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EXCUSES, EXCUSES: THE PARABLE OF THE BANQUET (LUKE 14:15-24) WITHIN THE LARGER CONTEXT OF LUKE

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Excuses, excuses, you hear them every day;
The Devil, he'll supply them, if from church you stay away.
When people come to know the Lord, the devil always loses,
So to keep them folks away from church, he offers them excuses.[1]

This paper proposes a fresh reading of the Parable of the Banquet (Luke 14:15-24) on the basis of patterns of repetition throughout Luke as a whole. In particular, I will emphasize Luke's repetition of excuses or opportunities for excuses in clusters of three.

It goes without saying that this reading is not the only possible one of this text. It is, like all other readings, the result of the interaction of one reader's particular set of questions and techniques with a text. While other modern interpretations treat the parable as a unit unto itself, or connect it to the rest of Luke thematically, I propose a complex rhetorical operation by which this text is one section of Luke's larger intricate weaving. My intent is not to destruct other reading strategies, but to demonstrate how the posing of a different question can lead to enlightening results.

Repetition in Greco-Roman Literature

Repetition played a crucial role in ancient rhetoric and literature. In contrast to modern *readers* who are expected to remember all they have read,[2] ancient *hearers* had to be reminded. Such reminders were necessary because ancient literature was produced more for the ears of an audience than for its eyes. Since texts were read aloud both privately (Acts 8:30) and publicly (Rev 1:3), it was necessary for speakers and

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1 Southern gospel song.

2 S. S. Lanser (*The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* [Princeton: Princeton University, 1981] 180-181) argues that the degree zero narratee is 'able to remember all that has been told.'

authors to develop various ways of saying the same thing more than once. Ancient rhetoric featured repetition of sounds, words, phrases, periods, and themes, ranging from literal duplication to allusion. As *Rhetorica ad Herennium* put it, 'there inheres in the repetition an elegance which the ear can distinguish more easily than words can explain' (4.14.21).[3] The same work even included a scheme for varying themes: 'Refining consists in dwelling on the same topic and yet seeming to say something ever new' (4.42.54-4.44.58). Variation was desirable because excessive exact repetition was considered boring.

Ancient authors understood that repetition was worth its trouble in achieving comprehension.[4] Paul uses this mechanism overtly:

> But even if we or an angel from heaven preaches to you contrary to that which we preached to you, let that one be accursed. As we said before, so also I say again, if someone preaches to you contrary to that which you received, let that one be accursed (Gal 1:8-9).

Another NT example of this process is the juxtaposition of similar parables and miracle stories (e.g., Matt 13:31-33; Mark 6:30-44, with 8:1-10 and 8:14-21).

Though some may object to the application of ancient rhetorical theory to narrative forms such as the Gospels, I would argue that it is appropriate for two reasons. First, ancient critics themselves sometimes made the same move, using rhetoric to analyze other forms of discourse.[5] Second, most people who could write in the hellenistic world had learned to do so through rhetorical training; even persons who were not educated had often heard public oratory. Indeed, writers of historiography and biography constructed their work through rhetorical techniques.[6]

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[3] Quotations from *Rhetorica ad Herennium* are taken from the translation by H. Caplan, *Cicero: Ad C. Herennium* (LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1954).

[4] Demetrius; *On Style*, 4.197.

[5] G. A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984) 13.

[6] W. van Unnik, 'First Century A. D. Literary Culture and Early Christian Literature,' *Protocol of the First Colloquy: The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture* (Berkeley:

Patterns of Repetition in Luke

Readers of Luke-Acts have long noted that patterns of repetition are a common feature of the works. Whether they read Luke-Acts as a single work or as two related works, many authors have demonstrated Luke's tendency to vary diction and other means of expression from one context to another as well as within single contexts. A early as 1901, J. H. Ropes noted that:

> Luke varies words in the same context, varies expressions in distant contexts, and even varies larger units of material in distant contexts (e.g., Paul's conversion is reported three times in Acts).

Ropes saw these patterns as evidence for Luke's literary competence as well as for the assigning of Luke-Acts to one author.[7]

H. J. Cadbury's article on Lucan style follows the work of Ropes.[8] Cadbury couples Luke's use of variation with his fondness for repetition (also of words, phrases, and scenes). We should note, however, that Cadbury argues that repeated scenes are less common in Luke than in Acts.[9] Though he does not discuss it in detail, Cadbury also mentions that repetition and variation were general features of ancient rhetorical practice.[10] From the work of Ropes and Cadbury, we may say that scholars have long known that Luke often repeats words, phrases, and even scenes, but is careful to do so with variation.

More contemporary scholars have noted these patterns on a larger scale, what L. T. Johnson calls parallelism.[11] Thus, both Luke and Acts begin with the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit (of Mary in

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Graduate Theological Union and University of California, 1970) 6-7; D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 30-31.

7 'An Observation on the Style of S. Luke,' *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 12 (1901) 299-305.

8 'Four Features of Lucan Style,' in *Studies in Luke-Acts* (ed. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn; Fortress edition; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 87-102.

9 Ibid., 89.

10 Ibid., 92.

11 *The Gospel of Luke*, (Sacra Pagina, vol. 3; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) 14.

Luke and of Mary and the disciples in Acts), Peter and Paul share similar experiences, and Stephen's trial resembles that of Jesus. According to Johnson, this device both makes connections among Luke's main characters and creates an unspecified 'dynamic tension between discrete parts of his narrative.'

Johnson's concept could easily be stretched. For example, the shutting of Zechariah's mouth in Luke 1:20 and the freeing of his tongue in 1:64 could be studied in relation to the more familiar resting of tongues upon the believers in Acts 2:3. In other words, Luke's use of repetition and variation may be just as much thematic as stylistic, and may be carefully designed for rhetorical effect. That is precisely what I propose in relation to the Parable of the Banquet.

Modern Interpretations

Outside of commentaries and parable research, the Parable of the Banquet has not received much attention; when it is treated, it is often related to its Lucan context only thematically, even in literary-critical readings. A survey of modern scholarship reveals three primary lines of interpretation, though the boundaries between these are often blurred. First, some interpreters have emphasized the parable's invitation to the eschatological banquet. Though the parable does address *who* attends the banquet, some readers emphasize the universality of the invitation over the exclusion of the original invitees.[12]

Second, some highlight the polemical dimension of the parable. Such readings locate the parable as a warning either to the Jews or to the rich. Those who say the parable speaks against the Jewish leaders often associate it with Luke's salvation-history theme which points to the mission to the gentiles; those who discern a warning to the rich note a dimension of reversal: 'The reversal of the humble and those who exalt

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[12] E. Schweizer, *The Good News according to Luke* (trans. D. E. Green; Atlanta: John Knox, 1984) 237-239; D. L. Tiede, *Luke* (Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) 268; J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV* (AB 28A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1981) 1052-1053. Tiede and Fitzmyer subordinate this dimension to the third emphasis cited below, the urgency of the invitation.

themselves in 14:11 is mirrored in the parable by the replacement of people of social position and wealth with beggars off the street.'[13]

Third, some have seen the parable as expressing the urgency of discipleship or the necessity of responding to Jesus. The original invitees have squandered their only opportunity. Linking the parable with 2 Cor 6:2 ('Now is the acceptable time'), E. Linnemann stresses the 'now' of the invitation: 'Anyone who is not willing to be summoned to the first course, does not get to taste of the meal proper.'[14] And C. F. Evans adds that the excuses demonstrate the way 'economic and social attachments' can hinder response to Jesus' messianic invitation.[15]

A characteristic shared by all these interpretations -- even literary-critical ones -- is their atomism. Each of the readings either abstracts Luke 14:15-24 from the whole of the Gospel or connects the parable with its context only thematically. Though they may highlight some thematic or theological relationships, these readings rarely find literary or rhetorical reasons for seeing the parable as functioning as one part of a larger rhetorical whole. D. L. Tiede notes the resemblance between Luke 14:15-24 and 9:57-62 -- but he gives little attention to this relationship -- while Evans and R. C. Tannehill associate elements of 9:51-62 with 14:25-33.[16]

Patterns of Excuses in Luke

This project began with a casual observation: while reading a commentary section on the Parable of the Banquet, I was struck by the parable's similarity to Jesus' interaction with would-be followers in Luke 9:57-62. As I began to search for connections, I found that Luke repeatedly reports encounters in which an individual or series

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13 R. C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (vol. 1; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 184.

14 *Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition* (London: SPCK, 1966) 92.

15 *Saint Luke* (TPI New Testament Commentaries; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 574.

16 Evans, *Saint Luke*, 439-441; Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, 149, 232. Tannehill is careful to place the parable within a larger context of 14:7-24 (*Narrative Unity*, 184).

of individuals is allowed three excuses (or opportunities).[17] Each time, the characters face a crucial choice.[18]

In the Parable of the Banquet, the host sends a slave to those who had invitations to the party. The first invitee begs off; he has bought a piece of land, and needs to go see it. Likewise the second has bought five oxen and wishes to inspect them. In the third case the guest has been recently married, and excuses himself.

When we compare this part of the parable with 9:57-62, we see different excuses and different narrative contexts, but a similar pattern. To the first potential disciple, who approaches Jesus rather than waits for an invitation, Jesus himself offers the excuse: the Son of Man and his followers must embrace homelessness. Jesus invites the second person, but this one has an excuse of his own: he must bury his father.[19] A third person offers to follow Jesus (Did he overhear the second?), but he needs to say good-bye to his household. Luke does not tell us directly that the three men in 9:57-62 do not follow Jesus, but Jesus' stern pronouncement in 9:62 encourages such a reading.

Now it is possible to define the pattern, and to test it against the larger context of Luke. The pattern consists of characters faced with a choice (whether to go to the banquet; whether to follow Jesus). Three times, the characters employ excuses to beg off. So far, the choices relate to invitations, and we assume that Luke views the positive response as being yes.

But to what degree must other stories conform to this pattern for it to be meaningful? If we recall that the ancient practice was to vary patterns rather than to repeat them outright, and that Luke commonly employs variation, we will look not for one-to-one correspondences, but for patterned recurrences. I propose that we seek two elements: (1) a character or a series of three characters faced with a critical choice; and (2) the presence of three excuses. If a pericope closely replicates this pattern, it deserves closer attention. These guidelines will exclude other Lucan examples of threefold narration (e.g., 3:10-14; 8:49-56; 10:25-37;

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17 This pattern does not continue in Acts.

18 With respect to the Parable of the Banquet, an invitation to a feast is not a crisis, but its eschatological context in Luke is.

19 Whether or not the father is still alive is not crucial to this paper.

11:44-54; 17:34-38; 19:11-27) from our study.[20] I would also note that once Luke has established this pattern early in the narrative, we need not expect him to repeat it in detail later; rather, as the text progresses, Luke may simply allude to it.

The first character to fit this pattern is Jesus himself.[21] Three times the devil challenges Jesus (4:1-13), and three times Jesus offers biblical excuses. It would seem that three rejections are sufficient, for after the third excuse the devil has completed every test (*suntelesas panta peirasmon*) and leaves Jesus until another time.

The next occurrences of the pattern are those of 9:57-62 and 14:15-24. These two passages are linked by Jesus' statements in 14:25-33. Luke achieves this effect in three ways. First, 14:25-33 follows immediately upon the Parable of the Banquet. Second, Luke recalls 9:57-62 by introducing a similar setting. In 9:57-62, Jesus and his disciples were going along the road and people were choosing whether to follow him; in 14:25-33, many crowds are going along with Jesus. (The setting on a road is assumed.) Third, Luke has Jesus express the demands of discipleship in *three* statements: those who do not hate their family, carry their cross, or give up their possessions cannot follow. The Parable of the Banquet mentions family and possessions as excuses; in 9:57-62 family and the difficulty of discipleship are at issue.

The elder son in the Parable of the Prodigal (15:11-32) is a less certain example. He does receive three invitations to the party for his brother, one from a slave (see 14:17) and two from his father. But as in 9:57-62, Luke does not relate how the elder son responds. Also, we are not given three direct excuses by the elder son. At first, Luke relates that the son became angry and refused to go in. His second excuse is direct: he feels he is being treated unjustly. If there is a third excuse, Luke does not inform us. Also, we cannot determine how much value Luke assigns

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[20] It is a commonplace that three-fold patterns of narration are a standard technique of folk literature. From a rhetorical perspective, however, such patterns may be extremely important, particularly when the patterns may indicate an intended rhetorical effect or message.

[21] John the Baptizer's interaction with the crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers (3:7-14) is also a three-fold challenge to repent, but the passage does not feature the groups' responses.

without social ramifications; in each instance there are social implications. The issue is simply that the decisions (and excuses) are made only by individuals.

By adding this ideological issue to the rhetorical aspects of this reading, we may place the parable within a broader Lucan context in both social and literary terms. My proposal for a social setting is influenced by the work of I. J. Mosala on Luke.[26] Mosala argues that Luke depicts Jesus in terms which would be acceptable to the ruling class of Palestine. Members of the ruling class would likely notice the social dynamics of the parable, a dimension emphasized by Tannehill. Such an audience would expect to be invited to nice dinners, but Luke uses this parable to confront the audience with the precarious status of its privilege.

Those who have read Mosala's work will recognize that I am co-opting it in pursuit of my own interests. Mosala criticizes Luke for erasing the real concerns of the poor in order to communicate to the powerful,[27] calling this strategy 'an act of political war against the liberation struggle.'[28] Still, Mosala does not ask the question which interests me as a member of a privileged group: 'How else could Luke address the powerful, or the comfortable for that matter?' I do not wish to combat Mosala's project, but to leave room for Luke's address to the powerful and the secure.

The individualistic emphasis of the Parable of the Banquet (as well as of its excuse-making parallels) complements Mosala's thesis that Luke's intended audience might be relatively privileged, especially in light of the economic factors involved in the first two excuses (the purchase of a field and the purchase of five yoke of oxen). It is not necessary to agree with Mosala concerning Luke's specific provenance among Palestinian elites -- such historical precision is difficult at best -- in order to provide a general setting for Luke among the privileged.[29].

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26 *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 154-189.

27 Ibid., 163.

28 Ibid., 171.

29 Such a reading could also lend support for the argument that Luke's addressee Theophilus is Luke's patron.

In literary terms, this reading demonstrates that Luke 14:15-24 is interwoven with other pericopes of diverse forms for an overall rhetorical effect. In other words, this reading is not atomistic. Together with the proposed social context, this interpretation points toward a possible Lucan rhetorical setting and function – confronting relatively comfortable individuals with the uncomfortable urgency of discipleship.

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