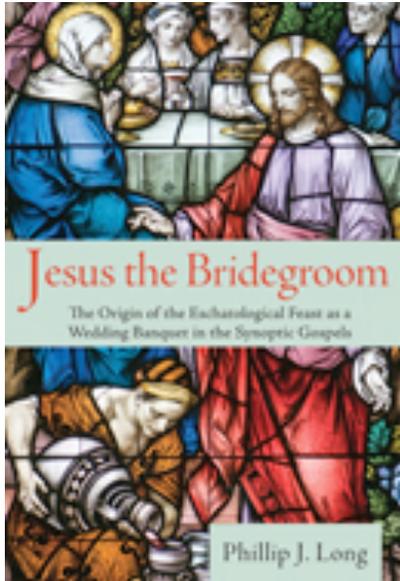


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**Phillip J. Long**

***Jesus the Bridegroom: The Origin of the Eschatological Feast as a Wedding Banquet in the Synoptic Gospels***

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That the New Testament refers to Jesus as the “bridegroom,” records parables about the kingdom of Heaven as a wedding banquet, and recounts how Jesus fed the multitudes and sat at table with many people in celebration of a new age is not disputed. Still, many scholars have claimed that the historical Jesus did not actually call himself a bridegroom; rather, the evangelists introduced the bridegroom and wedding imagery as a postresurrection interpretation of who Jesus was and is. Scholars acknowledge that Second Temple Judaism knew the tradition of the “eschatological banquet,” the theme of the “end of exile,” and the metaphor of God’s marriage to Israel from the prophets, and the Jesus Seminar judges the bridegroom sayings as authentically Jesus’s. Even so, because there is no literary evidence that specifically combines these traditions, the majority of scholars have claimed that Jesus could not have described himself as a bridegroom and his ministry as a wedding banquet.

In this study Phillip Long argues the opposite point of view, that Jesus did, in fact, call himself a bridegroom and that Jesus himself combined the prophetic imagery of the eschatological banquet (Isa 25:6–8), the end of exile (Isa 40–55), and God’s relationship to Israel as a marriage (Jer 2–4, Hosea) in order to identify his ministry as the beginning of the end of exile and the restoration of Israel as God’s spouse, through the metaphor of an ongoing wedding feast to which all are invited.

Long describes his method as “intertextuality,” carefully defined and built on the foundational work of Richard Hays (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, Yale University Press, 1989), in which the New Testament interpreter hears an “echo” or spots an allusion to a Hebrew Bible (or period extrabiblical) text or tradition and then proves, through historical-critical methods, that this intertextual allusion is literarily and historically credible. After reviewing critiques of this method, Long adopts it because Hays’s seven guidelines provide a means of objectivity that prevents “excesses of a reader-oriented hermeneutic” and “postmodern baggage” (18).

Long modifies Hays’s method to identify not only specific texts but “clusters” of traditions that contribute to a theme: “My method seeks to hear echoes of traditional metaphors which may not be bound to any one particular text in the Hebrew Bible but exist as a cluster of traditions” (31). Thus, when Jesus claims to be a bridegroom or alludes to the eschatological banquet and end-of-exile themes, the reader hears echoes from a collection of scriptural traditions. “Jesus did not simply quote traditions, he combined traditions intertextually in order to draw out new applications of that tradition to his present situation” (29). Jesus interwove well-known traditions in order to liken the coming kingdom to a wedding feast that celebrates the reunion of Israel with its Lord at the end of exile. Long’s intertextual method places Jesus within the oral discourse of Second Temple Judaism as a teacher who, like Paul and others, drew from the Hebrew Bible to develop new understandings of the present age. Jesus’s teachings about the bridegroom and marriage feast can thus be authenticated, through this method, as sayings of the historical Jesus.

Long spends the next three chapters carefully laying out his research on Hebrew Bible sources of the eschatological and wilderness banquet themes and the tradition of Israel as wife of the Lord. Chapter 3 details the eschatological banquet, predominantly in Isaiah, where the end of exile is described as a joyous banquet in a wilderness transformed into Eden. Long explores the term *mišteh* through the Hebrew Bible to find that it describes, diversely, a joyous banquet, an enthronement meal, a covenant meal, and a banquet that the Lord prepares for all people. Long demonstrates how Jesus interwove these banqueting themes in describing his ministry. Chapter 4 traces the exilic “wilderness tradition” through Isaiah and Jeremiah, which culminates in the “end of exile” and a banquet that celebrates a “new exodus.” Long shows how Isa 40–55 merges the wilderness/end-of-exile tradition with the marriage metaphor of Israel’s union with the Lord as a model for Jesus’s merging of these traditions.

Chapter 5 is an in-depth study of the marriage metaphor in the Hebrew Bible, to set the literary and historical contexts for the “echo” of intertextuality in the gospels. Long examines marriage customs, biblical stories of betrothal and marriage, and related topics

of adultery and divorce. He then focuses on Hos 1–3 and Jer 31 as proclamations of hope for restoration of the broken relationship between Israel and its God. Long finds Jeremiah’s themes of a new covenant and wilderness celebration to be important motifs in regard to Jesus’s portrayal of his own ministry. He notes important similarities between wedding and vineyard imagery in Isa 1–5 and Jesus’s parables of the vineyard and wedding feast as evidence of resonant traditions, and he highlights the many passages in Isaiah that develop the wilderness tradition and marriage metaphor in tandem as a basis for Jesus’s own combination of these themes. An important tie-in to messianic themes in regard to Jesus’s wedding metaphor is developed in Long’s section on the “royal wedding” theme in Ps 45, Song of Songs, Zech 9:9–10, and the “Daughter of Zion” tradition in Zeph 3, Isa 62, and Jer 31. Long posits that Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem (Matt 21:1–11) reenacted the way in which the anointed (messiah) king also functioned as bridegroom in these clustered traditions. Long shows that Jesus’s celebration at table with sinners is a messianic demonstration of a new age, and the bridegroom theme means that mourning is no longer appropriate. The wedding banquet is at hand, signaling the end of exile and the renewal of God’s relationship with Israel. While never expressly calling himself a messiah-bridegroom, Jesus nevertheless blends these biblical themes.

Chapter 6 draws on rich traditions from Second Temple Judaism (primarily the pseudepigrapha and Qumran literature) on the themes of the eschatological banquet, wilderness tradition, and marriage metaphor to show that these three themes often converge as a description of the end of exile. Long demonstrates that the writers of these diverse texts saw themselves as still living in exile but anticipating God’s intervention in a messianic age that would restore right relationship with God. This chapter shows the historical and literary plausibility that Jesus’s teachings were congruent with Second Temple Jewish speculation and writings.

Chapter 7 is the application of Long’s intertextual argument and development of how the wedding banquet and bridegroom metaphors are Jesus’s own creative interpretations of Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Jewish themes. Long hopes to establish the “voice of Jesus,” if not the actual words of Jesus. Jesus’s table fellowship with sinners, the miraculous feedings, and the Last Supper are enactments of Jesus’s interpretation of the eschatological banquet, the end of exile, and the restoration of Israel’s marriage to its Lord. Jesus alludes to prophetic texts in calling his generation “adulterous” (Mark 8:38) and the saying about people coming from the east and west to recline at the table (Matt 8:11). After having set up the evidence for intertextuality, Long proceeds to interpret the wedding parables as Jesus’s intertextual description of his ministry and expectations. Long elucidates Jesus’s parables as warnings that the invitation to the joyful feast is open but will not be so forever, and the wedding guests must accept the invitation now. Long concludes that the same themes are present in Luke, but not nearly as strongly as in

Matthew, because Luke's largely gentile audience would not have been as familiar with Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Jewish allusions; thus, the intertextuality would not have worked as well.

Long's concluding chapter summarizes his hope that the method of "clustered traditions" he has developed and demonstrated will help others in tracing Hebrew Bible resonances in the New Testament. He suggests that a good place to start might be the agricultural and harvest themes that pervade biblical literature.

This study is a compelling counterargument to scholarship that claims the church, and not Jesus himself, developed the bridegroom and wedding banquet themes. Long has provided well-researched and convincing evidence that Jesus could have operated within Second Temple Jewish interpretive conventions to develop Hebrew Bible themes in new ways to elucidate the purpose of his ministry.