. 22:11). Moreover, in terms of form, a unified view of the Royal Wedding Feast coheres with other two-part parables of Jesus. For example, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants consists of an initial narrative of the vineyard (Mark 12:1–9) followed by the concluding riddle of the “stone” rejected by the builders (Mark 12:10–12). Along the same lines, the parable of the Prodigal Son consists of the initial narrative of the son’s return (Luke 15:11–24), followed by the account of the elder brother’s reaction (Luke 15:25–32). Likewise, the parable of the Dishonest Steward has a quite distinct opening narrative (Luke 16:1–9) followed by a concluding application (Luke 16:10–13). As Joachim Jeremias comments: “[I]n all the double-edged parables the emphasis lies on the second point.”¹¹

8 See, for example, Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 64–66; Dodd, *The Parables of Jesus*, 94; see Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 346, n. 23 for further examples.

9 As well as the later *Gospel of Thomas* 64. So Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 65.

10 See, for example, Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 320; Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 333; Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 3:194.

11 Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 38, though he does not follow the logic of his own insight when he separates the Royal Wedding Feast into two parables.

In light of such considerations, it is reasonable to treat the parable of the “Royal Wedding Feast” (Matt 22:1–14) as a single, unified narrative, with two parts. With this in mind, we can now ask the question: What does the parable mean? How do we interpret it in a first-century Jewish context?

The Eschatological Wedding Banquet

The first aspect of this parable that strikes the reader is that of the royal “wedding banquet” (*gamos*), given by a “king” (*basileus*) for his “son” (*huios*) (Matt. 22:2). On the one hand, the basic meaning of this analogy is easily identified. As many commentators recognize, this is yet another example of Jesus’ use of the image of a feast to describe the eschatological banquet of the kingdom (cf. Matt 8:11–12; Luke 13:28–29).¹² Moreover, in this case, the specifically messianic character of the banquet seems particularly manifest, insofar as the king who hosts the banquet represents God, while the son for whom the banquet is celebrated is none other than the royal “son of God”—a title ascribed to the Davidic king of old, and later applied to the coming messiah.¹³

On the other hand, the depiction of the messianic banquet as a *wedding* banquet is distinctive, if not completely unique. According to W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, although the messianic banquet is a common *topos* in ancient Jewish literature, this parable of Jesus is unique in depicting the messianic feast as a wedding.¹⁴ The significance of this identification can be found both by briefly exploring the character of such a wedding banquet in a Jewish context, and then connecting this context to Jewish eschatology.

In ancient Jewish literature, although there are multiple references to wedding banquets, we unfortunately lack any detailed descriptions of these feasts. We are forced to paste together somewhat skeletal sketches of what the customs might have entailed from sources spanning a wide range of time and place.¹⁵ Such

12 See Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 311; Reiser, *Jesus and Judgment*, 242; Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 267; Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 3:199.

13 Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 343; Ben-Smit, *Fellowship and Food in the Kingdom*, 230–231, who points out that “while the Title Son of God is not used, ... the concept seems to be implied.” For a full-length recent study, see Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

14 Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 3:199, n. 27.

15 See David Instone-Brewer, “Marriage and Divorce,” in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 916–917; Michael Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); John J. Collins, “Marriage, Divorce, and Family in Second Temple Judaism,” *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. L. G. Perdue et al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 104–162; Victor P. Hamilton, “Marriage (OT and ANE),” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 4:559–69; Raymond F. Collins, “Marriage (NT),” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 4:569–72; Ethelbert Stauffer, “gameo, gamos,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 1:648–657; Joachim Jeremias, “numphe, numphios,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 4:1099–1106.

evidence suggests that an ancient Jewish wedding celebration ordinarily consisted of seven days of festivities (Gen. 29:22–27; Judg. 14:12; *Jos. Asen.* 21:8; *b. Ket.* 4b). If the parable of the Ten Virgins is any indicator, then it appears that the wedding feast proper took place late in the evening and that it consisted of some manner of procession of select young women to the celebration of the marriage (Matt 25:1–13). As one might expect, such a feast would be a time of great happiness, when the “voice of the bridegroom” and the “voice of the bride” would be lifted up in song and joyful celebration (Jer. 33:11).¹⁶

In light of such background, it is significant that Jewish Scripture utilizes the image of a wedding as a way of describing the everlasting joy that would be experienced at the eschatological restoration of Israel.¹⁷ For example, the prophet Hosea declares that when the ingathering of “the people of Judah” (the two tribes) and “the people of Israel” (the ten tribes) under a future king takes place, God will wed himself to Israel his bride “as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt” (Hos. 1:10–11; 2:14–23).¹⁸ In similar fashion, Jeremiah describes the restoration of Israel under a future Davidic king in terms of an “everlasting love” with which God loves the “virgin Israel” (Jer. 31:3–4). Perhaps most important of all for the Parable of the Royal Wedding Feast, the prophet Isaiah not only speaks of this eschatological wedding, but on several occasions ties this hope to the celebration of a great eschatological banquet.¹⁹ Consider, for example, the following texts:

Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not had labor pains! ... *For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name* ... For the LORD has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you. ... *Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come*

16 For numerous references in Greek literature to the sumptuous nature of ancient wedding feasts, see Blickenstaff, “*While the Bridegroom is With Them*,” 57–58, n. 40.

17 See Ben-Smit, *Fellowship and Food in the Kingdom*, 25–26. In contrast to those who analyze them separately, scholars who tend to treat the Royal Wedding Feast and the Great Supper as two versions of an “original” parable tend to overlook the significance of the nuptial imagery. Compare Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 344, with Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 318–321, the latter of whom does nothing with the eschatological wedding imagery in Isaiah.

18 Both these events are referred to as the day of “Jezreel,” meaning “God sows,” for he will sow his people “in the land” (Hos. 1:11; 2:23).

19 Dennis Smith, “Messianic Banquet,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 4:788–791.

to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, merciful love for David ... Behold, you shall call nations that you know not, and nations that knew you not shall run to you. (Isa. 54:1, 5–7; 55:1–5)

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name which the mouth of the LORD will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall not be termed Desolate; but you shall be called "My Delight is in her," and your land "Married;" for the LORD delights in you, and *your land shall be married ... As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you ...* The LORD has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: "I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink your wine for which you have labored; but *those who garner it shall eat it and praise the LORD, and those who gather it shall drink it in the courts of my sanctuary.*" (Isa. 62:1–5, 8–9)

Two aspects of these oracles stand out. First, in both prophecies, the restoration of Israel is described in terms of a wedding between God and Israel. In the first of the two oracles (Isa. 55:3), this nuptial covenant is explicitly identified as an "everlasting covenant" that is rooted in God's "love for David" (compare with Psalm 89). This Davidic dimension is important, for it suggests that the future wedding is not merely *eschatological*; it is Davidic, and therefore *messianic* in character. Second, in both oracles, the eschatological wedding of God and Israel is tied to a banquet of great joy.²⁰ As Dennis Smith notes, in Isaiah, "the theme of a *divine marriage* (54:5) is combined with a *joyful feast* which is characterized by an abundance of food (55:1–2), vindication of the righteous (54:6–17), and the pilgrimage of the nations (55:5)."²¹

When the Parable of the Royal Wedding Feast is interpreted in light of this background in Jewish Scripture, Jesus' use of the image of a "royal wedding feast" suddenly appears as more than simply an image of happiness drawn from daily life; even more, it is an allusion to the oracles of the biblical prophets regarding

20 In the second oracle, Isaiah explicitly describes the banquet as taking place in the Temple ("the courts of my sanctuary"). In other words, this eschatological feast of "grain" (for making bread) and "wine" will not be any ordinary meal, but a cultic feast (Isa. 62:9).

21 Dennis Smith, "Messianic Banquet," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 4:788–791, at 790 (my emphasis).

the eschatological restoration of Israel. In the future age of salvation, the twelve tribes and the nations will not only be gathered to the restored Jerusalem, but God will wed himself to Israel in an everlasting nuptial covenant, in a wedding celebrated—as are all weddings—with a great banquet.

This nuptial dimension of the Old Testament background helps explain another strange part of Jesus' parable of the Royal Wedding Feast. Some commentators have been puzzled by the severity of the punishment for rejecting the invitation to a wedding, which is usually a voluntary festive celebration.²² However, when Jesus' parable is interpreted against the backdrop of the eschatological wedding of God and Israel, then the gravity of failing to attend the wedding becomes clear. Jesus' message is one of warning: this is no ordinary wedding feast. It is the feast of the eschatological restoration of Israel and the renewal of the Davidic kingdom covenant (see 2 Sam. 7). Hence, the rejection of the invitation to this wedding banquet means rejecting the "everlasting covenant" that God will make with Israel and "the nations" in the age of "salvation" (Isa. 54:4–5; 62:1–2).

King Hezekiah's Rejected Banquet and the Restoration of Israel

Once this background of the eschatological wedding feast is firmly in place, we can now make sense of a second important element in the parable: the invitations sent out by the king and the various responses they engender. First, the king sends his servants to call those who had been invited to the feast, but the invitees refuse to come. Next, the king sends "other servants" to tell those invited that the banquet is "ready" and that they should "come to the marriage feast." In this instance, the invitees not only make light of the invitation; some of them even persecute and kill the king's "servants," eliciting a military reaction from the king, who sends his troops to destroy "those murderers" and burn "their city." In the wake of this destruction, the king declares the original invitees "unworthy" and commands a third and final invitation to go out to "as many" as possible, "both bad and good," so that the wedding hall might be filled with guests (Matt. 22:3–10).

What are we to make of this seemingly bizarre series of actions and reactions?²³ As several scholars have suggested, their hyperbolic and even unrealistic character seem to be signs of an allegorical meaning.²⁴ What might such meaning have been in an ancient Jewish context?

Once again, the answer seems to lie in the Old Testament background of the parable. If scholars are correct, and the Royal Wedding Feast is a retelling of the

22 See Jan Lambrecht, *Out of the Treasure: The Parables in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louvain: Peeters, 1991), 128.

23 For a plethora of interpretations, see Blickenstaff, "While the Bridegroom is With Them," 55, n. 30.

24 See, for example, Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 3:196–197.

history of Israel in a new key,²⁵ then it is surely significant that this parable of Jesus is not the first story of a royal banquet to which many were invited and refused, and so were replaced by others.²⁶ Indeed, a remarkably similar story can be found in 2 Chronicles, when one of the greatest Davidic kings, King Hezekiah, sends out invitations to the northern tribes to come to the Passover feast in Jerusalem—only to have his invitations rejected. The author of Chronicles evidently regarded the event as pivotal and of great moment, in that it is recounted in conspicuous detail in his otherwise concise narrative:

Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to Ephraim and Manasseh that they should come to the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, to keep the Passover to the LORD the God of Israel. ... So they decreed to make a proclamation throughout all Israel, from Beer-sheba to Dan, that the people should come and keep the Passover to the LORD the God of Israel, at Jerusalem; for they had not kept it in great numbers as prescribed. So couriers went throughout all Israel and Judah with letters from the king and his princes, as the king had commanded, saying, "O people of Israel, return to the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, that he may turn again to the remnant of you who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria. Do not be like your fathers and your brethren, who were faithless to the LORD God of their fathers, so that he made them a desolation, as you see. Do not now be stiff-necked as your fathers were, but yield yourselves to the LORD, and come to his sanctuary, which he has sanctified forever, and worship the LORD your God, that his fierce anger may turn away from you. For if you return to the LORD, your brethren and your children will find compassion with their captors, and return to this land. For the LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him." So the couriers went from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, and as far as Zebulun; but they laughed them to scorn, and mocked them. Only a few men of Asher, of Manasseh, and of Zebulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem. The hand of God was also upon Judah to give them one heart to do what the king and the princes commanded by the

25 For example, Joachim Jeremias identifies the parable as "an outline of the history of the plan of redemption." Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 69. Likewise, Klyne Snodgrass concludes that it "uses language of Israel's history ... to warn of the consequences of rejecting God's messengers." Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 319.

26 See Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 302; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 824, n. 12; Blickenstaff, "While the Bridegroom is with Them," 61, all of whom mention Hezekiah's banquet in passing but do not draw out the significance of the parallel for Jesus' parable.

word of the LORD. And many people came together in Jerusalem to keep the feast of Unleavened Bread, in the second month, a very great assembly. ... Then the whole assembly agreed together to keep the feast another seven days; so they kept it for another seven days with gladness. ... *The whole assembly of Judah, and the priests and the Levites, and the whole assembly that came out of Israel, and the sojourners who came out of the land of Israel, and the sojourners who dwelt in Judah, rejoiced.* So there was great joy in Jerusalem, for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem. (2 Chron. 30:1, 5–13, 23, 25–26)²⁷

Here we see several potentially significant parallels with Jesus' parable of the Royal Wedding Banquet.

First, we have the story of a king who invites many of his subjects to a royal feast. Although the feast is obviously not a marriage feast, it is intriguing that it lasts for "seven days," which is also the customary length of a wedding feast (Gen. 29:22–27; Judg. 14:12; Jos. Asen. 21:8; b. Ket. 4b). Despite this difference, the parallel still intrigues, especially when we note that the invitees are identified as *the twelve tribes of Israel*: both "Israel" (the northern kingdom) and "Judah" (the southern kingdom). The obvious implication of this pan-Israelite invitation is that King Hezekiah has as his goal the *cultic* restoration of Israel and the reunification of the twelve tribes *by means of the Passover banquet*. In the words of Scott Hahn:

The Chronicler presents Hezekiah's Passover as a kind of sacrament of the united kingdom intended by God. It is a sign of the unity of all the tribes under the Davidic king as well as the efficacious means or instrument by which that unity is brought about ...²⁸

According to the messengers, by accepting the king's invitation to celebrate the Passover feast, the invitees will somehow not only preserve Israel from future "desolation," but will ultimately bring about the ingathering of the Assyrian exiles, enabling them to "return to this land" (2 Chron. 30:9).

Second, King Hezekiah sends out "couriers" or messengers, presumably his servants, to invite the twelve tribes, but his invitations are rejected ("laughed to scorn") and even "mocked" by those who, according to covenant made with David, should have been his loyal subjects (see 2 Sam. 5:1–5). Indeed, although many were invited, "only a few" from among the northern tribes of Israel actually

²⁷ RSV, slightly altered.

²⁸ Scott W. Hahn, *The Kingdom of God as Liturgical Empire: A Theological Commentary on 1–2 Chronicles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 181.

came to the Passover feast in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 30:11). Again, the story differs from Jesus' parable insofar as the servants are not put to death. Nevertheless, the consequences of rejection are severe: if the Israelites refuse to come, they will face the "fierce anger" of God (2 Chron. 30:8).

Third—and this is significant—the refusal of King Hezekiah's invitations by the northern tribes did *not* mean that no one attended the Passover banquet or that the city of Jerusalem was not filled with people. Strikingly, in response to the refusal of the invitation by the northern tribes, the Chronicler reports that although the original invitees refused to attend, there were non-Israelites who accepted the invitation! At the Passover were Gentile "sojourners" or "foreigners" (Hebrew *gerim*) who came out of the land of both Israel and Judah to participate in the feast (2 Chron. 30:25; compare Exod. 12:19).²⁹ In other words, despite the widespread refusal by the northern tribes of King Hezekiah's invitations to the Passover, his plans of a celebratory feast are ultimately not foiled, for Jerusalem is filled with a "remnant" of the twelve tribes of Israel alongside certain Gentiles, whose piety ironically exceeds that of the Israelites who refused to attend (see 2 Chron. 30:6). In light of this remarkable turn of events, it is no wonder that Hezekiah's banquet was deemed unforgettable: according to the Chronicler, "Since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem" (2 Chron. 30:26).

To my mind, these parallels with the parable of the Royal Wedding Feast are too striking to be coincidental. Instead, it seems more likely that Jesus' teaching is modeled in part on the famous story of King Hezekiah's Passover banquet, with the Passover banquet of Hezekiah functioning in Chronicles the same way the messianic banquet functions in the parable. Lest there be any doubt about this, it is remarkable to note that extra-biblical Jewish reflection on Hezekiah's Passover also provides us with a striking parallel to Jesus' parable.³⁰ In his *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus elaborates on the biblical account of Hezekiah's banquet and adds that not only did the king's "messengers" invite the northern tribes to come to the feast, but "the prophets" did so as well. And what was the result? Not only did the northern tribes reject the invitations, they also persecuted and killed the prophets:

Then the king [Hezekiah] sent messengers throughout his realm, summoning the people to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of Unleavened Bread, which had for a long time been allowed to lapse through the lawless action of the kings previously mentioned. He also sent messengers to the Israelites, exhorting

29 For examples of "sojourner" as a reference to non-Israelites see also Lev. 24:16; Num. 15:30; Jos. 8:33; "ger," in Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), 158. See also Hahn, *The Kingdom of God as Liturgical Empire*, 182.

30 Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 3:201; Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 520–521.

them to give up their present manner of life and return to their ancient custom and reverence God, for he said he would permit them to come and celebrate the festival of Unleavened Bread and join in their festal assembly ... *However, when the envoys came and brought them this message from their king, the Israelites were not only not persuaded, but even laughed at his envoys as fools; and when their prophets exhorted them in like manner and foretold what they would suffer if they did not alter their course to one of piety toward God, they spat upon them and finally seized and killed them. And not stopping even at these acts of lawlessness, they devised things still worse than those mentioned, and did not leave off until God punished them for their impiety by making them subject to their enemies.* But of these things we shall write farther on. However, many of the tribes of Manasseh, Zabulon, and Isaachar heeded the prophets' exhortations and were converted to piety. And all these flocked to Jerusalem to Hezekiah that they might worship God. (Josephus, *Antiquities* 9:263–67; [my emphasis])³¹

From an ancient Jewish perspective, the refusal of Hezekiah's invitations to the Passover feast in Jerusalem was no minor incident. Rather, for both the Chronicler and Josephus—and, presumably, for Jews who regarded Chronicles as Scripture—it was an irreparably tragic and consequential moment in the history of Israel. Never before in the Davidic Monarchy had an invitation to a feast caused so much to hang in the balance.

In the case of the northern tribes, the ultimate result of their rejection of Hezekiah's invitation was the dissolution of the Davidic kingdom, the dispersion of ten of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the intermingling of the remnants of the northern tribes with the Gentile nations. In other words, *for Josephus, the overthrow of Samaria and the Assyrian exile of the ten northern tribes in 722 B.C. was a direct result of their refusal to repent and come to Hezekiah's Passover banquet.* Because of the "impiety" of the northern tribes, God "brought them under their enemies," by allowing the capital city of Samaria to be overthrown by King Shalmaneser. The vast majority of the northern tribes were then scattered among the nations (see *Antiquities* 9:267, 277–291).

In short, when both Jewish Scripture and Jewish literature outside the Bible are taken into account, the parable of the Royal Wedding Feast appears to be deeply rooted in ancient Jewish history as well as eschatology, in such a way that both its similarities and its differences with Hezekiah's Passover shed light on its possible meaning. On the one hand, Jesus' image of the refusal of invitations to a king's banquet hearkens directly back to the refusal of the northern tribes to come

31 Translation by Ralph Marcus, *Josephus, Jewish Antiquities, Books IX–XI* (Loeb Classical Library 326; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), 139–143.

to the Passover banquet of Hezekiah. Moreover, Jesus' image of the initial invitees being punished with the destruction of their city likewise hearkens back to the destruction of Samaria by the Assyrians in the Assyrian exile (2 Kings 17:24–41). On the other hand, the banquet of which Jesus speaks is no mere annual Passover meal, but rather the eschatological wedding feast that the prophets had said would coincide with the restoration of Israel (Isa. 54:1–7; 55:1–5; 62:1–9). Whereas with Hezekiah's banquet it was primarily the wicked northern tribes who refused to repent and accept the invitation of the heir to the Davidic throne, in the parable of Jesus it is his contemporaries—and, in context, the chief priests and Pharisees in Jerusalem (Matt. 21:45–46, 22:15)—who refuse to come to the banquet of the kingdom of God.

Finally, but by no means least significant, whereas in Hezekiah's day it was the city of *Samaria* that was destroyed because of the northern tribes refusal to repent and come to the Passover, in the parable of Jesus, it is the unidentified "city" of those who reject the invitation to the messianic banquet that ends up destroyed and "burned" (Matt. 22:7). It is not surprising that interpreters have almost unanimously identified this unnamed city as the capital of the southern kingdom, the city of *Jerusalem*.³²

If this is correct, and the parable is in fact about the messianic banquet, then the overall message of Jesus in this parable can be summed up in a warning: "Do not reject my invitation to the messianic banquet, which is now ready, or your fate will be worse than that of the lost tribes of the northern kingdom. You too will be cast out—not from the earthly promised land, but from the banquet of the kingdom of God."

The Messianic Wedding Garment

The third and final part of the parable is the king's arrival at the banquet and his inspection of the wedding guests (Matt. 22:12–13). As we saw above, upon seeing a man who had no "wedding garment," the king immediately questions him: "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?" But the man is speechless. As a result, the king orders his servants to bind him hand and foot and "cast him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." What is the meaning of this mysterious and troubling ending? In particular, what is signified by the wedding garment? What does the ending of this parable reveal about the nature of the kingdom of God?

The overall meaning of the conclusion revolves almost entirely around how one identifies the "wedding garment" (*enduma gamou*) (Matt. 22:11–12).³³ Among

32 Although many commentators regard the implicit warning of Jerusalem's destruction as a prophecy that has been attributed to Jesus *after* the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, a case can be made that Jesus is using the destruction of Samaria as a warning for an unspecified future destruction of Jerusalem. See Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 318.

33 See Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 347–348. For a helpful survey of ancient and medieval

the interpretations proposed by scholars focused on what the garment might have signified in Jesus' first-century Jewish context, three proposals stand out:

1. The garment signifies *deeds of righteousness*.³⁴ This view is supported by Jewish parallels in which the metaphor of clothing is used to signify the good works or "the robe of righteousness" (Isa. 61:10; Bar. 5:1–4; Sir. 27:8; Wis. 5:18).
2. The garment signifies *divine favor and salvation*.³⁵ This view is supported by Jewish parallels which speak of a "garment of salvation" (Isa. 61:10; compare Isa. 52:1; Ezek. 16:10–13; 1 En. 62:16).³⁶
3. The garment signifies *the glory of heavenly beings*.³⁷ This view is supported by Jewish parallels in which heavenly beings such as God or the angels are depicted as wearing special garments of light (Ps. 104:1–2; 1 En. 62:13–16; T. Mos. 20:1–3; Apoc. Zeph. 8:3–4)³⁸

Although these are sometimes pitted against one another, a closer examination reveals that none of them are mutually exclusive: good deeds and divine favor go hand in hand, and can result in the righteous being exalted into heaven to share in the heavenly glory of God and his angels (see Dan. 12:1–2). Moreover, given Jesus' emphasis in the parable on the fact that the messengers of the king gathered both "bad and good" (Matt. 22:10), some kind of moral symbolism of the garment lies "close at hand."³⁹ Finally, two of the three meanings listed above have in common the oracle regarding the "anointed one" in Isaiah 61. Indeed, as Joachim Jeremias convincingly suggests, Isaiah 61 stands out as the most likely background for Jesus' imagery of the eschatological wedding garment.⁴⁰

interpretations, see Blickenstaff, "While the Bridegroom is with Them," 70–71, n. 89.

34 Smit, *Fellowship and Food in the Kingdom*, 235; Funk and Miller, *The Five Gospels*, 235.

35 Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 189.

36 Intriguingly, this imagery is frequently linked to priestly vestments (Isa. 61:10; Ps. 132:15; 2 Chron. 6:41). See Blickenstaff, "While the Bridegroom is with Them," 72, n. 92.

37 Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 3:204.

38 This imagery seems to suggest that by means of the garment of glory God restores to the righteous what Adam had lost in the fall. See 1 En. 62:15–16; Asc. Isa. 7:22; 8:14, 26; 9:9, 24–26; 11:40; L.A.B. 20:1–3; Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 3:204, n.55.

39 Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 347.

40 See Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 188–189.

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because *the LORD has anointed me* to bring good news to
the afflicted ...
I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall exult in
my God;
for he has clothed me with *the garments of salvation*,
he has covered me with *the robe of righteousness*,
as a *bridegroom* decks himself with a garland,
and as a *bride* adorns herself with jewels. (Isa. 61:1, 10)

The explanatory power of this oracle in Isaiah as background for the image of the wedding garment in the parable of the Royal Wedding Feast is manifold.

First, Isaiah not only uses the imagery of wedding “garments”; it does so in the context of an oracle describing the future marriage of the LORD and Israel (Isa. 62:1–5). This strengthens our suggestion above that the parable of the Royal Wedding Feast is about the eschatological wedding of God and his chosen people.

Second, in Isaiah 61 the wedding represents the renewal of the covenant between God and Israel; hence, the wedding garment symbolizes both the righteousness of the elect and the salvation won for them by God. Assuming that Jesus had this Isaianic background in mind, a similar meaning for the wedding garment in the parable is likely: the garment represents the righteousness of those who answer the invitation to the banquet, as well as the salvation given them by God.

Third and finally, the oracle in Isaiah 61 is not merely eschatological; it is demonstrably messianic. Not only is the word “messiah” (*mashiah*) utilized (Isa. 61:1), but the passage was consistently interpreted in messianic terms in ancient Jewish literature (see 11QMelchizedek 2:4–20; 4QMessianic Apocalypse [521] 2:12).⁴¹ This is important because in Isaiah, the anointed figure is compared to “a bridegroom,” just as the son of the king in Jesus’ parable is a bridegroom. If the king signifies God, then his son, like the figure in Isaiah 61, is both bridegroom and messiah.⁴²

Once again, the Old Testament illuminates Jesus’ parable, strongly suggesting that the Royal Wedding Feast is not only about the eschatological wedding of God and Israel, but about the messianic banquet of the kingdom. In support of this suggestion, it is worth noting that the imagery of eschatological garments of salvation finds support in two ancient descriptions of the messianic banquet, one indisputably Jewish in character and one arguably Jewish, though thought by some scholars to be Christian.⁴³ Compare the following texts:

41 See Craig Evans, “Jesus and the Messianic Texts from Qurman,” in *Jesus and His Contemporaries* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 83–154, at 118–120; M. P. Miller, “The Function of Isa 61:1–2 in 11QMelchizedek,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 467–469.

42 See further Brant Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom: Seeing Christ and the Cross through Ancient Jewish Eyes* (forthcoming; New York: Image, 2014).

43 See J. Priest, “A Note on the Messianic banquet,” in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest*

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. (1 Enoch 62:13–16)⁴⁴

Receive what the Lord has entrusted to you and be joyful, giving thanks to him who has called you to *heavenly kingdoms*. Rise and stand, and see at *the feast of the Lord* the number of those who have been sealed. Those who have departed from the shadow of this age have received *glorious garments* from the Lord. Take again your full number, O Zion, and conclude the list of your people who are clothed in white, who have fulfilled the law of the Lord ... I, Ezra, saw on Mount Zion a great multitude, which I could not number. ... Then I asked an angel, “Who are these, my lord?” He answered and said to me, “These are they who have put off mortal clothing and put on the immortal, and they have confessed the name of God; now they are being crowned, and receive palms.” (4 Ezra 2:37–42, 44)

Whatever we make of the provenance of the latter text, the first text provides us with a striking parallel to Jesus’ imagery of a garment that symbolizes the eschatological salvation given to the righteous at the messianic banquet. Further, in both 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra the kingdom is not only eschatological but a *heavenly* kingdom. This heavenly kingdom has been prepared for all eternity and will be revealed for the righteous at the banquet (see 4 Ezra 2:10–14, 33–35). The righteous ascend to this glorious banquet, so that they are in “the presence” of God in heaven (1 En. 62:16).

In light of such parallels, it seems safe to conclude with Jeremias that in the parable of the Royal Wedding Feast, “the white robe, or the garment of Life and Glory, is a symbol of the righteousness awarded by God (see especially Isa. 61.10), and to be clothed with this garment is a symbol of membership in the redeemed community.”⁴⁵ To this I would only add that the community in question is nothing less than *the messianic kingdom* that will be manifested at the eschatological wedding banquet of Israel’s restoration. To this banquet, “many” are called (meaning

Judaism and Christianity, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 224–225.

44 See Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 189.

45 Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 189.

“everyone”), but “few” are chosen (meaning, “not everyone”).⁴⁶ Those who either reject the invitation or refuse to wear the garments of righteousness and salvation will not be allowed to enter into the joy of the kingdom.

The Nature of the Kingdom

With these various aspects of the Old Testament background in mind, we can now step back from the details of the parable’s narrative and ask the broader question about its message as a whole. Given that the parables of Jesus are intended to teach something about the nature of the kingdom of God, what kind of kingdom does the parable of the Royal Wedding Feast describe? In light of our analysis, several significant implications emerge.

First, the kingdom envisaged is a *messianic* kingdom.⁴⁷ Although it is true that the parable does not develop the character of the king’s son, to the extent that the king represents God, his son is by clear implication the “son of God”—an identity regularly associated with the Davidic king of Israel, both in his historical and eschatological roles (2 Sam. 7; Ps. 2; *Psalms of Solomon* 17). Moreover, if, as I suggested above, King Hezekiah’s famous Passover banquet and the northern tribes’ refusal to come to the feast lies in the background of Jesus’ parable (2 Chron. 30), then the Davidic (and therefore messianic) nature of the kingdom Jesus is describing is strengthened. Indeed, given this Old Testament background, the parable seems to suggest that the broken kingdom of David, which Hezekiah himself failed to fully restore through his Passover banquet, will finally be restored *via* the messianic banquet hosted by God himself.

Second, the kingdom is also a *universal* kingdom.⁴⁸ Although there is a clear chronological distinction in the parable between “those who are invited” first and the “many” who are invited subsequently (Matt. 22: 3–4, 8–9), in the final analysis, everyone is invited. Although the parable itself does not give the exact identity of the original invitees vs. the later guests,⁴⁹ to the extent that the story echoes the Passover banquet of King Hezekiah, Jesus may be suggesting a distinction between those Israelites who fail to respond to his message and those who accept it, the later group including both responsive Israelites and Gentiles (see 2 Chron. 30:25). Admittedly, however, the emphasis in Jesus’ parable is not on ethnicity but on receptivity and righteousness.

Third, the kingdom is an *imminent* kingdom.⁵⁰ This is very important to stress. The king notifies the invitees because the dinner is *ready*. Twice this is

46 See Ben F. Meyer, “Many (=All) Are Called, But Few (=Not All) Are Chosen,” *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 89–97.

47 Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 177–178.

48 See Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 3:202.

49 Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 321.

50 Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 120–121.

emphasized: “Tell those who are invited, Behold, I have made ready (*hetoimaka*) my dinner ... everything is ready (*hetoima*)” (Matt. 22:4). Given that Isaiah’s oracle of the eschatological feast was centuries old, this message of imminence in Jesus’ parable would have been particularly arresting in a first-century Jewish context. The long-awaited eschatological banquet is coming soon. The question is no longer when the kingdom will come but how people will respond. Will they prefer the things of this world—a “farm,” a “business” (Matt. 22:5)? Or will they even reject the messengers of the king and put them to death (Matt. 22:6)? To the extent that those invited refuse, they will miss participating in the kingdom itself.

Fourth, although the kingdom is in some way *present*, it is not yet *fully realized*. This is evident in that both “bad and good” are allowed into the kingdom—at least for a time (Matt 22:10). When the king finally comes to the banquet, however, there will be a separation.⁵¹ The kingdom is now a *corpus permixtum* (mixed body); but at the arrival of the king it will be purified of those who have failed to put on the proper “wedding garment” (Matt. 22:11–14). This distinction is important because it suggests some kind of interim period between being *gathered* into the kingdom banquet and the final *separation*. The kingdom is currently in “the process of gathering” but awaits a final sifting that will take place at the eschatological judgment.⁵² The parable thus envisions, in the words of Jeremias, “*an eschatology that is in the process of realization.*”⁵³

Fifth and finally, the kingdom is not merely eschatological, but *heavenly*.⁵⁴ When the king throws the man without a wedding garment out of the banquet (=the kingdom), he is cast into “the outer darkness” where there is a “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 22:13). Although “outer darkness” imagery does not appear in the Old Testament itself, it is a standard early Jewish way of describing the realm of the damned, sometimes called Gehenna.⁵⁵ Consider the following parallels:

Indeed, I will bring forth in shining light those who loved my
holy name, and I will set each one on the throne of his honor ...

51 France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 828.

52 Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 320–321.

53 Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 230 (my emphasis).

54 See Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 172, n. 613: “It is understandable that in Christian sources ‘the kingdom (of God)’ sometimes means ‘heaven.’ ... In like fashion, ‘the world to come’ can, in Jewish sources, mean ‘the other world.’” See also Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 113, who equates the marriage feast with “the life of the age to come” in accordance with “the regular Jewish use of these symbols.” As we have seen elsewhere, the World to Come is, in Jewish thought, a heavenly realm that will appear in its fullness in the eschaton. See, for example, 1 En. 39:4; 61:8–12; 71:15; 4 Ezra 8:52; 2 Baruch 51:7–8, 10–13, 14; 2 Enoch [J] 42:3–5; m. Aboth 4:16; Midrash on Psalms 31:6; cf. y. Yeb. 15:14d; b. Ber. 28b; Sifra on Lev 85d; see Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 198.

55 See, for example, France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 319.

And the righteous, as they shine, will see those who were born in darkness *cast into darkness*; the sinners will cry out and see them shining, and they, for their part, will depart to where days and times are written for them. (1 *Enoch* 108:12, 14–15)

Rabbi Nehemiah said: It came from the darkness of Gehinnom [=Gehenna], for it says, “A land of thick darkness, as darkness itself; a land of the shadow of death, without any order” (Job 10:22) ... Rabbi Judah ben Rabbi said: *With what are the wicked covered in Gehinnom? With darkness.* (*Exodus Rabbah* 14:2)

The upshot of such parallels is simple: in the Royal Wedding Feast, the messianic kingdom envisaged is no mere earthly reality. Rather, *the kingdom stands in direct contrast to Gehenna, the spiritual realm of the damned*. Both realms—the kingdom and Gehenna—are not earthly in character. In sum, the kingdom spoken of by Jesus is not merely prefigured in the history of Israel (as in the allusions to Hezekiah’s Passover); nor can it be reduced to the mere invitation to and gathering of the invited to the wedding banquet. Rather, the kingdom consists of a heavenly realm, which is contrasted with its opposite: the supernatural (but abysmal) realm of the damned.

Conclusion

The basic conclusion to our study can be summed up as follows: although at first glance the parable of the Royal Wedding Feast has struck many commentators as difficult and even bizarre, upon closer inspection of its Old Testament background each of its images becomes remarkably clear. For example, the gravity of one’s response to the Wedding Banquet invitation is because this is no ordinary banquet. It is the messianic banquet of salvation spoken of by the prophets. Likewise, the severity of the king’s reaction to those who reject his invitations is understandable against the backdrop of the mockery and rejection of King Hezekiah’s invitations to the Passover feast in the book of Chronicles. As this Old Testament background reveals, the banquet in question is not just the eschatological feast of the messiah; it is the banquet of the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel. To despise and reject an invitation to this feast is no less egregious than was the rejection of King Hezekiah’s attempts to restore Israel by means of the Passover feast. Indeed, the situation is even more serious, for rejecting the invitation to the messianic feast is tantamount to rejecting God’s repeatedly stated plan to gather and restore the twelve tribes of Israel. Further, the image of a man being cast out of this messianic banquet of restoration and salvation because he had no “wedding garment” can be illuminated by recourse to the prophecies of Isaiah, who speaks about the “garments of salvation” with which God will clothe his people in the eschatological age of salvation.

If these basic observations are correct, then at least three important implications stand out.

First and foremost, if the other parables of Jesus are anything like that of the Royal Wedding Banquet, then close attention needs to be paid to possible backgrounds in *Jewish Scripture* as a tool for unlocking the meaning that the parable would have had in a first-century Jewish context. In particular, the Old Testament background of this parable strongly suggests that Jesus spoke about the coming of the kingdom of God in ways that were deliberately evocative of the history of Israel, especially the famous story of King Hezekiah's rejected invitations to the Passover feast in Jerusalem.

Second, if this suggestion is correct, then a strong case could be made that Jesus is comparing himself to the Davidide Hezekiah, who sought to unite the northern and southern kingdoms, and the twelve tribes of Israel, not through military or personal might, but through the celebration of the Passover feast. In other words, Jesus, like Hezekiah before him, is attempting to bring about *the liturgical restoration of Israel*, through the banquet at which he will act as host and to which he is inviting his contemporaries. If this is correct, then a case can be made that the Last Supper—as a Passover meal celebrated by Jesus with the Twelve disciples (Matt. 26:26–28; Mark 14:24–25; Luke 22:19–30; 1 Cor. 11:23–25)—is nothing less than a prophetic sign which will both signify and set in motion the liturgical restoration of Israel and the inauguration of the Kingdom of God.

Third and finally, and by no means least significantly, the parable of the Royal Wedding Feast provides an important corrective for the way in which scholars imagine Jesus' vision of the restoration of Israel. Some interpreters are inclined to interpret Jesus' vision of the restoration of the twelve tribes as a this-worldly ingathering to the earthly promised land.⁵⁶ The parable of the Royal Wedding Feast, however, unequivocally states that whoever is cast out of the wedding feast of the kingdom will not just be cast out of the land of Canaan, but into the "outer darkness" of the spiritual realm of Gehenna. In other words, how one responds to the invitation to this banquet of the messiah is not ultimately a question of geographical restoration or dislocation, but a matter of *eternal life and death*. For the kingdom envisaged in this parable is no earthly kingdom, but the eschatological kingdom of heaven.

56 See, for example, Karen J. Wenell, *Jesus and Land: Sacred and Social Space in Second Temple Judaism*, Library of New Testament Studies 334 (London: T. & T. Clark, 2007).