

The Wedding Feast (γάμος) as an Image of the Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew

Uczta weselna (γάμος) jako obraz królestwa niebieskiego
w Ewangelii Mateusza

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Abstract: This article explores the symbolism of the term “wedding feast” (γάμος) as an image of the kingdom of heaven in the Gospel of Matthew. In the introductory part, the author emphasizes that the theme of the kingdom of heaven is one of the central topics in the First Gospel. One of the terms used to explain its nature is γάμος, which appears in the parables of the invitation to the royal wedding feast (Matt 22:1–14) and of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1–13). In the next section the terminology related to feasting in the Synoptic Gospels is investigated. Subsequently, the author examines the two parables, focusing on the meaning attributed to the “wedding feast” within them. In the conclusion, the eschatological significance of the term γάμος is underlined in the broader context of the whole of the Gospel of Matthew.

Keywords: wedding feast, γάμος, kingdom of heaven, Matt 22:1–14, Matt 25:1–13

Abstrakt: Artykuł analizuje symbolikę wyrażenia „uczta weselna” (γάμος) jako obraz królestwa niebieskiego w Ewangelii Mateusza. W części wstępnej podkreślono, że temat królestwa niebieskiego należy do centralnych wątków Pierwszej Ewangelii. Jednym z terminów użytych do wyjaśnienia jego natury jest γάμος, który pojawia się w przypowieściach o zaproszeniu na królewską ucztę weselną (Mt 22,1–14) i o dziesięciu pannach (Mt 25,1–13). W kolejnym etapie badana jest terminologia związana z ucztowaniem w Ewangeliach synoptycznych. Następnie analizie poddano

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obie przypowieści, koncentrując się na znaczeniu zawartego w nich wyrażenia „uczta weselna”. W zakończeniu podkreślono eschatologiczny wymiar terminu γάμος w szerszym kontekście całej Ewangelii Mateusza.

Słowa kluczowe: uczta weselna, γάμος, królestwo niebieskie, Mt 22,1–14, Mt 25,1–13

1. Introduction

The theme of the kingdom of heaven is one of the primary topics throughout the First Gospel.² It is the subject of Jesus' inaugural proclamation: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 4:17), that is subsequently elaborated and clarified throughout Matthew's narrative.³ A particularly important section in this regard is chapter 13, where Jesus explains its nature through parables.⁴ It is worth mentioning here in particular the quote from Psalm 78:2 in Matthew 13:35, that the evangelist uses to justify Jesus' parabolic teaching aimed at revealing the mysteries concerning the kingdom of heaven/God, Israel, and the Church.⁵ This teaching—contained in a series of comparisons, symbols, etc.—concerns the past, present and future.⁶ However, it is not limited to chapter 13, where the

² The terms "First Gospel" and "Gospel of Matthew" as well as "the author of the First Gospel" and "Matthew" will be used interchangeably. In the entire Bible, the expression "kingdom of heaven" appears only in Matthew (32x). Biblical sigla without reference to a specific book always refer to the Gospel of Matthew.

³ E.g., 5:3.10.19–20; 7:21; 8:11; 13; 16:19; 18:1.3–4.23; 19:12.14, etc. The phrase "kingdom of heaven/God" has been interpreted differently by scholars, but they generally agree that it refers to God's rule, both in the earthly present and in the eschatological future; see D. Adamczyk, *Realizm zapowiadanego królestwa Bożego w świetle Ewangelii według świętego Mateusza*, 'Studia Theologica Varsaviensia' 44 (2006) 2, pp. 155–169; R. Foster, *Why on Earth use "Kingdom of Heaven"?: Matthew's Terminology Revised*, 'New Testament Studies' 48 (2002), pp. 487–499; S.G. Matulich, *The Kingdom of the Heavens in the Gospel of St. Matthew*, 'Catholic Biblical Quarterly' 3 (1941) 1, pp. 43–49.

⁴ Cf. 13:24.31.33.44–45.47.52.

⁵ Cf. P. Herok, *Funkcja cytatu z Ps 78,2 w Ewangelii Mateusza*, 'Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne Śląska Opolskiego' 43 (2023) 2, p. 33; id., *Marked Quotations from Psalms in the Gospel of Matthew*, Göttingen 2024, pp. 106–115. Matthew employs the concepts of "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" interchangeably; cf. J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology, Part One: The Proclamation of Jesus*, London 1971, p. 97; K.L. Schmidt, βασιλεία, in: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, Grand Rapids 1999, p. 582. As James D.G. Dunn states, "Jesus was evidently remembered as using parables to illustrate or illumine what he had in mind when he spoke of the kingdom"; J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, Grand Rapids 2003, p. 385.

⁶ The past is indicated by the expression "I will utter what has been hidden from the foundation of the world" (i.e., the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven), contained in the quote from Ps 78:2 in 13:35c; the present is expressed in the words and actions of Jesus, who reveals this kingdom. In turn, the future is emphasized by the eschatological tone of this teaching. A similar

term “parable”—*παραβολή*—appears for the first time, but also appears in the rest of the Gospel.⁷ One of the images that Jesus uses to explain the nature of the kingdom of heaven is the wedding feast—*γάμος*.⁸ This expression is found in two parables: [1] the invitation to the royal wedding feast (22:1–14) and [2] the ten virgins (25:1–13). The aim of this article is to demonstrate how Jesus’ reference to wedding terminology reveals the nature of the kingdom of heaven—a reality that he himself embodies through his teaching and actions. In the study of the biblical text, we use synchronic analysis, with elements of diachronic analysis, while assuming—in the editing the First Gospel—the two-document hypothesis.

2. *Status Quaestionis*

To the best of our knowledge, no comprehensive study has yet been undertaken on the significance of the term *γάμος* (wedding feast) as an image of the kingdom of heaven in the Gospel of Matthew, considered in the context of the Gospel as a whole. Scholarly attention has typically focused on this term within the framework of either the parable in 22:1–14 or that in 25:1–13. While some authors note that the term *γάμος* connects these two passages, they have not drawn broader conclusions from this observation.⁹ Thus, the nature of this work is exploratory.

3. Terminology Related to Feasting in the Synoptic Gospels

In reference to the communal eating of a meal, the Synoptics primarily use three nouns—*γάμος*, *δεῖπνον* and *ἄριστόν*. While the semantic field of the noun

dynamic of teaching—from the past to the future—is included by the psalmist in Ps 78 itself; cf. A.F. Campbell, *Psalm 78: A Contribution to the Theology of Tenth Century Israel*, ‘Catholic Biblical Quarterly’ 41 (1979) 1, p. 53.

⁷ Cf. F. Hauck, *παραβολή*, in: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5, ed. by G. Friedrich, G.W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids 1999, pp. 751–760; J.W. Sider, *The Meaning of Parable in the Usage of the Synoptic Evangelists*, ‘Biblica’ 62 (1981) 4, pp. 453–470; R. Zimmermann, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, in: *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. by R. Zimmermann, Gütersloh 2007, pp. 3–44.

⁸ In the introductions to Jesus’ parables, Matthew uses the expression “kingdom of heaven” as a reference point to the content of a given parable as many as ten times; “the kingdom of heaven is like...” —ὁμοιωθή ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν; see 13:24–30; 13:44; 13:45–46; 13:47–50; 13:52; 18:23–35; 20:1–16; 21:28–32; 22:1–14 and 25:1–13.

⁹ E.g. W.D. Davies, D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 3, London 2004, p. 198; R.H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, Grand Rapids 1994², p. 501; D. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Dallas 1993, p. 729.

ἄριστόν is broad and denotes various forms of eating,¹⁰ the semantic scope of the expressions γάμος and δεῖπνον is narrower, indicating a solemn form of celebration. Consequently, the noun γάμος is rendered by *w e d d i n g, m a r r i a g e, m a r r i a g e f e a s t*.¹¹ In turn, δεῖπνον indicates the main meal of the day eaten in the evening—dinner.¹² Thus, the term γάμος has no synonymous equivalent, being the only expression indicating the *w e d d i n g f e a s t*, which is the subject of this study. It should also be noted that in the New Testament (NT) γάμος denotes not only the *w e d d i n g f e a s t* in the context of male-female relationships, but also the marriage of the Church community with Christ, as presented in the Apocalypse of John (Rev 19:7–9).¹³ Consequently, the expression γάμος also functions as a metaphor for the eschatological messianic kingdom, announced already in the Old Testament (OT).¹⁴

4. The Term γάμος in the Parable of the Invitation to the Royal Wedding Feast (22:1–14)

To determine the meaning of the term γάμος in 22:1–14, one must first explore the immediate context of the parable in question and then establish the

¹⁰ Cf. A. Strobel, ἄριστόν, in: *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, Bd. 1, Stuttgart 1992, p. 365. The author defines ἄριστόν as “Frühstück,” then he adds “Auch vom Mittagessen und vom Mahl allgemein.” The word ἄριστόν appears three times in the New Testament, occurring only in Matthew and Luke (Matt 22:14; Luke 11:38; 14:12).

¹¹ Cf. *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon. Abridged: The Little Liddell*, ed. by H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, Oxford 2007, p. 138. Of the 16 occurrences of the noun γάμος in the New Testament, 9 are found in the First Gospel (8 occurrences in Matt 22:1–14 and 1 occurrence in Matt 25:1–13). As for the other Evangelists, the expression γάμος also appears twice in Luke (Luke 12:35–40, 14:1–14) and once in John, indicating the wedding at Cana in Galilee (John 2:1). The remaining occurrences of γάμος are found in Heb 13:4 (to denote marriage) and in Rev 19:7–9 (ὁ γάμος τοῦ ἀρνίου—the wedding of the Lamb). For the messianic banquet in John 2:1–11, see M.F. Powęska, *The Christological Metaphors of Wine, Water, and Bread in the Gospel of John in Relation to Their Sapiential Background: An Intertextual Study*, Göttingen 2024, pp. 99–132.

¹² Cf. *Liddell and Scott's*..., p. 153.

¹³ Cf. Z. Grochowski, “Ukażę ci Oblubienicę, Małżonkę Baranka” (Δείξω σοι τὴν νύμφην τὴν γυναῖκα τοῦ ἀρνίου: Ap 21,9)—Mistyczne zaślubiny Chrystusa i Jego Kościoła, ‘Studia Elbląskie’ 6 (2004–2005), p. 75. The identity of the woman (ἡ γυνή) espoused to the Lamb is explained in Rev 21:2–3, where the new Jerusalem is compared to the bride (νύμφη); cf. I. Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, London 2006, p. 294.

¹⁴ Cf. Isa 25:6; 62:15; A. Paciorek, *Ewangelia według świętego Mateusza, rozdziały 14–28*, Częstochowa 2008, p. 354. See Ph.J. Long, *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Origin of the Eschatological Feast as a Wedding Banquet in the Synoptic Gospels*, Eugene 2013.

referents of the nouns “king” and “son” within it.¹⁵ These steps will allow for a deeper understanding of the significance hidden behind the term being studied.

4.1. The Immediate Context of the Parable

In the editorial concept of the First Gospel, the parable of the invitation to the royal wedding feast is closely linked to the two preceding parables—the one about the two sons (21:28–32) and the one about the wicked tenants (21:33–46)—constituting a coherent whole with them.¹⁶ The thematic unity of the three indicated texts contained in 21:28–22:14 is expressed in mutual connections expressed through: [1] the same addressees—religious leaders (cf. 21:33.45; 22:15);¹⁷ [2] the place of their utterance—the temple in Jerusalem (cf. 21:23); [3] thematic coherence, focusing on the motif of failure, successively, in relation to: working in the vineyard, bearing fruit, and coming to the wedding feast; and [4] the common vocabulary.¹⁸ While the first two parables emphasize the lack of obedience of Israel’s religious leaders to God and the consequent loss of their privileged position towards him (though at the same time the Gentiles accept Jesus—see

¹⁵ Matt 22:2–10 has its synoptic equivalent in Luke 14:16–24, but the differences in Luke’s redaction are so great that they do not affect the understanding of Matthew’s version; for example, the one who throws the banquet is not the “king” (βασιλεύς), but the “lord of the house” (οικοδεσπότης), instead of “wedding feast” (γάμος) there appears a “great dinner” (δεῖπνον μέγα), and, unlike Matthew, in whom the banquet is thrown for the “son” (τῷ υἱῷ), Luke does not specify the addressee. See J.L. Story, *All is Now Ready: an Exegesis of “the Great Banquet” (Luke 14:15–24) and “the Marriage Feast” (Matthew 22:1–14)*, ‘American Theological Inquiry’ 2 (2009) 2, pp. 67–79; E.E. Lemcio, *The Parables of the Great Supper and the Wedding Feast: History, Redaction and Canon*, ‘Horizons in Biblical Theology’ 8 (1986) 1, pp. 1–26. See also the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, logion 64; A.D. DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation: With a Commentary and New English Translation of the Complete Gospel*, London 2006. A collection of fragments from [1] early Jewish writings, [2] Greco-Roman writings, [3] early Christian writings, and [4] later Jewish writings containing content similarities with Matt 22:1–14 is found in K.R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Grand Rapids 2018², pp. 237–239.

¹⁶ Cf. D. Hagner, *Matthew...*, pp. 626–627. The most comprehensive study of the parable contained in Matthew 22:1–14 has been conducted by Joseph Nalpathilchira in his doctoral dissertation, published as a monograph entitled “*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, Roma 2012.

¹⁷ In the context of the First Gospel, the phrase “religious leaders/of Israel” has a broad meaning and may refer to groups such as: the Pharisees, Sadducees, high priests, elders, and scribes; cf. R.T. France, *Matthew and Jerusalem*, in: *Built upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew*, ed. by D.M. Gurtner, J. Nolland, Grand Rapids, MI 2008, pp. 117–118.

¹⁸ For the common vocabulary, see the list in W.D. Davies, D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary...* vol. 3, pp. 188–189.

21:43), the third parable focuses on the call not to neglect the opportunity to participate in the wedding feast, which is a picture of the kingdom of heaven. Moreover, this parable ends with a prediction of severe judgment (22:13–14). Consequently, 22:1–14 functions as a continuation of the polemic against the Jewish leaders, while at the same time pointing to the kingdom of heaven, which is transferred from Israel to the community, including both Jews and Gentiles.¹⁹

4.2. Identity of the King and His Son

For an accurate understanding of the term γάμος, it is essential to determine who, on a metaphorical level, the king and his son (υἱός) are. The subject of the parable is the kingdom of heaven, which, as A. Paciorek rightly observes, is similar (ὁμοιώθη) not so much to the king, but rather to the event in which the king invites people to the wedding feast (γάμος) prepared for his son and, in the face of their dismissive reactions, takes appropriate steps.²⁰ The very expression “kingdom of heaven/God” (cf. 5:35), denoting the reign of God, indicates that the king mentioned in 22:2.7.11.13 is God.²¹ In turn, the identity of the son is clarified by the immediate and broader context. In the preceding parable of the wicked tenants, the term “son” (υἱός) appears three times (21:37[2x].38), referring to Jesus, who thus for the first time in his public activity indicates his divine identity as the Son of God (doing so, however, indirectly).²² Therefore, the reader of the First Gospel naturally identifies the term “son” (υἱός) with Jesus also in 22:2.²³ Moreover, Jesus has already identified himself with the figure of the bridegroom in 9:15a when he says: “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?”. He will do so again in 25:1–12 in the parable of the ten virgins.²⁴

¹⁹ Cf. J. Gnllka, *Das Matthäusevangelium: Kommentar zu Kap. 14,1–28,20*, Freiburg i.Br 1992, pp. 242–244.

²⁰ Cf. A. Paciorek, *Ewangelia...*, p. 354.

²¹ Cf. D.L. Turner, *Matthew*, Grand Rapids 2008, p. 524; D.C. Olson, *Matthew 22:1–14 as Midrash*, ‘Catholic Biblical Quarterly’ 67 (2005) 3, p. 435.

²² Cf. J. Nalpathilchira, *Everything...*, p. 309; R. Schnackenburg, *Matthäusevangelium: 16,21–28,20*, Würzburg 1987, p. 206.

²³ D. Hagner, *Matthew...*, p. 629; A. Paciorek, *Ewangelia...*, p. 354; E. Stauffer, *γαμέω, γάμος*, in: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, Grand Rapids 1999, p. 655.

²⁴ Cf. W.D. Davies, D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary...*, vol. 2, London 2001, p. 110. See Ph.J. Long, *Jesus the Bridegroom...*

4.3. Dynamics of the Term γάμος in the Narrative Progression of the Parable

As already noted above, out of nine occurrences of the term γάμος in the First Gospel, as many as eight are found in the text under examination. This expression functions as a kind of refrain, interwoven throughout the narrative, which consequently leads to focusing the reader's attention on it. The term first appears in v. 2—the opening of the parable—that announces a wedding feast (γάμος) was prepared by the king for his son. Then in v. 3 the evangelist reports that the king sent his servants to call those invited to the wedding feast (γάμος), but they refused to come. In v. 4 the term γάμος appears again. Additionally, the call is intensified by: [1] sending other servants; [2] emphasizing the fact that everything is already prepared; and [3] urging with the call “come to the wedding feast!”. Moreover, Matthew quotes the king, who calls the feast his own (ἄριστόν μου), thus emphasizing the fact that he is its host. The mention of slaughtered oxen and fattened animals recalls the invitation from Wisdom in Prov 9:1–6, as well as the description of the messianic feast in Isa 25:6.²⁵ In turn, the second sending of the servants refers to their double sending in the parable of the wicked tenants.²⁶ The dismissive, repeated rejection of the invitation by those invited, even to the point of murdering the servants (vv. 5–6; cf. 21:36–38), brings to mind the rejection and murder of God's messengers to Israel throughout salvation history.²⁷ This turn of events prompts the king in v. 7 to take military action, leading to the death of the murderers and the burning of their city.²⁸ Thus, vv. 5–7, devoid of the expression γάμος, introduce the motif of judgment along with its justification, while interrupting the narrative about the feast itself.²⁹ The theme of the wedding feast (γάμος) returns in vv. 8 and 9—the king sends his servants for the third time, this time to people who come from other places and were not previously invited. The openness of this invitation corresponds to the transfer of the vineyard to other tenants in the previous parable (cf. 21:41.43). As D. Hagner rightly notes, in both cases it results in the loss of Israel's privileged position (in 22:8 as those who were invited first).³⁰ The order given to the servants by the king to go and invite all those they meet symbolizes here the universal mission of the

²⁵ Cf. W.D. Davies, D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary...*, vol. 3, p. 200.

²⁶ The words πάλιν ἀπέστειλεν ἄλλους δούλους from 22:4 are a literal repetition of 21:36.

²⁷ Cf. A. Paciorek, *Ewangelia...*, p. 355; J. Gnlika, *Das Matthäusevangelium...*, p. 238; R. Schnackenburg, *Matthäusevangelium...*, p. 209.

²⁸ Cf. Isa 5:24–25, where God's anger against Israel is compared to the fire.

²⁹ Cf. R.H. Gundry, *Matthew...*, p. 437.

³⁰ Cf. D. Hagner, *Matthew...*, p. 630. In 3:8 John the Baptist calls upon the leaders of Israel to bear worthy fruit (καρπὸν ἁγίου) of repentance. In 22:8 the king finally states that those invited to the wedding feast were not worthy of it (οὐκ ἦσαν ἄξιοι).

Church.³¹ As a result, the place of the feast (γάμος) is filled with participants, as the evangelist specifies, both bad and good, which in turn brings to mind the parable of the net gathering all kinds of fish (13:47–48)—first they are gathered, and only then the good are separated from the bad. A. Paciorek is right when he states that, in Matthew’s understanding, the expressions “good” and “bad” define the Church as a *corpus mixtum*. Additionally, in the course of his argument Paciorek underlines that the missionaries of the Church should not pass judgment before the time but should try to win all who are ready to accept the invitation.³² Moreover, the mention of the good and bad in v. 10 prepares vv. 11–13, which allegorically describe the last judgment, extending to those who belong to the community of the Church.³³ In vv. 11–12 the motif of the wedding garment (ἔνδυμα γάμου) appears twice, the possession of which is a condition for staying at the wedding feast, and the lack of which results in being thrown outside, into the darkness. Thus vv. 11–13 emphasize, that being a member of the community does not automatically guarantee salvation, but one must bear fruit (cf. 21:43); the last judgement will not pass anyone by, so no one can consider their status as completely certain and secure (cf. v. 14).³⁴

5. Term γάμος in the Parable of the Ten Virgins (25:1–13)

In order to establish the deeper meaning of the expression γάμος in 25:1–13, one should first refer to the context in which the parable is set and then determine the referent of the term “bridegroom”. These two steps will allow us to discover the meaning that the noun γάμος plays in the entire narrative of the parable.³⁵

³¹ Cf. W.D. Davies, D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary...*, vol. 3, p. 202; A. Paciorek, *Ewangelia...*, p. 356; R.H. Gundry, *Matthew...*, p. 437.

³² Cf. A. Paciorek, *Ewangelia...*, p. 356. Moreover, the author emphasizes the universality of God’s turn towards people in the present period, and also warns against predetermining those who would enter the kingdom; *ibid.*

³³ Cf. W.D. Davies, D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary...*, vol. 3, pp. 203–204; A. Paciorek, *Ewangelia...*, p. 357.

³⁴ Cf. D. Hagner, *Matthew...*, pp. 631–632; A. Paciorek, *Ewangelia...*, p. 357. See *Excursus* devoted to Matthew’s understanding of judgment (including the last judgement) in the context of his entire work in: U. Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, Minneapolis 2005, pp. 285–296. The formula of eschatological judgment “There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” from v. 13 also appears in 8:12; 13:42.50; 24:51; 25:30—all these references emphasize the horror of the punishment awaiting the false disciples; cf. R.H. Gundry, *Matthew...*, p. 440. In the context of 22:1–14, it is worth noting that 8:12 speaks of the tragic fate of the sons of the kingdom, while 13:42 refers to those expelled from the kingdom of the Son of Man. See D.H. Wenkel, *The Gnashing Teeth of Jesus’s Opponents*, ‘Bibliotheca Sacra’ 175 (2018) 697, pp. 83–95.

³⁵ A collection of fragments from [1] early Jewish writings, [2] Greco-Roman writings, [3] early Christian writings, and [4] later Jewish writings containing content similarities with Matt 25:1–13 is found in K.R. Snodgrass, *Stories...*, pp. 389–391.

5.1. Context of the Parable

The author of the First Gospel placed the parable of the ten virgins (25:1–13) between two others that speak of the coming (parousia³⁶) of the Son of Man: the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servant (24:45–51) and the parable of the talents (25:14–30). Additionally, the parable of the ten virgins is connected to the previous one by the temporal adverb “then” (τότε)—which introduces 25:1.³⁷ In turn, the last verse of the parable under consideration—“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (25:13)—embeds 25:1–13 in the context of the parousia, functioning at the same time as an introduction to the next parable that follows it. It should also be noted that the indicated texts are placed within the framework of the so-called eschatological discourse, covering chapters 24–25, which takes up, among others, the theme of the coming of the Son of Man³⁸ and the call to watch.³⁹ In turn, the parable following the parable of the talents and at the same time concluding chapter 25—about the last judgment (vv. 31–46)—presents the judgment of all humanity carried out by the Son of Man after his coming (cf. 25:31). Thus, the parable of the ten virgins is at the very heart of Jesus’ eschatological discourse, constituting its integral part.⁴⁰

5.2. Identity of the Bridegroom

In the analyzed pericope, the term νυμφίος appears four times (vv. 1.5[2x].10). It is translated into English as “bridegroom,” “husband.”⁴¹ As already noted above, Jesus has already referred to himself as a bridegroom twice in 9:15.⁴² Now he returns to this self-identification in the eschatological context (having previously been a bridegroom also in 22:1–14).⁴³ Therefore, pointing to the referent of the expression νυμφίος, W.D. Davies and D.C. Alli-

³⁶ Matthew is the only one of the four evangelists who employs the term παρουσία, which emphasizes his eschatological concern; cf. 24:3.27.37.39.

³⁷ The section of Matt 24:42–25:13 is one great call to vigilance and readiness; cf. R. Schnackenburg, *Matthäusevangelium*..., p. 230.

³⁸ Cf. Matt 24:27.30–31.37.39.42–44.

³⁹ Cf. Matt 24:42 and 25:13.

⁴⁰ See P. Foster, *The Eschatology of the Gospel of Matthew*, in: “To Recover What Has Been Lost”: *Essays on Eschatology, Intertextuality, and Reception History in Honor of Dale C. Allison Jr.*, ed. by T.S. Ferda, D. Frayer-Griggs, N.C. Johnson, Leiden 2020, pp. 77–103.

⁴¹ Cf. *Liddell and Scott’s*..., p. 469.

⁴² Matt 9:15[2x] and 25:1.5[2x].10 exhaust the occurrences of the term νυμφίος in the First Gospel.

⁴³ Cf. U. Luz, *Matthew*..., p. 233; A. Paciorek, *Ewangelia*..., p. 493; D. Hagner, *Matthew*..., p. 728.

son rightly state that “Matthew’s text is plainly an allegory of the *Parousia* of Christ, the heavenly bridegroom (...).”⁴⁴ Moreover, Jesus’ identification with the coming bridegroom from the parable of the ten virgins also results from the broader context of the eschatological discourse, which speaks of the coming of the Son of Man, who in 25:1–13 comes in the form of a bridegroom.⁴⁵ Besides, throughout the First Gospel, Jesus repeatedly identifies himself with the coming Son of Man, but he does so only indirectly.⁴⁶ This results from Matthew’s editorial assumptions, according to which Jesus—in the public sphere—openly reveals his divine identity only in the scene of the judgment before Caiaphas (cf. 26:63b–64). It is also worth paying attention to the words that the bridegroom addresses to the unprepared virgins in 25:12: “Amen, I say to you, I do not know you”—the expression amen (ἀμήν) belongs to the characteristic vocabulary of Jesus, which he uses throughout his public activity.⁴⁷

5.3. Meaning of the Expression γάμος from the Perspective of the Entire Narrative of the Parable

Matthew includes several parables as part of his eschatological discourse. The text 25:1–13 under examination, being the second, subsequent one (cf. τότε in 25:1)—after the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servant (24:45–51)—continues the theme of readiness for the coming of the Son of Man (cf. 24:44). The image of the bridegroom arriving at the wedding feast contains messianic connotations (see above) that give the whole parable a specific meaning. The passage is at the same time the last pericope that emphasizes the need for constant readiness. This results from two facts: [1] the time of

⁴⁴ W.D. Davies, D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary...*, vol. 3, p. 392.

⁴⁵ Cf. J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids 2005, p. 1010; A.J. Tarazona, „Dem Bräutigam entgegengehen”. Zur Parabel von den jungen Frauen (Mt 25,1–13) in der matthäischen Endzeitrede, ‘Theologie und Philosophie’ 89 (2014) 4, p. 512. In Matt 24–25 the coming Son of Man is compared to: [1] a thief (24:43); [2] the master of the house (24:45–51; 25:14–30); [3] the bridegroom (25:1–12); and [4] a shepherd (25:32).

⁴⁶ Cf. 8:20; 9:6; 10:23; 11:19; 12:8.32.40; 13:37.41; 16:13.27.28; 17:9.12.22; 19:28; 20:18.28; 24:27.30.37.39.44; 25:31; 26:2.24.45.

⁴⁷ Cf. 5:18.26; 6:2.5.16; 8:10; 10:15.23.42; 11:11; 13:17; 16:28; 17:20; 18:3.13.18.19; 19:23.28; 21:21.31; 23:36; 24:2.34; 25:12.40.45; 26:13.21.34. In the First Gospel, Jesus says the word *amen* 31 times. Comparing this to the frequency in Mark (14 times) and Luke (6 times), it must be said that of all three Synoptic Gospels, in Matthew this term is the most expressive identifier of authoritative statements of Jesus. See A. Zawadzki, *Kim jest obłubieniec w przypowieści o dziesięciu pannach (Mt 25,1–13)? Między tradycyjnymi i współczesnymi próbami zrozumienia*, ‘The Biblical Annals’ 9 (2019) 2, pp. 106–107.

the Son of Man's return remains unknown and [2] it may be associated with a longer than expected delay.⁴⁸

The formula introducing the parable: "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like" (ὁμοιωθήσεται) is almost the same as the words opening the parable about the invitation to the royal wedding feast (cf. 22:2). However, due to his eschatological orientation, Matthew used the future tense instead of the present tense (cf. 13:24; 18:23). It should be emphasized that the kingdom of heaven is compared here not so much to the ten virgins (παρθένοι) as such, but to the event in which they participate—the sudden arrival of the bridegroom/Son of Man, in light of which some of them are prepared, some are not.⁴⁹ Without going into the editorial and interpretative details of the parable, that do not shed any additional light on the issue under examination, it should be noted that the ten παρθένοι represent the Christian community awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom. In turn, the delay in his arrival (v. 5) represents the postponement of the parousia. The unexpected arrival of the bridegroom (v. 6), on the other hand, indicates the moment of its commencement. Finally, the harsh rejection of the five virgins (vv. 11–12), referred to as foolish (μωραί), indicates the final judgment.⁵⁰

In the parable, Matthew uses the expression γάμος once—in v. 10—when he states that while the five unprepared virgins went to buy olive oil, the bridegroom arrived and the other five—who were prepared—went in with him to the wedding feast (γάμος) and the door was closed.⁵¹ The mention of the wedding feast is thus juxtaposed in its immediate context with an allegorical image of the last judgment (vv. 11–12) and the concluding exhortation of the parable: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (v. 13). The statement that the wise virgins entered the wedding feast with him (μετ' αὐτοῦ) [the bridegroom] brings to mind the Emmanuel motif, both from the very beginning of Matthew's work—1:23—where the author quotes the prophecy from Isa 7:14, at the same time explaining this name as God with us (μεθ' ἡμῶν ὁ θεός), and from the end of the First Gospel (28:20), where the Risen One assures the disciples I am with you (ἐγὼ μεθ' ὑμῶν εἰμι). In conclusion, it should be stated that in the

⁴⁸ Cf. D. Hagner, *Matthew*..., p. 727.

⁴⁹ Cf. A. Paciorek, *Ewangelia*..., pp. 494–495; D. Hagner, *Matthew*..., p. 728.

⁵⁰ Cf. W.D. Davies, D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*..., vol. 3, p. 392; U. Luz, *Matthew*..., p. 235; J. Gnllka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*..., p. 352; K.R. Snodgrass, *Stories*..., p. 398; E. Stauffer, *γαμέω*..., pp. 654–655. Cf. Matt 7:24–27, where, speaking of the man building his house on the rock and on the sand, Jesus also uses the same antithetical concepts—wise (φρόνιμος) and foolish (μωρός).

⁵¹ The readiness of the five virgins to enter with the bridegroom is expressed here with the adjective ἔτοιμοι (*ready*), which recalls 24:44, where Jesus calls for readiness—*be ready* (ἔτοιμοι)—because the Son of Man is coming at an hour the disciples do not expect.

parable of the ten virgins the term γάμος was used—similarly as in the parable of the invitation to the wedding feast—with a strong messianic overtone, but with a clearer emphasis than in 22:1–14 on eschatology expressed through the arrival of the Son of Man and his carrying out of the last judgment.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the expression γάμος (wedding feast) has shown that it carries both messianic and eschatological significance. In Matthew's narrative, the motif of participation at the table in the kingdom of heaven—open to both Jews and Gentiles—appears for the first time in 8:11, where Jesus states that many will come from the east and west and sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These words are the result of Jesus' amazement at the faith of the pagan centurion (8:5–10). At the same time, in the very next verse—8:12—Jesus uses for the first time the formula of weeping and gnashing of teeth in reference to the sons of the kingdom who will be thrown outside. Then in 9:15, in response to the accusation addressed to Jesus that his disciples do not fast, he, by identifying himself with the figure of the bridegroom—νυμφίος—(cf. 25:1.5[2x].10), replies that as long as the bridegroom is with the wedding guests (οἱ τοῦ νυμφῶνος), they have no reason to be sad.

In two parables—the royal invitation to the wedding feast (22:1–14) and the ten virgins (25:1–13)—Jesus develops the motif of the wedding feast as an image of the kingdom of heaven. As has been shown, these parables have a strong messianic and eschatological tone, while at the same time referring to the rich symbolism of the OT.

Matt 22:1–14, functioning as a part of 21:28–22:14, is an appeal not to neglect the opportunity to participate in the wedding feast, which represents the kingdom of heaven; the invitation is now addressed not only to Jewish people but also to the Gentiles. At the same time, this text contains a very clear motif of judgment, repeating, among others, the words of 8:12 about weeping and gnashing of teeth (cf. v. 13). The final sentence of the parable, which says that many are called but few are chosen (v. 14), emphasizes that it is not enough to accept the invitation, but that one must also come suitably prepared.

The theme of readiness and vigilance is taken up and developed in the parable of the ten virgins (25:1–13). This text is deeply embedded in eschatological reality, identifying the bridegroom with the coming Son of Man. Here too, the theme of judgment appears, and the whole is crowned by a call to vigilance (cf. v. 13). It should be emphasized that, as in the parable of the royal invitation to the wedding feast, so here too everyone is invited—i.e. all ten virgins. However, who will remain at this banquet is determined by the attitude of vigilance and

being prepared. In sum, through the term γάμος Matthew illustrates the eternal communion of God with humanity, while simultaneously highlighting the eschatological dimension of the kingdom of heaven.

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