

PARABLES, “THROUGH PEASANTS EYES!”

Study 36, “The Great Banquet,” Part I, Luke 14:15-24

1. Luke 14 and 15 have some of the greatest passages in all of Scripture. Here the unqualified offer of grace to sinners is set forth in all of its majesty. Often the theological masterpiece of the p of the prodigal son is allowed to overshadow that of the Great Banquet (GB), which deserves equal attention. We will examine in turn the literary background, setting, structure and culture of the p. The interpretation will take all of these into consideration.
2. In Luke this p. is told about the GB where people recline. Our Arabic translators following the Greek text, give us ‘reclined’ rather than the RSV ‘sat at the table.’ What is the precise setting? Jeremias has pointed out that with the receptions of Luke 24:30 and Mark 16:14 the word recline in the Gospels usually means either a meal out of doors or a banquet of some kind (Jeremias). Here we have a banquet. But was there a table? In the OT the presence of a table for a meal seems to assume wealth or rank. The same can be said for the NT. There are many references to meals and eating but a physical table is only mentioned four times. It occurs in the story of the Canaanite women, who humbly suggests that the dogs can eat crumbs from the master’s table, (Matt. 15:27). The rich man in the story of Lazarus has a table, (Luke 16:21). There is a table in the upper room, Luke 22:21, and in the eschatological messianic banquet hall of Luke 22:30. Granted, the meals held out of doors at which Jesus and the disciples “reclined,” were not eaten on tables. Yet it is best to assume as we did in Luke 7:36, that here also are guests reclining on couches on a low table. The p. tells of the GB where property owners are the chosen guests. The setting is the house of the ruler, 14:1, who is most certainly wealthy enough to be in the class of people who recline on coaches around tables and not on the floor.
3. Thus reclined around ‘tables’ would perhaps best represent the scene. We must visualize relatively wealthy people reclining in Greco-Roman style at the format in the banquet. The p. itself is introduced by a pious outburst

from a fellow diner who says, “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the Kingdom of God.” With this statement we are clearly in the world of Palestinian speech and culture. “To eat bread,” is a classical ME idiom meaning to ‘eat a meal.’ It has long been identified as a Hebraism (Plummer). T.W. Manson regards this introductory statement as “probably too good to be invented,” (Sayings). Thus the guest reclining with Jesus introduces the subject of eating in the kingdom. Here as elsewhere the banquet is a symbol of salvation, (Marshall). This salvation culminates at the end of history with a final GB. The last GB is a symbol for salvation (Marshall). The last GB is commonly referred to as the Messianic Banquet of the end times. So important is this latter theme as a background for an understanding of the p., that it must be examined briefly.

4. The idea of the sacred meal with God is deeply embedded in the OT. In Ps. 23:5, we are told that God Himself spreads a banquet for the one who trusts in Him, even more informative for our passage is Isaiah 25:6-9. This passage is most likely poetry that uses very old poetic forms (as confirmed to me by William Holladay). Our translation of the text is as follows:

5. Text:

<i>(6) And He will make, Yahweh of hosts</i>	<i>MAKE-A BANQUET</i>
<i>For all the peoples on this mountain</i>	<i>ALL PEOPLES</i>
<i>A fat banquet, wine banquet</i>	
<i>A banquet of juicy marrow, of good wine</i>	<i>SWALLOW--VEIL</i>
<i>(7) And He will swallow on this mountain</i>	<i>ALL PEOPLES/NATIONS</i>
<i>The face of covering</i>	
<i>And the veil spread over all nations.</i>	
<i>(8) He will swallow up death forever.</i>	
<i>And the LORD Yahweh will wipe away tears</i>	<i>SWALLOW-DEATH</i>
<i>From off all faces</i>	<i>ALL FACES</i>
<i>And the reproach of His people.</i>	
<i>He will take away from upon all the Earth.</i>	<i>TAKE AWAY—REPROACH</i>
<i>For Yahweh has spoken</i>	<i>ALL THE EARTH</i>
<i>(9) It will be said on that day</i>	
<i>“Lo this is our God;</i>	<i>GOD</i>
<i>We have waited for Him</i>	<i>WAIT</i>
<i>That He might save us</i>	<i>SAVE</i>

(10)	<i>This is Yahweh</i>	<i>GOD</i>
	<i>We have waited for Him</i>	<i>WAIT</i>
	<i>Let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation."</i>	<i>SAVE</i>

6. In this text a number of important themes are brought together. Salvation is described in terms of a GB, which shall be for all the peoples/nations. The gentiles will participate after God has swallowed up death and their veil. The veil is not removed, but destroyed. Ordinarily the nations who come to the Lord must come bringing gifts, (Is 18:7, 60:4-7, and Psalm 96:8). Here the banquet is pure grace—the global participants bring nothing! The food offered is rich fare of the kind that is the King of kings. Verse 9 is often seen as a separate piece of tradition. Yet it is attached here by the editor and thus the waiting of God who comes to save is emphasized. There is also the striking occurrence of five cases of 'all' in verses 6-8.
7. This banquet theme was developed in the intertestamental period and understood to be related to the coming of the Messiah (Jeremias). But somehow the idea that the gentile would be invited to attend was muted. The Aramaic version of the passage, the Targum, paraphrases verse 6 as follows;

"Yahweh of Hosts will make for all the peoples in this mountain a meal; and thought they suppose it as honor, it will be a shame for them and the great plagues, plagues from which they will be unable to escape, plagues whereby they will come to their end." (Gray).
8. Clearly, the vision of Isaiah is here lost. Even the Apocrypha pictures that the worldly powers will fall down and worship Jesus. He will then drive them from his presence. He will deliver them to the angels for punishment. They shall be a spectacle for righteousness and 'the sword is drunk with their blood.' In the Qumran community, the GB is specifically connected with the coming of the Messiah, this is described in a short work called "The Messianic Rule." In this passage, we read of how, in the last days, the Messiah will gather His entire congregation to eat bread and drink wine. Wise, intelligent and the perfect men will gather with Him. These will be assembled by rank.

"And then the Messiah of Israel shall come.
 And the Chief of (the clans of Israel shall sit before him)
 Each in the order of his dignity
 According to (his place) in their camps and marches. (Vermes).

9. The specifics of ranks are carefully aligned. First are the judges and officers, then come the chiefs of thousands, fifties and tens; and finally there are the Levites. No one is allowed in who is “smitten in his flesh, or paralyzed in his feet or hands, or lame or blind or deaf or dumb, or has a visible blemish.’ All gentiles are obviously excluded and, along with them, all imperfect Jews. Thus Isaiah’s open-ended version has been blurred and eliminated. For him the great day was coming when the veil of the gentiles would be destroyed and they would sit down with God’s people. Enoch has the gentiles excluded, and the Qumran community in addition rejects all Jewish unrighteous along with those with any physical blemish. The pious guest in Luke 14:15 certainly assumes something of this background. Regarding the opinions of Jesus, the reader of Luke’s Gospel already has an indication of his view on this topic from reading Luke 13:29, which is an important part of the p. before us. This verse is set in a structure which can be as follows.

10. Read Luke 13: 28-34.

a. There is a repeated theme;

Three interlocking themes are stated and then repeated in an inverse fashion. In the preceding verses we are told in the final fulfillment of all things that some who think there are invited will specifically plead, “we ate and drank in your presence.” They believe they have participated in table fellowship with him. “But no, I don’t know you,” come the answer. Abraham, Isaac and all the prophets are there, but these bystanders will be rejected. Then comes the double repetition of the threefold theme of the ‘ingathering’ for the GB, a reference of the death of Jesus and the third day.

11. These materials are presented in an inverse fashion. Some of the motifs in Isaiah 25 reappear. There will be an ingathering. The faithful will come from the four corners of the compass. A dramatic reversal of positions is anticipated, because the first will be last and the last will be first. Jerusalem is presented as the place where Jesus most earnestly desired to gather the faithful for the banquet, but they have refused. Here the ingathering for the messianic banquet is discussed along with the twice-repeated theme of the death of Jesus., and reference for him being made perfect on the third day. The latter two themes are not in our p. and so lie outside the scope of our study, but are an important part of the Travel Narrative as a whole, and for a full understanding of the messianic banquet.