

A Meal with the Messiah: Biblical Hopes Amidst Pandemic Hunger

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Abstract: In this short work, the author asks “Why is salvation imagined in the bible as a meal with the Messiah?” The biblical imagination of a messianic banquet must have been developed by inspired but hungry people and then read and handed on from generation to generation by hungry people who were inspired by them. As the pandemic worsened world hunger, this work accompanies the reader in a biblical reflection on hunger and fullness from the Old Testament to the New.

Keywords: Hunger, meal, messiah, apocalypse, eschatology, prophecy, Eucharist

Introduction

These years, beginning 2020, are perhaps years that history will always remember. Most probably, in the study of many disciplines - from medical and health, hospitality and tourism,¹ leadership and management, sociology and economics, to theology and religion - the time of the Covid19 pandemic will be one of the main reference points. It is the time when the life of global humanity is changed – for better or for worse.

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¹ In lieu of actual physical visits, *e-tourism* has become an alternative during the covid19 period. A good study on strengthening and exploring more on *e-tourism* is Ulrike Gretzel et al., “E-Tourism beyond Covid-19: A Call for Transformative Research,” *Information Technology & Tourism* 22, no. 2 (2020): pp. 187-203, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40558-020-00181-3>.

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While politicians are bickering about policies (and how these could benefit them) and government leaders are busy blaming and counter-blaming their international counterparts,² the frontliners – medical professionals, peace and order officers, merchandizers and salespersons, security guards, etc. – are laying their lives down the line and the ordinary citizenry are either running out of earnings or are already starving. Hunger has become, more and more, a world-wide phenomenon.³

In the midst of all these, many of us want to hear God's voice. Whether we are asking questions in our perplexity and we want to have some answers from him or want some words of consolation to strengthen us in our daily struggles, we can turn to him and seek his voice in the words of the Sacred Scriptures. After all, he promised in the book of the prophet Jeremiah that "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart (Jeremiah 29:13, NIV)."

As we go along this pandemic with hunger in our midst, it is a consolation to read about the meal with the Messiah in the eschatological materials in the Sacred Scriptures. By "eschatological," we mean things concerning the last age, the end times – when the Lord finally comes to fulfill his promises and inaugurate the new heaven and the new earth (cf. Revelation 21), when he would set up a new order of things and free us from the present worldly and oppressive order in which we live in.⁴

² For the varying steps and policies undertaken by different government leaderships, see: Timon Forster and Mirko Heinzl, "Reacting, Fast and Slow: How World Leaders Shaped Government Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of European Public Policy* 28, no. 8 (2021): pp. 1299-1320, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1942157> and Gideon Lasco, "Challenging World Leaders amid Medical Populism," *The Lancet*, December 5, 2020, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)32377-1/fulltext#seccestitle10](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)32377-1/fulltext#seccestitle10). For the personal behaviors of some world leaders in relation to the realities of health and the their respective national policies, see: Simon Tisdall, "From Trump to Erdoğan, Men Who Behave Badly Make the Worst Leaders in a Pandemic," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, April 26, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/26/trump-to-erdogan-men-who-behave-badly-make-worst-leaders-pandemic-covid-19> and Sammy Westfall and Claire Parker, "Boris Johnson and Other World Leaders Continue to Run Afoul of Their Own Covid Restrictions," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, January 12, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/09/leader-covid-rule-breaking/>.

³ Cf. Rodriguez-Leyva, Delfin, and Grant N. Pierce. "The Impact of Nutrition on the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Nutrition." *Nutrients* vol. 13,6 1752. 21 May. 2021, doi:10.3390/nu13061752 and Donatella Saccone, "Can the covid19 Pandemic Affect the Achievement of the 'Zero Hunger' Goal? Some Preliminary Reflections," *The European Journal of Health Economics* 22, no. 7 (February 2021): pp. 1025-1038, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10198-021-01311-2>.

⁴ A comprehensive discussion on eschatology that summarizes and discusses the thoughts of five contemporary Christian German theologians on the topic is Terence McGuckin, "The Eschatology of the Cross," *New Blackfriars* 75, no. 884 (1994): pp. 364-377, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1994.tb01504.x>. A good parallel reading on Jewish Eschatology is Jenny R. Labendz, "Rabbinic Eschatology: Complexity, Ambiguity, and Radical Self-Reflection," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 107, no. 3 (2017): pp. 269-296, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2017.0015>.

In this short work, passages from Scriptures on the Messianic Banquet are read with the lenses of Contextual Hermeneutics.⁵ In some circles, especially when used in a more pastoral setting, a simplified form of this approach is called “Reading Scripture in Global Contexts.”⁶ As the Scriptures were spoken to its original hearers, written for intended readers, translated by scholars with respective cultural linguistic idioms, interpreted by teachers and preachers, and read by people of different backgrounds, its message and relevance traverse time and space. The scriptural message becomes meaningful in many ways as it is read and proclaimed to peoples of different places and generations who look to the same text for guidance and inspiration. As Biblical passages on the Messianic Banquet are read in this short work, the readers are led to reflect on the passages’ historical, cultural, and literary contexts seeking these passages’ continuing contexts in present global and local experiences. The basic concern in this paper, therefore, is to make a profound reflection on the experience of hunger during the covid 19 pandemic in relation to the Messianic banquet in the Scriptures.

Let us go through the readings about this meal. Surely, as we go along reading them in the light of our present context, we may draw from them fresh meaning and hear God’s voice speaking to us.

Isaiah’s Prophecy of the Lord’s Feast

One of the first and most important texts on the eschatological banquet in the Old Testament is Isaiah 25:6-8:

On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears

⁵ Cf. Walter Dietrich, *The Bible in a World Context: An Experiment in Contextual Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007); Lim Chin Ming Stephen, *Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics as Multicentric Dialogue: Towards a Singaporean Reading of Daniel* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Fernando F. Segovia, “Intercultural Bible Reading as Transformation for Liberation: Intercultural Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies,” *Bible and Transformation: The Promise of Intercultural Bible Reading*, 2015, pp. 19-52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18z4h3g.4>.

⁶ Cf. Mark Labberton, “Reading the Scriptures from My Point of View,” Fuller Studio, January 24, 2018, <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/reading-the-scriptures-from-my-point-of-view/>.

from all faces;
 he will remove his people's disgrace
 from all the earth.
 The Lord has spoken.

Isaiah 25:6-8 belongs to a corpus in the Bible (Isaiah 24-27) called "Isaiah's Apocalypse."⁷ The term "apocalypse" is related to "eschatology". While apocalypse and eschatology pertain to the same period, they give variant meanings to it. If eschatology is about the end times, from the Greek word "eschaton" meaning "ending," the term "apocalypse" is about "revelation." In Greek, "apocalypse" means the removal of covering – the revelation of what is hidden, the time when truth, so desperately pursued and hidden in this world is revealed entirely. The synoptic gospels describe the apocalypse as the time when "no secret shall remain hidden, and everything shall be revealed (Matthew 10:26; Luke 8:17; 12:2)."

Isaiah's Apocalypse is a poetic description about the Lord's final victory. Isaiah 24 is about the purging of humanity. The poem is gloomy with a portrayal of destruction because of the penalty of sin. Sin and rebellion against God bring along their own penalty. The "old normal" of human life fades away as the once glad hearts are now full of sighs, the once prosperous cities and powerful nations are now in ruins, every house door is now shut, and death and lament are everywhere. The entire creation quakes, shivers, and shakes before the Lord. The sun, the moon, and the stars are awed by the Lord's presence. And the rulers of the nations are led to their prisons due to their wickedness. Reading Isaiah 24 is like reading the newspapers describing in poetry our circumstances today. Except that we are still awaiting the divine justice that would strike against the wickedness of the world's tyrants.

Isaiah 25-28 are all songs of praise for the Lord's victory. The message of these chapters is consistently comforting: the Lord will triumph in the end. All evil will perish because the Lord is triumphant. The curse of sin and rebellion will cease because God is greater than our sins.

Part of the Lord's victory is the banquet that he shall hold for his people. This eschatological banquet is reminiscent of Exodus 24:1-14 where Moses and the elders of Israel saw the Lord and ate and drank with him on Mt. Sinai. It was the covenant banquet – the banquet they ate together at the inauguration of Israel's new relationship with God: "I am your God, and you are my people (Genesis 17:7 and

⁷ For a discussion on the title of this subsection of Proto-Isaiah, see: J. Todd Hibbard, "Isaiah 24–27: The So-Called Isaiah Apocalypse," in *The Oxford Handbook of Isaiah*, ed. Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 79-94; Roberts J J M. and Peter Machinist, "The Little Isaiah Apocalypse," in *First Isaiah: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), pp. 306-341.

Exodus 6:7).” A covenant is a pact between two unrelated parties who are forming a relationship. In the rite of establishing a covenant, blood is an essential element as in Exodus 24:1-14, showing that the two formerly unrelated parties are now bound together and bound to each other in sacred lifeblood. The covenant between God and Israel is always spoken about in the Scriptures through marriage metaphors.⁸ The meal on Mt. Sinai in the striking of the everlasting covenant with Israel, was a wedding feast celebrating the intimate personal relationship – the oneness – that was formed.⁹ This meal with the Lord on Mt. Sinai shall always be the reference point for the chosen people in their hope for the promised messianic age.

Giving a summary glimpse of the details of the eschatological feast, Isaiah 25:6 describes the food served at the eschatological banquet as a feast of rich food for all people where the best of meats, rich and juicy, and the finest of wines, strained and aged, are served. Anyone who would read this passage in the midst of hunger would surely salivate. This means that this meal is carefully and lovingly prepared. Great effort is given when this meal was set up and it reflects how important to the Lord are those whom he would share the table with. The rich meats and finest wine signify the great abundance with which the people enjoy out of the Lord’s goodness at the inauguration of this new age. Part of the program of this meal is the Lord removing the veil of mourning from the people, and he shall wipe away every tear from their eyes. And the people, in their joy, shall eat and drink to their satisfaction with the Lord.

But what does it mean to dine with the Lord? In the ancient culture of the Bible, people do not just eat with anyone. Only people who are at peace can eat together. To be invited into the banquet of the Lord, therefore, is to be invited into his forgiveness and peace. This means the Lord is no longer angry because of human rebellion and betrayal of his love. He, who is sinned against, is ready to keep the hurt and the pain behind and he himself will ease the self-inflicted pain and punishment of humanity.

Ezekiel’s Meal of the Victorious

The prophet Ezekiel has his own way of prophesying. He is really a character among the writing prophets of the Old Testament. He employs a very colorful language and uses metaphors that may be considered gruesome and morbid. This is because Ezekiel was a priest who ministered as a prophet from the beginning of

⁸ See for example: Isaiah 54:5, 62:4-5; Jeremiah 2:2, 31:32; Ezekiel 16:8-14, 43:59-60; Hosea 1:2, 2:7, 15, 9:1; Joel 1:8.

⁹ cf. Gordon Paul Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics Governing Marriage Developed From The Perspective Of Malachi* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 31-32, 215.

the first exile of Judah in 597 BCE, to the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the majority of the Judean population in 587 BCE and beyond.¹⁰ He has seen the gruesomeness and morbidity of the conquest and exile of his people and he uses the same symbols of their experience of conquest and exile in his apocalyptic prophecies. This apocalyptic prophet also tells of the eschatological banquet, but he tells it in a manner that is true to his character:

Son of man, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Call out to every kind of bird and all the wild animals: 'Assemble and come together from all around to the sacrifice I am preparing for you, the great sacrifice on the mountains of Israel. There you will eat flesh and drink blood. You will eat the flesh of mighty men and drink the blood of the princes of the earth as if they were rams and lambs, goats and bulls—all of them fattened animals from Bashan. At the sacrifice I am preparing for you, you will eat fat till you are glutted and drink blood till you are drunk. At my table you will eat your fill of horses and riders, mighty men and soldiers of every kind,' declares the Sovereign LORD (Ezekiel 39:17-20, NIV).

As in the prophet Isaiah, the setting of the banquet is at the Lord's Mountain. But Ezekiel goes further than Isaiah in matters of food. If in Isaiah 25, the food at the feast is finest meat and the drink is the best wine, in Ezekiel the food is the flesh of mighty men, and the drink is the blood of princes. Is this not gruesome? Anyone who reads it in our time, no matter how hungry he or she is, will surely lose his or her appetite if this pericope is taken literally. But the prophecy employs rich metaphors of war and conquest that can be very gruesome that so that it brings across a message of victory in the strongest way possible.

Ezekiel was a prophet in the exile (597-538 BCE). His language, metaphors, and imagery are colored by the people in the Babylonian captivity. The exile was not simply an experience of being uprooted from one's dear homeland and to be forcefully brought into a foreign land. The exile was an experience of extreme humiliation.¹¹ When the Neo-Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem after three years of siege, he looted the Temple and killed the High Priest with the ministering priests and Levites. He slaughtered the temple virgins and many citizens of Judah (cf. 2 Kings 24-25 and 2 Chronicles 36). When he deported the exiles, he hurried them to Babylon with respite from walking. Many died along the way due to exhaustion. And while they were mourning their dead at the banks of Euphrates when they just

¹⁰ Cf. Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, "To Read - or Not to Read - Ezekiel as Christian Scripture," *The Expository Times* 121, no. 10 (November 2010): pp. 483, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524610370763>.

¹¹ For an extensive discussion on the topic of Honor and Shame in Ezekiel, see: Daniel Y. Wu, *Honor, Shame, and Guilt: Social-Scientific Approaches to The Book of Ezekiel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016).

arrived, they were paraded chained and naked for the amusement of their conquerors. Nebuchadnezzar even shamed the Jews further by making their naked and chained princes carry sacks of sands. And to make matters worse, these sacks of sands were Torah scrolls that were sewn together.¹²

Ezekiel was one of the very first exiles in Babylon. He experienced all these hardships and shame at the first wave of the deportation. Imagine the angst and the anger he felt against the enemies of his people. These are all reflected in his prophecies. This is the reason why his prophecies are colorful, and his imageries and metaphors can be morbid and gruesome.

In Ezekiel's messianic meal, the food is the flesh of heroes, and the drink is the blood of the princes of the world. Note that the food is not the flesh of Jewish heroes, and the drink is not the blood of Jewish princes but of the heroes and princes of the world. The text pertains to those who conquered the Jewish people and the nations who shamed them in their captivity. The psalms (14:4; 53:4; and 79:7) speak about the enemies of Israel as devouring God's people, eating them like just eating bread. In the eschatological banquet, this order is reversed: the Lord will serve the flesh and the blood of Israel's oppressor at his table, and it is the Jewish people who will devour them – just like eating bread. The ultimate shame in being eaten is that at the end of the process one becomes excrement. And that is the ultimate victory envisioned for the oppressors by the prophet in this prophetic pronouncement.

Second Temple Extra-Biblical Literatures

Although this paper is primarily concerned with biblical texts on the messianic feast at the fullness of time, it is also interesting to look at the extra-biblical literatures of the Second Temple Period. By doing so, one could have a glimpse at how people, especially readers and interpreters of the Hebrew Bible, from that era imagined how the messianic banquet would be. Many of the literatures of this period are themselves apocalyptic in nature. One could sense the intense longing for the coming apocalypse in these literatures. The language is coded and can be very violent – something very telling of the context of their writers and the darkness of the age in which they wrote their respective works. These texts are worthy of voluminous studies, but for lack of space and to maintain focus, they are preemptorily discussed here as they pertain to the messianic banquet.

¹² Cf. Avrohom Bergstein, "Nebuchadnezzar." *Judaism, Torah and Jewish Info - Chabad Lubavitch*, 2 Aug. 2019, www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4451665/jewish/Nebuchadnezzar.htm. Accessed: February 2021.

The first that may be considered in a synoptic manner are 2 Esdras 6:49-52 and the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch 29:4:¹³

2 Esdras 6:49-52	Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch 29:4
<p>49 Then you kept in existence two living creatures; the one you called Behemoth and the name of the other Leviathan.</p> <p>50 And you separated one from the other, for the seventh part where the water had been gathered could not hold them both.</p> <p>51 And you gave Behemoth one of the parts that had been dried up on the third day, to live in it, where there are a thousand mountains.</p> <p>52 but to Leviathan you gave the seventh part, the watery part; and <i>you have kept them to be eaten by whom you wish, and when you wish.</i> (NRSV)¹⁴</p>	<p>And Behemoth shall be revealed from his place and Leviathan shall ascend from the sea, those two great monsters which I created on the fifth day of creation and shall have kept until that time; and <i>then they shall be for food for all that are left.</i>¹⁵</p>

Both above literatures were written around 70 CE, i.e., after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans during the Jewish revolt, to the early second century. They speak about two mythical monsters already mentioned in the Hebrew Bible: Leviathan¹⁶ and Behemoth.¹⁷ Both are mythological characters lifted from Canaanite folklore and both are used as metaphors in the Hebrew Bible for enemies formidable in stature and strength.¹⁸ These extra-biblical texts also use the same metaphors for the enemies of the Jewish people – the Romans and their allies. These texts also explain why the enemies continue to thrive and are not killed by the Lord: so that they may become the food for the faithful in the eschatological banquet – whenever that may happen.

¹³ 2 Esdras is also known as the Apocalypse of Esdras. It is an authoritative Jewish writing which was written around 70 to 280 CE. The Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch is another authoritative Jewish text. It was written in Syriac after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Because of the pseudepigraphic nature of these texts and their late composition, they were not included in the Canon of the Bible.

¹⁴ “2 Esdras 6 NRSV - - Bible Gateway,” 2 Esdras 6 NRSV - - Bible Gateway, accessed February 5, 2021, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2%2BEsdras%2B6&version=NRSV>.

¹⁵ “The Book of the Apocalypse of Baruch” *Pseudepigrapha*, accessed February 5, 2021, <http://www.pseudepigrapha.com/pseudepigrapha/2Baruch.html>.

¹⁶ Mentioned in Job 3:8, Job 40:15–41:26, Psalm 74:14, Psalm 104:26 and Isaiah 27:1.

¹⁷ Mentioned in Job 40:15-25.

¹⁸ For example, Leviathan is used as a metaphor for Babylon in Isaiah 27:1.

Another set of very apocalyptic text is the Dead Sea Scrolls written around 200 BCE to 100 CE and found in the Judean desert mostly around 1946-1949. These scrolls belonged to a Jewish apocalyptic group active during the Roman occupation of the Levant. The Rule of the Community (1Q28a [1QS^a]): Col II:2-22 describes the messianic banquet:

2 the famous men, those summoned to the assembly, those gathered for the community council in Israel 3 under the authority of the sons of Zadok, the priests. No man, defiled by any of the impurities 4 of a man, shall enter the assembly of these; and everyone who is defiled by them should not be 5 established in his office amongst the congregation. And everyone who is defiled in his flesh, paralyzed in his feet or 6 in his hands, lame, blind, deaf, dumb or defiled in his flesh with a blemish 7 visible to the eyes, or the tottering old man who cannot keep upright in the midst of the assembly, 8 these shall not enter to take their place among the congregation of famous men, for the angels 9 of holiness are among their congreg[ation.] And if one of these has something to say to the holy council, 10 they shall investigate it in private, but the man shall not enter in the midst of [the congregation,] because he is defiled. 11 This is the assembly of famous men, [those summoned to] the gathering of the community council, when [God] begets 12 the Messiah with them. [The] chief [priest] of all the congregation of Israel shall enter, and all 13 [his brothers, the sons] of Aaron, the priests [summoned] to the assembly, the famous men, and they shall sit 14 before him, each one according to his dignity. After, [the Me]ssiah of Israel shall ent[er] and before him shall sit the chiefs 15 [of the clans of Israel, each] one according to his dignity, according to their [positions] in their camps and in their marches. And all 16 the chiefs of the cl[ans of the congreg]ation with the wise [men and the learned] shall sit before them, each one according 17 to his dignity. And [when] they gather at the table of community [or to drink] the new wine, and the table of 18 community is prepared [and] the new wine [is mixed] for drinking, [no-one should stretch out] his hand to the first-fruit of the bread 19 and of the [new wine] before the priest, for [he is the one who bl]esses the first-fruit of bread 20 and of the new wine [and stretches out] his hand towards the bread before them. Afterwards, the Messiah of Israel shall stretch out his hand 21 towards the bread. [And afterwards, shall] bless all the congregation of the community, each [one according to] his dignity. And in accordance with this regulation they shall act 22 at each me[al, when] at least ten m[en are gat]hered.¹⁹

The text is both a glimpse of the messianic expectation of the apocalyptic community that owned the scrolls and their communal observance. The messianic meal for them was a future event – one which they awaited and hoped for. The text

¹⁹ “The Rule of the Congregation,” The Rule of the Congregation, accessed February 5, 2021, https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/sites/partners/cbaa_seminar/qumran.htm.

shows how disciplined and hierarchical the group was and one could imagine that they partook of their communal meals in the same order which the text reflects – somewhat a rehearsal of the messianic banquet. One could also notice the priestly character of the meal as if it was held in the midst of the temple, with all the ritual purity rules observed. The violent exclusion of those defiled – literally or metaphorically – is very striking. Lastly, it tells of a messianic in which bread and wine is served. The serving of bread and not of meat is the interesting novelty of this text that is worth exploring in another study.

Meal and Hunger: Politics Then and Now

Though the scriptural and extra-biblical texts closely read and reflected on above are primarily religious in nature, they are also heavily political. At this juncture, before the discussion proceeds from the Old Testament to Jesus and the New Testament, it is necessary to make some points to complete the spiritual aspect of the scriptures with their earthlier background.

First, in victory feasts, the victorious king may parade his prisoners into the banquet to further emphasize his triumph, tactical genius, and military strength. He may display his most important prisoners like kings, princes, or generals as his prized trophy among his followers. His guests, in turn, could not deny his triumph as his captives are made verily present in their midst. This custom is not mentioned in the Bible but is well-witnessed by material culture. A good example is the Megiddo Ivory which depicts a king, probably a king of Megiddo, during a feast and before him is presented some prisoners.²⁰ In such instances where prisoners are made present in the feast, while royal host and his guests are having their fill from the superabundant banqueting table, the prisoners are left on display in their hunger and humiliation.

Second, Isaiah's consoling prophecy of a messianic banquet also has a political layer. The text shows how kings dined in abundance and hosted their guests after an important victory – a propaganda to aggrandize themselves.²¹ In the case of Isaiah 25:6-8, the prophecy of victory feast is a mythical poetry celebrating Judah's hoped-for rise to world arena as a power to be reckoned with.²²

²⁰ Cf. Beth Steiner, "Food of the Gods: Canaanite Myths of Divine Banquets and Gardens in Connection with Isaiah 25:6" in *Formation and Intertextuality in Isaiah 24–27*, eds. Hibbard J. Todd and Kim Hyun Chul Paul (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013): 99-116.

²¹ Cf. Andrew T. Abernethy, *Eating in Isaiah: Approaching the Role of Food and Drink in Isaiah's Structure and Message* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 81-83.

²² cf. Christopher B. Hays, *The Origins of Isaiah 24-27: Josiah's Festival Scroll for the Fall of Assyria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 133-139.

Third, the coded and violent language employed in Ezekiel and in the Second Temple extra biblical literatures tell so much about the context of the writers and their sympathetic readers. They were powerless in the presence of their enemies that they had to use codes such as mythical creatures to stand for their oppressors. Moreover, the oppression greatly felt in their hunger was too much that their consuming anger makes them imagine that they could consume their enemy.

Summarily, in these three points, one could see how politics is at play: that oppression is felt in hunger and victory is celebrated in an abundant feasting. This is true from then until now.

The Messianic Banquet in the Synoptic Parables

Moving to the New Testament, one could notice the progression of the messianic meal motif. Jesus also employed the image of the eschatological meal in his parables. But the difference with Jesus' teachings about the messianic meal is in stark contrast with the triumphal victory of its portrayal in Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the extra-biblical literatures of the time. In Matthew 22:1-14 and Luke 14:16-24, those who were invited into the banquet of the Lord have no interest in sharing a meal with him (Matthew 22:5-6; Luke 14:17-19). They went off to their own individual businesses and some even killed the bringers of the invitation. The Lord proceeded to invite the common people in the streets – devoid of status and moral life. And when the feast began, he found many of them unworthy and he casted them out.

Matthew 25 is a very apocalyptic chapter. It starts with the Parable of the Ten Virgins (vv. 1-23), then proceeds to the Parable of the Talents (vv.14-30) where there is a reckoning of what the three servants did with the talents they received from their Lord and culminates in the Coming of the Son of Man (vv.31-46). If we look at the chapter, and with the chapter taken as a whole, one can sense what appears to be the programmatic arrangement of what the apocalypse would look like: the waiting for the Bridegroom, the reckoning of one's life, then the final judgment. For our purposes, of special attention is vv. 1-23. The ten virgins are waiting for the coming of the bridegroom. When the bridegroom arrived, he was escorted by the wise virgins into the wedding hall (v.10) and the door was shut. The wedding hall motif presupposes a banquet that is to be shared with the wise that were prepared in waiting for the Bridegroom. The Matthean parable of the virgin is well complemented with the Lucan parable of The Vigilant Steward (Luke 12:35-38) where Jesus exhorted his listeners to be like wise servants who await their master to serve him. These servants the master finds awake and prepared at his coming. When the master arrives, instead

of the servants serving him, the master himself will have them seated at his table and he himself shall serve them.

There are, of course, many typologies of the messianic banquet in the Gospel accounts - worthy of mention is the multiplication of the loaves. These pericopes however foretell the great abundance that is already embedded in the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible as in Isaiah and Ezekiel. The gospel passages discussed above give us further enlightening details on how the messianic banquet will be. Very noticeable in these passages is the stark simplicity of the messianic banquet. It is divested of the trappings of triumph and glory with which the prophets presented it. Essentially, it is a meal with the Lord. Luke 12 even portrays it as an intimate meal – a meal between the Lord and his servants whom he values and holds close to his heart. And that is what matters most – the intimacy of the meal shared with profound heartiness.

It Really Happens: The Eucharist, The Messianic Meal

For Christian believers, Jesus realized the messianic banquet when he celebrated the Last Supper. All that the prophets proclaimed, all that he taught in his parables concerning the inauguration of a new age, Jesus made real in his Last Supper.

The gospel accounts of the Last Supper are recorded in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20; and John 13:1-17, 26. John omits the actual supper, and it collates Jesus' Last Supper narrative with farewell discourses and prayer. This is done with a very deliberate theological intention that has to do with the timing of the Passover that year coinciding with the time of the actual death of Jesus. The synoptic gospels have another *theologoumenon* (theological reading).

The passages on the Last Supper are very complex but they are also well researched and commented on by scholars throughout the centuries. There are many issues surrounding the texts, ranging from different approaches in biblical scholarship like textual criticism, Historical Jesus Research, and so on. For our purposes, let us consider the texts, especially the synoptic texts, as revealing the messianic meal that Jesus realized in his last supper.

True to the form of the messianic banquet in the synoptic parables, the Last Supper appears to be a simple meal. In the synoptic accounts, it is a Passover meal. A Passover meal is a very intimate meal that, most of the time for most Jews, is eaten within the family circle. Jesus ate his Passover meal with his inner circle, the 12 disciples. This shows the relationship that Jesus is establishing with the twelve: a

family bond, a bond of brotherhood.²³ Jesus has transformed their relationship into a familial union.

Jesus ate the Passover as his Last Supper with his disciples. The Feast of the Passover is a one-day feast that is followed by a seven-day feast of the Unleavened Bread. Both feasts are high feasts for the Jews. Passover was one of the Jewish pilgrimage feasts (with the Feasts of Pentecost and Tabernacles) wherein the ancient Jews had to go to worship at the Temple. The feasts of the Passover and of the Unleavened Bread commemorate God's act of freeing his people from the slavery of Egypt: the angel of death who was tasked to slay the firstborn male of each household passed-over or skipped the homes of Israelites who put the blood of an unblemished lamb on their doorposts (Exodus 12:1-14) - thus the term "Passover." Immediately after the Passover night in the book of Exodus, the Lord instructed the Israelites to bake unleavened bread as their food (Exodus 12:15-20), leaven being the symbol of being puffed up. In passing, it must be summarily mentioned here, despite the voluminous study on the chronology of the last supper and passion narratives in the synoptic Gospels and John, that there are two celebrations of the Passover: the one celebrated at home by individual families and the one celebrated in the temple by priests. Jesus celebrated the home Passover meal with his disciples (Synoptics) and he died during the slaughtering of the lamb for the Passover celebration of the priests at the Temple (John 19:14 and 31).²⁴

Paul's narration of what occurred in the Last Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 is the first in the chronology of writings in the New Testament. It preceded the narrations of the gospels on the same event. But it is significant how the gospel accounts are parallel with Paul's version. Paul tells about the institution of the Lord's Supper in the context of calling his community's attention against their prevalent factionalism. He stresses the demand for moral purity in partaking of the Lord's meal in reference to the very real experience of the members of the sins that rapture the communion of the community. After all, Paul wrote his letters in reaction to the

²³ Josephus, in *Jewish Wars* 6.423 and in *Antiquities* 2.312 and 3.248, mentions that Jews, who are not biological family members, can celebrate the Passover as φρατρίας – fraternities or brotherhoods. Cf. Joel Marcus, "Passover and Last Supper Revisited," *New Testament Studies* 59, no. 3 (2013): pp. 303-332; Clemens Leonhard, *The Jewish Pesach and the Origins of the Christian Easter: Open Questions in Current Research* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 27, 238.

²⁴ Cf. Mark A. Matson, "The Historical Plausibility of John's Passion Dating," *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 2*, n.d., pp. 291-312; Geza Vermes, *Who's Who in the Age of Jesus* (Penguin Group: London, 2006) 135-144; James Charlesworth, "The Historical Jesus in the Fourth Gospel: A Paradigm Shift?," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 8, no. 1 (2010): pp. 3-46; David C. Grabbe, "Is Passover on the First Day of Unleavened Bread? (Part One)," *Is Passover on the First Day of Unleavened Bread? (Part One)*, accessed February 5, 2021, <https://www.cgg.org/index.cfm/library/weekly/id/741/is-passover-on-first-day-unleavened-bread-part-one.htm>.

events that happen in the communities that he established. He delivers poetry, hymns, diatribes, and stories with teaching relevant to the first Christian's experiences.

Jesus' Last Supper was a simple Passover celebration with his disciples. In fact, it is surprising that the New Testament only mentions bread and wine as their food. This simplicity in the meal with only bread and wine is actually profoundly elaborate in theology. When Jesus held the bread, he said, "This is my body... (Mark 14:22; Matthew 26:26; Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24)." And when he held the cup, he said, "This is my blood. (Mark 14:24; Matthew 26:28; Luke 22:20; and 1 Corinthians 11:25)." The Passover bread has become his flesh and the Passover wine has become his blood. The food and drink in the messianic meal is the self-sacrifice of the Messiah around which his people, the people close to him have communion. Isaiah said that the food in the messianic banquet is the best meat and the finest wine. The adjectival qualifications "best" and "finest" pale before the reality of the food at the Last Supper – the body and the blood of the Messiah. "Best" and "finest" fail to truly describe them. In Ezekiel, what are set at the messianic banquet are the flesh of heroes and the blood of princes. In the messianic banquet, the food is the body of not a mere hero and the blood of not a mere prince is set before the invited, but the flesh and blood of the Messiah served as nourishment for his people.

For Catholic believers, the Eucharist makes present to the whole Church the Last Supper of Jesus. Every Eucharist is the Last Supper. Every Eucharist is the messianic banquet. The Lord said, "Do this in memory of me. (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24)." From the day of its institution at the Last Supper, week after week, day after day, the Church never ceases to celebrate the messianic banquet.

Making Sense of our Present Hunger

What is the sense of all these in the pandemic? How does this solve our hunger?

First, in different degrees, a great majority of humanity experience hunger amid the covid19 pandemic.²⁵ We are physically hungry as the availability of food – both naturally and humanly produced – is controlled. We are hungry because we are supposed to be given food but our share in the food distribution may have been

²⁵ Cf. "Covid-19 Pandemic Is Causing Global Hunger in Poor Countries," World Food Program USA, December 29, 2021, <https://www.wfpusa.org/drivers-of-hunger/covid-19/>; "Covid-19 Brief: Impact on Food Security," US Global Leadership Coalition, August 12, 2021, <https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/global-hunger/>.

diverted elsewhere.²⁶ We are hungry because “no work, no pay” is widely observed in the globe, especially in the Philippines.

Hunger is a painful experience. But the pain is even more aggravated when the distribution of food is politicized: national leaders, comfortable and out of touch, saying “nobody dies of hunger;”²⁷ people, especially the poor, become victims of partisan politics;²⁸ politicians use their hold on aids to boost their ego and the people’s indebtedness to them – “It’s like you have to beg before they give you.”²⁹

As the pandemonium intensifies, there is also the global phenomenon of the closing of Churches.³⁰ This is to enforce physical distancing by the prohibition of gatherings. The Church, in its many efforts, also tried to reach out to the people by holding online celebrations of the Eucharist, online healing rosaries, deliverance prayers, and other sacramentals, online retreats and meditations. But as the Church intensifies these efforts, her members more and more feel the hunger of the actual reception of the Eucharist – the actual physical partaking of the messianic banquet.³¹

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, the passages on the messianic banquet in the Old and the New Testaments and in the Extra-Biblical literatures are read. Admittedly, these passages need to be read more profoundly and deserve further discussions. As one could

²⁶ Cf. Jason Gutierrez and Jes Aznar, “‘Will We Die Hungry?’ A Teeming Manila Slum Chafes under Lockdown,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, April 15, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/world/asia/manila-coronavirus-lockdown-slum.html>.

²⁷ Cf. Jodesz Gavilan, “Insensitive, out of Touch Remarks by Ph Gov’t Officials during Pandemic,” *RAPPLER*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/insensitive-out-of-touch-remarks-philippine-government-officials-coronavirus-pandemic/>; GMA News Online, “Panelo Says No One Dies of Hunger, Even for a Month,” *GMA News Online* (GMA News Online, March 15, 2020), <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/729768/panelo-says-no-one-dies-of-hunger-even-for-a-month/story/>.

²⁸ An example of politicized food distribution is the red-tagging of the people-initiated community pantries in the Philippines: JC Gotinga, “Food Pantries for Hungry Filipinos Get Tagged as Communist,” *Coronavirus pandemic News | Al Jazeera* (Al Jazeera, April 24, 2021), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/24/food-pantry-for>.

²⁹ Rambo Talabong and Jodesz Gavilan, “‘Walang-Wala Na:’ Poor Filipinos Fear Death from Hunger More than Coronavirus,” *Rappler* (Rappler, April 2, 2020), <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/poor-filipinos-fear-death-from-hunger-more-than-coronavirus>.

³⁰ Cf. Philip Pullella, “Rome Catholic Churches Ordered Closed Due to Coronavirus, Unprecedented in Modern Times,” *Reuters* (Thomson Reuters, March 12, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-italy-rome-churche-idUSKBN20Z3BU>.

³¹ Cf. Robertzon Ramirez, “CBCP Head: How Much Longer Do We Celebrate Mass in Empty Churches?,” *Philstar.com* (Philstar.com, January 14, 2022), <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2022/01/09/2152709/cbcp-head-how-much-longer-do-we-celebrate-mass-empty-churches>.

notice in the discussions above, the passages are very rich and they have so many dimensions in the contexts where they were first proclaimed, in the context where they were written, and the contexts that they are read: political, liberational, sacramental, eschatological, spiritual, and so on. The richness of the Scriptures is truly immense. As one reads these passages on dining with the Messiah while experiencing the hunger of the covid 19 pandemic, he or she might not fail to hear his or her stomach churning. This makes the reading of the Scripture truly inter-contextual.

Going through all these passages that we have read; it feels like they are especially written for us today – for us who are hungry physically and spiritually. They tell us that our hunger will be over soon in the hope that the Messiah will come to dine with us. And we shall dine with him and have our fill if we are ready.^{PS}

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