Our gospels preserve three stories of Jesus about 'the guests who would not come' (Matthew xxii, Luke xiv, Thomas lxiv). In each of these stories (i) a big dinner is prepared, but (ii) when summoned, the guests originally invited all decline to come, so (iii) the host, taking offence, ropes in all and sundry to enjoy the feast instead of them.

In Luke and Thomas the guests give several excuses for not coming. Similar items are given in Matthew, not as excuses made by the unwilling guests, but as what they went off to do instead.

Two recent and valuable studies 1) have drawn fresh attention to a possible allusion, in these excuses (or better-things-to-do), to a list of exemptions from call-up given in Deuteronomy. The allusion is taken to show that the host is Messiah calling his troops out for the final Holy War. Those who refuse to fight—so the parable now reads—will be excluded from his feast of victory.

There are however certain difficulties in accepting this allusion as a feature of the parable.

The first difficulty concerns the relation between the stories given in our gospel texts. The allusion to Deuteronomy is clear (if at all) only in the story told by Luke; but the military elements, without which we would hardly catch the allusion, come only in Matthew’s version of the tale. These facts are not easily reconciled with any plausible theory of development.

Another difficulty relates to the excuses as excuses. Were they valid? The allusion would make them scriptural. But then the guests who make these excuses are excluded from the feast—'not even a taste' will come to them. That seems harsh, especially if the host is meant to be Messiah. No excuses (it is said in reply),

not even scriptural ones, can justify refusal when Messiah calls. This reply may be sound theology, but for that very reason it must wreck the parable. An 'earthly story' must make its own (earthly) point first, and clearly, if it is to bring home a personal or 'heavenly' message to the audience. It won't bring it home, if 'heaven' has to intervene to save or to explain the earthly point. In this case: if the exemptions in Deuteronomy, once alluded to, then need to be explained away again—well, then, whoever constructed the parable was ill-advised to allude to them!

I shall suggest, after examining these points, that the allusion to Deuteronomy is really there, in Luke, but was intended to be humorous. So taken, Luke's story makes sense in its own terms once again, it makes a clear point to a well-defined audience, and in making that point it 'works' on them in a way clearly exemplified in some other parables.

I. EXEMPTIONS FROM ACTIVE SERVICE

Is the allusion really there, in any of our texts?

The excuses, or better-things-to-do, are these:- one guest has a field or farm demanding attention (all versions); one has just made a purchase, of oxen (Luke) or a house (Thomas); one has business to see to (Matthew and Thomas); one is involved in a wedding-party (Thomas) or is himself on honeymoon (Luke) and therefore 'cannot come'.

There are two passages in Deuteronomy to which these excuses might be taken to allude:

Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying, 'What man is there that has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it. And what man is there that has planted a vineyard and has not enjoyed its fruit? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man enjoy its fruit. And what man is there that has betrothed a wife and has not taken her? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man take her. (Deuteronomy xx 5-7)

When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or be charged with any business; he shall be free at home one year, to be happy with his wife whom he has taken. (Deuteronomy xxiv 5)

Now Luke's third excuse I have married a wife does match When a man is newly married in Deuteronomy xxiv. Luke's emphatic wording and therefore I cannot come may mark this point: I cannot, for it is forbidden in the Law 2).

2) BALLARD, op. cit., p. 345.