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“EVERYTHING IS READY; COME TO THE MARRIAGE BANQUET” The Parable of the Invitation to the Royal Marriage Banquet (Matt 22:1-14) in the Context of Matthew’s Gospel

Nalpathilchira Joseph[♦]

University: Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome

Faculty: Bible

Director: Prof. P. Stock Klemens, SJ

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1. The Thesis

This study is an exegetical investigation into the meaning and function of Jesus’ Parable of the Invitation to the Royal Marriage Banquet (Matt 22:1-14) in the context of the First Gospel. Formulated as a thesis, the present study argues that the parable in Matt 22:1-14 is mainly not paraenetical or polemical but revelatory, and that by the parable, which is the most influential and powerful means used by Jesus to speak about the reign of heaven, he is making clearer the dynamism operative in the kingdom of heaven. Exploring the parable

[♦] **Nalpathilchira Joseph**, born in Kerala (India), is a priest of the archdiocese of Changanacherry, Kerala. He completed his doctoral studies (DSS) at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome (2011). Email: joenalpath@gmail.com

in its immediate and wider contexts of the First Gospel, the dissertation demonstrates that the advent of the rule of heaven, symbolised as a marriage banquet (22:2), offers everyone an opportunity to become commensals with the Son in the presence of the Father. Acceptance of this offer brings everlasting joy, its rejection results in eternal punishment.

2. Focus and Methodology of the Dissertation

Previous studies on Matt 22:1-14 on the whole consist of generalised treatments, and there are no other lengthy studies which explore this parable in the overall context of the First Gospel. The main thrust of most of the previous studies, applying diachronic methodologies, was to articulate the polemical and paraenetical motifs in the parable. They also suggest that the parable as a whole expresses the concern and preoccupation of Matthew for his community. Furthermore, most of these authors consider it as an allegory of salvation history and Christian living.

To analyse the text using the synchronic method is helpful in discovering the meaning and function of the parable. We seek to substantiate our thesis with a textual study of Matt 22:1-14 in its immediate and wider contexts. This dissertation takes the First Gospel in its final form. No matter what development it has undergone, the final stage of a text as an independent literary unit is what we have now and is most important. Our method is also founded on the Christian view that the Evangelist is sharing his faith experience and conviction with his readers through the Gospel so that they also may enter into and grow in faith. Hence, throughout the study we read the Gospel and interpret it while keeping in mind this faith-purpose of the Evangelist.

3. Itinerary of the Study

This thesis consists of five chapters with a general introduction and a general conclusion. In the First Chapter we undertake a survey of the history of parable interpretation, ancient and modern, and present our methodology of parable exegesis. The Second Chapter is dedicated to establishing the synchronic coherence of Matt 22:1-14 with a view to attaining a preliminary understanding of the textual unit. This is done mainly through a linguistic-syntactic analysis.

The scope set for Chapter Three is a detailed analysis of the parable under discussion. Making use of the theory of parable interpretation adopted for this study, the parable is investigated in two stages. In Section I the parable is analysed in its fictitious level, and in Section II

an attempt is made to elucidate the real referents and real situations depicted in the parable. The analysis then proceeds with the exploration of the response demanded by the parable and the theological cluster of motifs that provides the semantic energy capable of eliciting the response, thus grounding the efficacy of the parable as a performative speech-act.

What goes before any given text is widely recognized as important in its interpretation; similarly, it is vital to consider what follows a text as well, in order to understand fully what the author is saying. Hence, in the Fourth Chapter we undertake an exploration of the context (Matt 21:23-46) immediately preceding and the context (22:15-46) immediately following Matt 22:1-14, which together form the immediate context of the parable of the marriage banquet.

Chapter Five has for its objective the investigation of the global context of Matt 22:1-14, especially seeking to elucidate the common motifs that the parable under discussion shares with the rest of the narrative of Matthew. For this purpose, the Chapter ventures to analyse those textual units in the First Gospel that share common traits with the parable of the marriage banquet. This enables us to comprehend and appreciate better the meaning and function of the parable in the overall plan of the First Gospel. In the general conclusion we sum up our exploration of Matt 22:1-14 by noting the important themes of the parable in the context of Matthew.

4. Brief Exposition of the Results of the Study

The results of the present study bring home the following points:

4.1. The Parable in Matt 22:1-14 is Revelatory

Jesus' Jerusalem ministry is dominated by his direct confrontation with the Jewish elite who challenged his authority (21:23), and it is in the wake of this mounting tension with the Jewish elite and those following them that Jesus addresses them in a parabolic mode (22:1). This study has demonstrated that the purpose of the parable is revelatory. Jesus turns the moment of confrontation into one of illumination; he does not retaliate, but reveals the dynamism of the rule of heaven, a revelation in view of the salvation of mankind. The parable in Matt 22:1-14, our study suggests, is a veiled answer to the question about Jesus' authority raised by the Jewish authorities (21:23). The parable discloses that God's Kingship/Fatherhood, and Jesus' divine Sonship form the core of the kingdom of heaven. Furthermore, the parable under discussion presents Jesus as the Bridegroom of the new nuptials. The reign of heaven consists

primarily in God's acting (22:2); God sends, guides, empowers, and sustains His messengers. Keeping in line with the characteristic of the kingship of heaven, where the majesty of God's universal dominion is operative, the parable presents God as a king, someone with power and sovereignty. Moreover, the kingship of God, involves God's kingly/fatherly intervention in human history, who reveals his sovereignty as King and Father.

4.2. The Symbol of the Marriage Banquet: The Kingdom of Heaven as Commensality with the Son in the Presence of the Father

The kingdom of heaven is the common element of several parabolic discourses of Jesus, and the phrase *basileia tw/n ouwrnw/n* is so characteristic and distinctive in Matthew, that it is without doubt the single most comprehensive concept in the First Gospel. However, this concept of the reign of heaven is never defined in any of the parables or anywhere in the First Gospel, nor does any parable elucidate directly what the expression kingdom of heaven itself means. It remains as a symbol that calls for an interpretation.

In the parable under discussion the Evangelist uses the symbolism of a marriage festivity to express the likeness of the reign of heaven (22:2). By the inauguration of the kingdom of heaven humankind becomes the object of God's fatherly love; the term marriage banquet, therefore, refers to the joy or the salvation in the promised messianic era, which God now offers in the person and mission of Jesus, the Bridegroom of the new nuptials.

The abundance of God's love now finds its most caring and elevated manifestation in commensality with the Son in the presence of the Father. The reign of heaven therefore is relationship, a relationship that emerges from the plan of God; the new affiliation envisioned is one in which there is an elevation in the status of those who accept the invitation to the marriage banquet. The goal of Jesus' mission is to raise people to these heights, whereby they are able to join the Patriarchs and enjoy eternal bliss in the banquet of the kingdom (8:11). There is a double movement operative in the reign of heaven; it has its beginning in the initiative and benevolence of God, is a 'man-ward' movement whereby all are invited to the joy of the kingdom of heaven. Corresponding to this 'man-ward' movement, there is a 'God-ward' movement on the part of man, where people respond positively to this divine initiative.

4.3. Preferential Option for the Kingdom of Heaven: A Demand of Discipleship

The advent of the kingdom relativises the priorities of peoples' lives; the invitation given to the marriage festivity is a call to reorient one's life, new priorities emerge. Heaven's rule, which is the absolute reason of a person's life, sets the standards of one's life and demands total and primary allegiance to the kingdom. According to the parable, the code of conduct, or the dress-code required for admission at the banquet of the kingdom, is this preferential option for the reign of heaven, and it is represented by the wedding garment one is supposed to have at the nuptial banquet. This radicalised demand for the option of the reign of heaven is the divine-imperative necessitated by the divine-indicative that the "the kingdom of God is drawing near" (3:2; 4:17; 10:7). Jesus therefore exhorts people that they should strive first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness (6:33). Jesus and his ministry become the guarantee for those who totally opt for the kingdom; his life epitomises the life of someone who has given total priority to heaven's rule and God's providence. He declares that, "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (8:20). This attitude is demanded of everyone who accepts the invitation given to follow Jesus (4:18-22; 8:18-22; 9:9; 19:16-22; 22:1-14). What is implied here is a total detachment from mundane matters that are ordinarily seen as important (22:5).

4.4. Love of God and Love of Neighbour: The Hallmark of Discipleship and Sonship, the Way to Perfection

Heaven's reign gives new direction and substance to one's relationship with God as the Father and with the neighbour as brother (22:34-40). Love of God is the key characteristic of a person's preferential option for God and His reign (6:8, 9-13, 25-34; 7:11; 22:1-14). Love of God and neighbour is the distinguishing feature of the reign of heaven; it is the hallmark of discipleship and sonship. Moreover, for the First Evangelist love of God and neighbour, modelled after the perfection of the heavenly Father, is the way to perfection (5:43-48; 6:19-34; 19:16-30; 22:1-14, 34-40). Being the hermeneutical principle of the whole of the Scriptures, the love commandment envisions a new nuptial community in a profound fraternal bond of perfection and righteousness in the standard of Jesus (5:20, 43-48). The one who waters the tree of his life with the will of the Father, i.e., by doing the will of the Father, will produce the fruits of repentance and righteousness in his life (3:8, 10; 7:17; 21:33-44), and will enjoy the everlasting festivity of heaven's rule.

One of the key antagonists of heaven's rule is the love of mammon (22:3-6; see also 4:1-11; 6:19-24; 19:16-30; 20:1-15; 1 Tm 6:10). Opting for the reign of mammon, contrary to that of heaven, one permits that the claims of mammon take precedence over the claims of God in his life. Only by renouncing the attractions of worldly powers (4:1-14), deciding against mammon (6:24), and being liberated from the bondage of self-assurance and self-righteousness (6:1-8, 16-18) with a view to a better righteousness (5:20) will one be able to give heaven's rule one's primary and only priority (6:33) and make God the primary object of his life.

4.5. An Invitation to all Nations, of all the Ages

The First Gospel concludes with a command of the Risen Lord. Jesus, who is risen from the dead and who is given all 'authority' in heaven and on the earth by the Father (Matt 28:18), commissions the Eleven on a universal mission, they are also assured of his invisible, powerful and everlasting presence (28:19-20). The first invitation given to the disciples (4:18-22; 9:9) reaches its climax or takes a decisive turn at this universal commissioning. This final mission commissioning could be interpreted as a final invitation given by the Risen Lord to his disciples to invite all nations (28:19a) to discipleship, to the festivity of the kingdom. Jesus assures them of the festivity by declaring his perpetual presence. For, the presence of the Groom, both terrestrial (9:15) and eschatological (22:1-14; 25:1-13) is a time of nuptial festivity, it is the time of celebration, of rejoicing. Both discipleship and making-disciples in the dynamism of the First Gospel are experiences of joy and festivity because it is Jesus, the eschatological Bridegroom, who invites them and commissions them, and is with them for ever (28:20; see also 1:23; 18:20). Through this assurance of his continued presence till the end of the ages, Jesus, the Emmanuel, the eschatological Bridegroom, makes the disciple-making mission an endeavour of joy and festivity. The magnetic force of the joy of Christian discipleship, reinforced by the everlasting presence of the Risen Lord, will work as a catalyst that attracts people to the path of discipleship (28:19), to embracing the teaching of Jesus (28:20a) and finally, at the end of the ages (28:20b), to join the company of the Patriarchs (8:11), the Son and the Father at the marriage banquet of the kingdom (22:1-14).