

"MANY ARE CALLED, BUT FEW ARE CHOSEN"

(MATTHEW 22:14)

It has been suggested by some recent exegetes¹ that Matthew 22:14 may well have been a typical remark made by our Lord to bring to a conclusion any of the parables dealing with the messianic kingdom; that its position at the end of the Parable of the Wedding Feast may have been owing to the Evangelist himself. Be that as it may, we still have the difficulty of explaining the verse in some context; and while in the Vulgate it is found also at the end of the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:16), it is not found there in the better Greek MSS, e.g., the Sinaitic and the Vatican, or in the Sahidic and the Coptic Versions. On the other hand, all the MSS that contain the twenty-second chapter of Matthew have the verse, "Many are called, etc.," at Matthew 22:14.²

In explaining the verse, then, in our present context, we must first of all consider that the Parable of the Wedding Feast is, in a sense, two parables: first, the Parable of the Rejected Guests (Matt. 22:1-10)—and this, of course, is commonly applied to the Jews of Christ's time who rejected the messianic kingdom; secondly, the Parable of the Wedding Garment (Matt. 22:11-13)—and whatever be its specific meaning, all are agreed that it refers to one or all of the dispositions required for entrance into Christ's kingdom, whether on earth or in heaven.³

As for the meaning of the verse, therefore, we may divide the opinions of the commentators, according to the half of the Parable which they hold the verse belongs to, into three classes:

1) The verse refers only to the second part of the Parable (i.e., to those already in the kingdom, to all Christians). This may be called St. Augustine's opinion.

2) It refers to both parts (i.e., to both Jews and Christians). This is Maldonatus' opinion.

3) It refers only to the first part (i.e., to the Jews alone). This is van Steenkiste's opinion.

¹ D. Buzy, S. C. J., *La sainte Bible* (éd. L. Pirot, Paris, 1935), XI, 262, note; 295 f., and note; P. Boylan, *The Sunday Epistles and Gospels* (Dublin, 1941), II, 263.

² Cf. A. Merk, *Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine* (Romae, 1935), *apparatus criticus ad loc.*; Lagrange, *Évangile selon s. Matthieu* (Paris, 1927), pp. 390, 424; C. Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (ed. 7*, Lipsiae, 1859), pp. 98, 112.

³ It is generally agreed among Catholics that the words *vocati* (κλητοι) and *electi* (εκλεκτοι) in this context refer to those who receive sufficient and efficacious grace respectively. In other contexts, of course, there might be an entirely different meaning. For their use in St. Paul, where the terms are practically synonymic, see Prat, *The Theology of St. Paul* (New York, 1926), I, 436 f.

According to the first opinion, the verse refers only to the last part of the Parable; therefore, it pertains only to the guests actually present at the feast, and, by application, to Christians only (whether Jews or gentiles) who actually accept the call to Christ's kingdom. The reasons for this opinion would seem to be merely the sequence and the position of the verse in the Parable, together with the use of the particle *γάρ*. Its apparent harshness seems to fit in with the punishment meted out to the unworthy guest in the preceding verse and to give some explanation for it.

This is the older, but today less commonly accepted, interpretation. St. Augustine⁴ and St. Gregory the Great⁵ in several sermons seem to understand it this way. Maas mentions for this opinion Rhabanus Maurus, B. Arnoldi, O.S.A., and A. Calmet, O.S.B.⁶ Ceulemans adds Liagre and J. T. Beelen.⁷

But this opinion does not explain the obvious fact that in such an interpretation our Lord would seem to have forgotten the first and main section of the Parable, the call and rejection of the Jews; and further, that only one of the guests was actually rejected in the second part, and except by a rhetorical trick (which Augustine does use), he cannot be called "many" as distinguished from the other guests at the banquet. The very lack of restriction in the verse seems to indicate a wider application. Moreover, as even Maldonatus points out, the particle *γάρ* need not indicate a causal nexus with the immediately preceding verse; it may also be resumptive of the entire Parable.

At the present time there are two other opinions predominant, both supported by prominent exegetes, though, as we shall see, the latter of these opinions appears to be winning more adherents. The second opinion, as we said, holds that the verse applies to both sections of the Parable and hence, by application, to both the rejected Jews and the accepted Christians. This interpretation is defended by the following exegetes: Maldonatus,⁸ Cornelius à Lapide,⁹ Fillion,¹⁰ Schanz,¹¹ C. J. Ryan,¹² Callan,¹³ Lagrange,¹⁴

⁴ *Serm.* 90, 4 (*PL*, XXXVIII, 560): "In comparatione malorum, pauci sunt boni"; and see also *Serm.* 95, 6 (*PL*, XXXVIII, 583). It is in the *De diversis questionibus ad Simplic.*, I, ii, 13 (*PL*, XL, 118) that Augustine takes the verse as referring to efficacious grace.

⁵ *Hom. in Evang.*, 38, 14 (*PL*, LXXVI, 1290); but the lesson Gregory draws is merely that of the uncertainty of salvation: "Si sumus electi, nescimus."

⁶ A. Maas, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (St. Louis, 1898), p. 224.

⁷ F. Ceulemans, *Commentarium in Evangelium secundum Matthaeum* (Mechliniae, 1928), p. 308, note. Beelen in his *Het Nieuwe Testament* (3 vols., Amsterdam, 1860), I, 139, note, certainly seems to hold this view.

⁸ *Commentarium in Evangelia* (Moguntiae, 1853), I, 307.

⁹ *Commentaria* (Paris, 1877), XV, 476.

¹⁰ *Évangile selon saint Matthieu* (Paris, 1878), p. 425, note.

Vosté,¹⁵ Prat,¹⁶ and Buzy.¹⁷ Also for this opinion Maas cites St. Thomas, Cajetan, Gabriel Biel, Salmeron, Jansenius, Catharinus, Ockam, and Lamy.¹⁸

The reasons for this second interpretation may be summed up as follows: (a) Since in the text the verse seems to be given as the conclusion of the entire Parable, there is no reason to restrict its application to the earlier section alone. (b) Since the number of guests who actually came to the feast apparently equalled the number of those invited first, the "many" and "few" are not relative designations for these two groups alone but must have a wider application; i.e., they must refer to all men, Jews and Christians, who receive sufficient grace for salvation. (c) The terms used in the verse are absolutely unrestricted and hence, like so many of Christ's lessons, are applicable not only to His Jewish audience but also to all Christians. (d) Thus understood, the verse is more in accord with the other references in the Synoptics to the "narrow gate" where only a few can enter (Luke 13:24; Matt. 7:13 f.).

Closely allied with this interpretation is the question whether the number of the saved is fewer than the number of the lost. According to this second opinion, granting that the verse applies to all men, we have a division depending on whether or not "few" is to be taken in its obvious signification. This division we shall now consider.

The strict interpretation holds that the number of the saved is really fewer than that of the lost. Of those mentioned above, St. Augustine, Salmeron, Lamy, Jansenius, Fillion, Lagrange, and Callan (in his earlier work) are of this opinion. St. Thomas clearly held this view;¹⁹ and it has been held as a traditional thesis by the modern Dominican school with Garrigou-Lagrange and Hugon, the former of whom has attempted to show that this

¹¹ *Commentar über das Evangelium des hl. Matthäus* (Freiburg im Br., 1879), p. 451.

¹² *Gospels of the Sundays and Festivals* (Benziger, 1905), II, 358.

¹³ *The Four Gospels* (New York, 1917), p. 142. If we understand Callan correctly, he seems to have abandoned this view in his later work, *The Parables of Christ* (New York, 1940), p. 164.

¹⁴ *Évangile selon saint Matthieu* (Paris, 1927), p. 425, note.

¹⁵ *Parabola Selectae* (Romae, 1929-30), I, 309.

¹⁶ *Jésus-Christ* (Paris, 1933), II, 228, note 1.

¹⁷ *La sainte Bible*, XI, 295 f. and note.

¹⁸ A. Maas, *op. cit.*, p. 224, note. We may mention also, for this opinion, J. F. Schleusner, *Lexicon novi testamenti* (Glasgow, 1817), I, 541, s.v. ἐλεκτός; and Kenrick's note on this verse in his *New Testament* (Baltimore, 1862), p. 96.

¹⁹ See *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 23, a. 7 ad 3. Compare Jansen's remark in his *Tetra-teuchus* (Parisii, 1677), p. 169: "... [mali] multitudine sua electos longe superant."

has been *sententia certa et communis* among the Fathers and theologians.²⁰

Commentators of a more moderate viewpoint hold that, though the verse refers to all men, it does not mean literally that few will be saved. As Maldonatus puts it, it merely points out that not all who are called will be saved.²¹ Similarly, Buzy brings out that the number is small in comparison with what Christ would have wished—in comparison with the infinite price paid.²² Père Suau, S. J., in his excellent little book of meditations, translates the verse: “Tous sont appelés, trop peu son élus.”²³ For this more moderate interpretation within the second opinion, we may also list, of those mentioned above, à Lapide, Schleusner, Kenrick, Vosté, and Prat.

Though our subject matter forbids us to go into the question more deeply here, we believe that it is possible to abide by the results of A. Michel's monograph in the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*.²⁴ After a thorough study of texts from the Fathers and theologians, Michel comes to the conclusion that, although a greater number of theologians have held the more rigorous interpretation, it is still a solidly probable opinion that as many will be saved as lost, or, better, that nothing certain can be deduced from revelation about the absolute or relative number of the elect. With him in this opinion is J. Pohle, who cites Castelein and Heinrich-Gutberlet.²⁵

St. Cyril of Alexandria, commenting on Christ's reply to the question, “Will only a few be saved?” brings out one of the reasons for this more moderate interpretation: “It was Christ's custom not to answer directly when they [his hearers] asked useless questions. . . . It was more essential for them to know the way of attaining salvation.”²⁶ Hence it would seem that Christ was never to be trapped, so to speak, either into revealing the day of judgment or into giving even a hint about the relative number of the elect. Thus Chrysostom, in his homily on the Parable of the Wedding Feast, makes no mention of the “few,” but merely says that here our Lord “foreshadows the rejection of the Jews and the call of the gentiles, and then points out the [requisite] virtue for [a true Christian] life and the penalty in store for those who disregard it.”²⁷

²⁰ See Garrigou-Lagrange, “Prédestination,” *DTC*, XII, 3018 ff; or *Predestination* (Herder, 1939), pp. 217–220; Hugon, *De Deo Uno* (Paris, 1933), p. 301; A. Ferland, S. S., *De Deo Uno et Trino* (Montreal, 1943), p. 389; F. Diekamp, *Theologia Dogmatica* (Paris, 1933), I, 301. Hugon, however, does not cite Matt. 22:14.

²¹ *Commentarium*, loc. cit.

²² *La sainte Bible*, XI, 295.

²³ *La vie chrétienne* (Toulouse, 1930), II, 277.

²⁴ “Élus.” *DTC*, IV, 2350–2378.

²⁵ Pohle, “Predestination,” *Catholic Encyclopedia*, XII, 381.

²⁶ *In Lucam*, 13, 23 (*PG*, LXXII, 776).

²⁷ *Hom. in Matth.*, 69 (al. 70), 1 (*PG*, LVIII, 647).

It should be remembered in general with regard to the seeming harshness of some of the quotations from the Synoptics that they can always be tempered with Christ's own words: "But to God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). We must remember that our Lord—as well as the early Fathers—was interested chiefly in getting men to do violence to themselves for the sake of their immortal souls; thus, we are told to work out our salvation "in fear and trembling," lest we be shut out by the "narrow gate" of the kingdom from the number of His "few" special friends. In fine, the harshness can always be explained as a type of rhetorical or pedagogical exaggeration.

The third opinion holds that the verse refers back only to the first part of the Parable, i.e., to the rejection of the Jews and the call of the gentiles. Hence, in this opinion the verse cannot be used at all for deciding the relative number of the elect; it is to be taken rather as a typical remark of our Lord in speaking of the rejection of the chosen people, and thus is placed here without reference to the significance of the wedding garment or to the number of Christians to be saved.

Further, the words are better taken as Christ's and not as those of the king in the Parable. As a matter of fact, they may even be taken as a conclusion to all the three preceding parables that deal with the rejection of Israel (the Two Sons, the Vine-dressers, the Marriage Feast), an ending to the entire discourse somewhat like "Vigilate itaque" (Matt. 25:13), "Qui habet aures audiendi, audiat" (Matt. 13:43), "Qui potest capere, capiat" (Matt. 19:12), in their places.

In our context, therefore, the "Multi vocati" sums up in a general way the lesson of the three preceding parables (as Matthew arranges them, 21:28—22:13). Many, indeed all, of the Jews were called to Christ's kingdom, but only a few were actually to be faithful to Him and enter the Church. Thus our Lord does not equate the "few" with the number of those who actually came to the banquet in the Parable, since these, if we are to be consistent, are the gentiles, but rather He is thinking of the small number of Jews that would enter His messianic kingdom.

This opinion is held substantially by J. van Steenkiste,²⁸ Knabenbauer,²⁹ Vigouroux,³⁰ Zorell,³¹ Ceulemans,³² Maas,³³ Durand,³⁴ Fonck,³⁵ the Com-

²⁸ *Comm. in Matth.* (Bruges, 1880), II, 799.

²⁹ *Evangelium secundum Matthaeum* (Paris, 1893), II, 247. As Knabenbauer points out, this was suggested by Origen; see his *Comm. in Matth.*, 17, 24, ed. Klosterman (*GCS*, Leipzig, 1935), X, 652.

³⁰ *La sainte Bible polyglotte* (Paris, 1908), VII, 103 note.

³¹ *Lexicon*, p. 401, s.v.

³² *Comm. in Ev. sec. Matth.*, p. 308 f.

³³ *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, p. 224, note. Maas, in his earlier harmony of

mentators of the Westminster Version³⁶ and the Confraternity Commentary on Matthew,³⁷ Innitzer,³⁸ Boylan,³⁹ and, if we understand them aright Schegg,⁴⁰ and Callan.⁴¹

Some reasons for this opinion are:

a) If applied to both parts of the Parable, the words "multi" and "pauci" would seem to have a double literal sense. For applied to the first part, both "multi" and "pauci" would refer to the Jews (and thus would be taken in a strict sense); applied to the second part, "multi vocati" would indicate all men, or all Christians, whereas "pauci electi" would refer only to those saved (whether the "few" be taken in the broad or the strict sense).

b) Again, as we have said, the principal theme of the Parable, as of the two preceding ones, is the rejection of Israel. The small section devoted to the wedding garment would seem to suggest that it is merely a detail referred to in passing, of moral import, but not necessarily to be taken in connection with the main theme. So too, to take the verse as a kind of concluding seal seems more in accord with the concluding verses of other parables in Matthew.

c) Further, without reading into the context, we may take "few" in its strict and obvious literal sense. As a matter of fact, few Jews, in comparison with the number of gentiles, were to enter the Church. Moreover such an interpretation is more in keeping with the rest of Christ's doctrine, as well as with Isaias and St. Paul, on the relationship of the Jews to the messianic kingdom.⁴²

To sum up: Exegetically, the more probable interpretation would seem to be the third; that is, the verse refers to the Jews alone—although, as we have said, the second opinion has been and still is held by many prominent exegetes. Again, although the more common opinion may have been that

the Gospels (*The Life of Jesus Christ*, Herder, 1890, p. 401, note), seems to have held that the verse referred to all men.

³⁴ *Évangile selon saint Matthieu* (Verbum Salutis, I: Beauchesne: Paris, 1939), p. 339.

³⁵ *The Parables of the Gospels* (New York, 1915), p. 376; *Verbum Domini*, II (1922), 298 f.

³⁶ J. Dean, *The Synoptics: St. Matthew*, p. 101, note.

³⁷ M. Kennedy, O.F.M., in the *Confraternity Commentary on the New Testament* (Catholic Biblical Association, 1942), p. 149.

³⁸ *Kommentar zum Evangelium des hl. Matth.* (Graz, 1932), p. 375.

³⁹ *The Sunday Epistles and Gospels* (Dublin, 1941), II, 263.

⁴⁰ *Evangelium nach Matthäus* (München, 1858), p. 154 f.

⁴¹ *The Parables of Christ* (New York, 1940), p. 164.

⁴² Isa. 10:20 f.; Rom. 9:27, 11:5. Yet even this point of view must be tempered with the knowledge that somehow, before the end, all Israel will be saved (Rom. 11:26).

more men are lost than saved, it would seem to be solidly probable that there is no certain evidence for this conclusion on the basis of Holy Scripture. With Matthew 22:14 removed as a basis for this doctrine, the question still remains an open one. Certainly, it need not be remarked that great caution and discretion should be exercised in using this verse in meditations and sermons, so as to avoid going beyond what is its certain literal sense.

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