

The Healing of the Man with Dropsy (Luke 14:1-6) and the Lukan Landscape*

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Abstract

The healing of the man with dropsy is a surprisingly under-noticed passage in Luke. Few commentaries give much attention to it at all. Where attention is given, the passage is usually heard in one of the following ways: (1) in the context of healing stories or Sabbath healings in general, and thus through the lens of form criticism and how this story participates in the larger context of healing stories; or (2) in the context of the symposia or meal stories since this passage introduces such a scene, and the background for understanding the passage is thus the literary *topos* of meal stories in the Greco-Roman world. In either reading, the fact that the man has dropsy specifically is essentially irrelevant to the story; he might as well have been blind or lame or deaf. Yet this is the only occurrence in the NT of this specific condition, and I would like to suggest that dropsy is not incidental to the story at all. Rather, the dropsy is itself key to the story. Dropsy is used widely in the ancient Greek world, particularly in the writings of philosophers, and it is frequently a metaphor for greed and wealth. Among the commentary tradition, few scholars take notice of the dropsy metaphor. This paper will mine the Greek philosophical tradition for examples of dropsy to build the case for its metaphorical usage, and it will apply that metaphor to this passage in Luke to see how it might serve the Lukan narrative.

Keywords

dropsy; greed; wealth; healing stories; meal scenes

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One of the more obscure stories found in the Gospel of Luke is in chapter 14 where Jesus finds himself as a dinner guest of a Pharisee on the Sabbath, and where he quickly heals a man suffering from dropsy. In Luke neither the meal with the Pharisee nor the healing on the Sabbath is unusual by this point in the narrative; Jesus has engaged in both on several occasions so far. Yet a quick read of the commentary tradition on this passage reveals that the overwhelming consensus has been to read this passage as one or both of those things—either as a Sabbath healing or as a meal scene. Certainly this episode is both of those things, and commentators are by no means in error to notice that. Yet I would like to suggest that something very significant is being missed by most of our scholarly discourse: the healing of the dropsy. To read most commentators on this text, the fact that the man suffers from dropsy is essentially irrelevant; that is, there is nothing particularly significant about the dropsy, and the man could just as well have been blind or lame or deaf and the story would be the same. What I want to suggest, however, is that the dropsy *is not* an incidental detail, made all the more significant by the fact that this is the only occurrence of this ailment in all of the New Testament. I want to suggest that Luke is employing dropsy here as a metaphor for greed, a metaphor that would be familiar to Luke's audience and thus an exegetically significant key to a full and proper reading of this Gospel.

To explain the metaphor: Dropsy is used widely in the ancient Greek world, particularly in the writings of philosophers (a good number of which will be put forward in this essay), and it is frequently a metaphor for greed and wealth. Dropsy is a condition marked by the body's inability to process fluids, thus the victim continues to drink more and more until he or she eventually dies from drinking too much. The victim drinks because he or she is thirsty, but the body retains the fluid rather than processes it; thus the victim remains thirsty and continues to drink until something bad happens, like the bursting of organs. Dropsy, then, is an appropriate metaphor for wealth and greed, as the victim thirsts for more and more wealth, only to find that the insatiable thirst for wealth is eventually his or her undoing.

To be sure, I am not the only person to have noticed this metaphor. I will name and credit those commentators of whom I am aware below, some of whom give a nod in the direction of the metaphor and some

of whom employ it on some level in their interpretation. The most thorough treatment of which I am aware is that of Willi Braun in his helpful 1995 monograph entitled *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14*.¹ As the title indicates, Braun's interest is in the collection of meal scenes found in this chapter, of which the dropsical man is but a small part. Braun does, however, give extensive attention to the metaphorical understanding of dropsy that I also wish to highlight. While I think I will suggest something a bit different from Braun, part of what I want to do is to call attention to a far too under-noticed reading of this text and suggest that we need to turn up the volume, as it were, on those voices who are noticing this significant detail of Luke's narration.

This essay will unfold in three sections. First, it will offer a brief survey of what the recent commentary and interpretive traditions are saying about this text, especially highlighting the problem of how few notice the significance of the dropsy. Second, it will explore the dropsy metaphor as it appears in the larger Greco-Roman literary tradition as a way of demonstrating that this is not an obscure reading, but one of which the Lukan audience is likely aware. Third, it will apply the metaphor to a reading of this passage and offer some suggestions on how it might contribute to the Lukan landscape and enhance our reading of this Gospel.

Survey of the Commentary Tradition

For the vast majority of commentaries on the dropsy text, the reading falls into a couple of categories: Many read the text as a healing story or Sabbath story, and many read the text as a symposium or meal scene. It is worth noting that in both cases, the fact that the man is healed of dropsy is essentially irrelevant to the discussion. Let us look at each in turn.

Many commentators read this text in the context of healing stories in general or of Sabbath healings in particular, and thus through the lens of form criticism and how this story participates in the larger con-

¹) Willi Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* (SNTSMS 85; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

text of healing stories. Examples of those scholars who read this text as a Sabbath healing would include such notable figures as Joseph Fitzmyer,² Frederick Danker,³ Scott Spencer,⁴ John Nolland,⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson,⁶ and Joel Green, who further labels the Sabbath-healing motif “a well-worn ingredient.”⁷ To be sure, the text *is* a healing story, and it *is* a Sabbath healing story, and it does participate in the larger Sabbath-healing form. Yet to label this text as simply a Sabbath healing is to short-sell the text, as the form in this case is the vehicle for the meaning but certainly not the point of the text in and of itself.

Similarly, a smaller number of scholars have labeled the form as perhaps being that of a pronouncement story. This goes back at least as far as Rudolf Bultmann and his *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, where he calls it a pronouncement story or controversy dialogue.⁸ A similar reading is found also from Charles Talbert⁹ and Robert Stein, the latter of whom argues that it is a pronouncement story rather than a healing story because “the emphasis is more on the pronouncement than on the healing.”¹⁰

A second group of scholars reads this text in the context of the symposia or meal stories since this passage introduces such a scene, thus arguing that the background for understanding the passage is the literary *topos* of meal stories in the Greco-Roman world. Typically, most who read this text as a Greco-Roman symposium scene proper tend to

² Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 28A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 1040.

³ Frederick Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), p. 267.

⁴ Scott Spencer, *The Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), p. 169.

⁵ John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34* (WBC 35B; Dallas: Word, 1993), p. 745.

⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (SP 3; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 223.

⁷ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 544.

⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. John Marsh; New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 12.

⁹ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (Macon, Ga: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), p. 171.

¹⁰ Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (NAC 24; Nashville: Broadman, 1992), p. 386.

read the passage in light of the honor-shame notions that the upcoming “places of honor” scene would address. Among those who read our text in light of the symposia as a technical category, Braun’s is probably the most significant work in this regard, having devoted an entire monograph to the topic. He reads the text definitively as a symposium scene and takes for granted that Luke is writing to a Hellenistic audience and can use Hellenistic writing devices such as this. Similarly, consider Johnson who refers to the symposium scene as “in effect a literary form.”¹¹ Johnson also cites a host of examples, including Xenophon, Plato, and Plutarch, examples which will be included below and which all come out of the symposium tradition. Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh in their *Social-Scientific Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* also link this scene to Greco-Roman meal scenes.¹² They also cross-reference the reader to a discussion of “meals” in the social world of the New Testament in their glossary of what they call “Reading Scenarios.”¹³ Finally, one should also be aware of work of John Paul Heil, who thoroughly treats all of the meal scenes in Luke-Acts, including the dropsy scene.¹⁴

This reading is not uniform though, and it has its detractors. For example, Nolland says that “there is probably some link between the meal setting and Hellenistic *symposion* practice and the loose literary genre that developed out of the practice,”¹⁵ but he seems to think the link is dubious. Others are less inclined to read the text as a symposium proper but talk about it more generally as a meal scene. Fitzmyer, for example, refers to Luke 14 as a collection of “Jesus’ dinner-table discourses”¹⁶ and refers to the dropsy scene specifically as “but another

¹¹ Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, pp. 225-26.

¹² Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Scientific Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), pp. 284-85.

¹³ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Scientific Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, pp. 381-82.

¹⁴ John Paul Heil, *The Meal Scenes in Luke-Acts: An Audience Oriented Approach* (SBLMS 52; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999). Heil indexes and exegetes all of the meal scenes, but the dropsy scene specifically is found on pp. 99-113.

¹⁵ Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, p. 745.

¹⁶ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, p. 1038.

of Luke's dinner episodes."¹⁷ Tannehill wants to keep both categories by saying that it is two type-scenes, both Sabbath healing and meal scene.¹⁸ Similarly, Green argues for the meal setting but reads it in light of *both* Jewish meal traditions and Greco-Roman meal traditions.¹⁹ Again, though, I wish to point out the fact that the extensive conversation about form—a conversation that probably takes more space in the commentary tradition than any other element of the interpretation of this passage—is distracting on some level, as what typically is said about our passage is rather unaffected by the man's condition of dropsy, and he might as well be blind or lame or deaf.

Once the issue of form is addressed, a surprising number of commentaries then detour onto the question of whether or not the dropsical man is an invited guest or a party crasher. The question is partly one about whether the man is invited or uninvited; it is also partly about whether an apparently uninvited guest would be an unusual occurrence in an ancient meal scene, as well as partly about whether the man with dropsy might even be “a plant” set up to trap Jesus in some way.²⁰ Virtually every commentary addresses this question in one way or another, and this detail receives what is to my mind a surprising amount of atten-

¹⁷ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, p. 1041.

¹⁸ Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 227.

¹⁹ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, pp. 540-41.

²⁰ To give only a few examples: Fitzmyer (*The Gospel According to Luke*, p. 1041) merely asks the question of whether the man was uninvited or a plant but offers no comment to answer the question. Nolland (*Luke 9:21-18:34*, p. 746) says it is irrelevant to the text whether he is invited or not. Stein (*Luke*, p. 386) suggests that he could be “an intruder, guest, or plant” but that it is essentially not relevant. Danker (*Jesus and the New Age*, p. 268) states definitively that the man is *not* a plant. Johnson (*The Gospel of Luke*, p. 224) speculates that he was likely uninvited if his dropsy was severe enough to be noticed, thus making him impure. Richard B. Vinson (*Luke* [Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2008], p. 480) speculates that if the man is actually at the table reclining, then the Pharisees might be trying to start an argument by having him there. Darrell L. Bock (*Luke 9:51-24:53* [Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT 3; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], pp. 1256-57) suggests that the man perhaps walked in off the street, as was fairly common at such meals. He also suggests that the Pharisees were attempting to trap Jesus, since they were said to be watching him closely, terminology that Bock takes to mean “watch lurkingly.” Heil (*Meal Scenes in Luke-Acts*, p. 99) seems to follow this trajectory as well.

tion, particularly since so many commentators bring up the issue only to dismiss it for lack of relevance (a point on which this author would agree!).

What, then, are commentators saying about the dropsy specifically? It is notable that most commentaries take very little notice of the dropsy specifically, and most only devote a sentence or two to the condition itself. Most offer only a description of the disease's basic symptomology, and most name the disease by its modern equivalent: edema. No meaning is typically attached to the disease beyond its basic description.²¹ Nolland goes further by directly stating, "The report is more about the dispute than about the healing,"²² leaving the reader to conclude that there is nothing particularly noteworthy about what the man suffers from. Such a reading seems typical of most major commentaries on this text.

A few commentators go a little further. Tannehill, for example, defines dropsy, then notes a connection to its metaphorical usage. He writes, "While the body is swollen with fluid, dropsy is accompanied by an unquenchable craving for drink. Hence the disease became a metaphor for insatiable desire, viewed as moral failing."²³ He then connects it to the specific moral failing of "their own insatiable desire for places of honor,"²⁴ a connection that is moving in the right direction but still falls short of the mark, incorrectly characterizing the thirst as thirst for honor and position rather than for wealth.

A small handful of scholars note the metaphorical usage of dropsy, with some only noting it in passing and others making a bit more of it, but with scarcely anyone reading the judgment on wealth as an indispensable element to this chapter in Luke or to the Gospel as a whole. Malina and Rohrbaugh notice the connection to the metaphor for greed but offer only a paragraph or two about it, including quotes from Poly-

²¹) Examples of this approach include Fitzmyer (*The Gospel According to Luke*, p. 1041), Danker (*Jesus and the New Age*, p. 268), Stein (*Luke*, p. 386), and Nolland (*Luke 9:21-18:34*, p. 746).

²²) Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, p. 747.

²³) Tannehill, *Luke*, p. 228.

²⁴) Ibid.

bius and Ovid.²⁵ Green also notes the metaphor of dropsy, suggesting that the dropsical man “would constitute a vivid parable of Jesus’ socially elite, Pharisaical table companions.”²⁶ Talbert also observes the metaphorical use, calling dropsy “the rich man’s disease,” and he cites three examples from Greek literature. He also suggests that the dropsy episode lays the foundation for a critique of the rich that is to follow.²⁷ It seems to me that Talbert’s suggestion is spot on, and I am only aware of two works that offer a sustained reading that follows this course. One is Braun, whom we have mentioned already. The other is John Paul Heil, who follows and cites Braun’s metaphorical reading, then applies the metaphor to the entirety of the meal scene to demonstrate that Jesus is attacking the selfishness and greed of the Pharisees—their greed for both wealth and social status.²⁸ It also merits mention that not everyone is convinced by such a reading. Gregory Bloomquist, for example, in a response to Braun’s work, understands and recognizes the metaphorical use of dropsy in Hellenistic literature in the time of the New Testament but expressly states that such an understanding of the text is essentially absent from the early Christian writings.²⁹ His argument is that the metaphorical reading of dropsy is not common among the earliest interpreters of the text, and thus it should not be very significant for us either. While his point is well taken, I would like to suggest that the metaphor is simply too widely spread in the Greco-Roman literature of the time for us to ignore its potential impact on the first hearers of Luke.

The next question, then, is where does one find the dropsy metaphor used in ancient literature, and is it common enough that one might expect Luke and his audience to read the text in such a way? It is to those ancient examples that we now turn.

²⁵) Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Scientific Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, pp. 284-85.

²⁶) Green, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 547.

²⁷) Talbert, *Reading Luke*, p. 172.

²⁸) See especially Heil, *Meal Scenes in Luke-Acts*, pp. 100 and 113.

²⁹) Gregory L. Bloomquist, “Patristic Reception of a Lukan Healing Account: A Contribution to a Socio-Rhetorical Response to Willi Braun’s *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14*,” in Kevin Coyle and Steven C. Muir (eds.), *Healing in Religion and Society, from Hippocrates to the Puritans* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1999), pp. 105-34.

Dropsy in the Ancient World

While the condition known as dropsy only appears in Luke 14 among all of the biblical writings, it is found commonly enough when we cast a wider net into the sea of Greco-Roman literature. My argument here is an important one: No direct link between Luke and this or that piece of Greek literature is necessary to posit; rather, we need only to establish that this metaphorical understanding of dropsy is widely known in the Greco-Roman world, and thus the Lukan audience could plausibly be expected to hear the metaphor in Luke 14. Regarding the link between dropsy and greed, Braun posits that “the comparison seems to have been common enough to become proverbial.”³⁰ I think such an assertion is completely justified, and if so it is enlightening to a reading of Luke 14. Let us consider a few examples.

Stobaeus states the comparison as succinctly as anyone: “Diogenes compared money-lovers to dropsies; as dropsies, though filled with fluid crave drink, so money-lovers, though loaded with money, crave more of it, yet both to their demise. For, their desires increase the more they acquire the objects of their cravings.”³¹ Or one might consider Lucian, who includes dropsy among a list of diseases associated with wealth: “But look at the rich: name the disease to which these creatures are not subjected by their intemperance; gout, consumption, pneumonia, dropsy—they all come of high feeding. Some of these men are like Icarus: they fly too high, they get near the sun, not realizing that their wings are fastened with wax; and then some day there is a great splash, and they have disappeared headlong into the deep.”³² Similarly, one might notice Polybius, who writes the following:

Scopas, the strategus of the Aetolians, when he fell from the office by power of which he ventured to draft these laws, turned eagerly towards Alexandria for help, convinced that if his expectations in that quarter were realized he would repair his damaged fortunes and satisfy his soul’s longing for gain. He was unaware that as in the case of a dropsy the thirst of the sufferer never ceases and is never allayed by the administration of liquids from without, unless we cure the morbid condition

³⁰ Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14*, p. 37.

³¹ Stobaeus, *Flor.*, 3.10.45.

³² Lucian, *Gall.*, p. 23.

of the body itself, so it is impossible to satiate the greed for gain, unless we correct by reasoning the vice inherent in the soul.³³

Polybius then continues to describe how the “insatiate greed” of Scopas brought about his downfall.

Ovid even draws the comparison to the whole of the Roman people. He writes:

But ever since the Fortune of this place has raised her head on high, and Rome with her crest has touched the topmost gods, riches have grown and with them the frantic lust of wealth, and they who have the most possessions still crave for more. They strive to gain that they may waste, and then to repair their wasted fortunes, and thus they feed their vices by ringing the changes on them. So he whose belly swells with dropsy, the more he drinks, the thirstier he grows. Nowadays nothing but money counts: fortune brings honors, friendships; the poor man everywhere lies low.³⁴

Also valuable is a story told by Philostratus of a man who has dropsy and seeks healing from Asclepius. We are first told that “though he was sick, yet he lived the life of luxury, and being continually drunk, I will not say he lived, rather he was ever dying. He suffered then from dropsy, and finding his pleasure in drunkenness took no care to dry up his malady. On this account then Asclepius took no care of him, and did not visit him even in a dream.”³⁵ The man is then advised to seek the help of Appolonius instead. Appolonius explains to him why Asclepius refuses to help him, and the reason is greed: “for [Asclepius] gives to those who desire it, but you do things that irritate and aggravate your disease, for you give yourself up to luxury.”

In each of these cases, there is a direct link between dropsy and the accumulation of wealth. Sometimes it is used only as a comparison, while other times it is quite literally a disease being suffered by the rich and is linked to their wealth and greed. There are yet other examples where the terminology “dropsy” is missing but where it is evident that dropsy is what is being described. Among those examples one might

³³) Polybius, 13.2.1-2 (the full passage is found in 13.2.1-5).

³⁴) Ovid, *Fast.*, 1.215-16.

³⁵) Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.*, 1.9.

consider the following specifically. Horace makes the rather apparent comparison: "If you were troubled by thirst that no water could quench, you would tell your doctor about it; then if, with possessions amassed you feel only cravings for more, would you fail to take counsel with someone about it?"³⁶ One might also consider Seneca, who writes,

Nothing will satisfy greed ... though a man should amass all these [great things], they will no more be able to satisfy his insatiable soul than any amount of drink will ever suffice to quench the thirst of a man whose desire arises, not from need, but from the fire that burns in his vitals; for this is not thirst, but disease. Nor is this true only in respect to money or food. Every want that springs, not from any need, but from vice is of a like character; however much you gather for it will serve, not to end, but to advance desire.³⁷

Lastly, Plutarch's *Moralia* knows the comparison as well. In an essay entitled "On the Love of Wealth," Plutarch draws in the imagery of dropsy this way: "From what other ills then does wealth deliver us, if it does not even deliver us from the craving for it? Nay, drink allays the desire of drink, and food is a remedy for hunger ... but neither silver nor gold allays the craving for money, nor does the greed of gain ever cease from acquiring new gains."³⁸ The comparison finishes a paragraph later: "And then, as those who drink when no longer thirsty, or eat when no longer hungry, vomit up with the excess the rest as well that was taken to satisfy hunger or thirst, so those who seek the useless and superfluous do not even retain the necessary. Such then is the condition of one sort of lover of wealth."³⁹

Finally, we should mention that the dropsy metaphor is not unknown to other Jewish and Christian writings of the era. Josephus reports that Herod the Great suffered from dropsy.⁴⁰ While the entirety of the quote is lengthy, what is important is that the dropsy is said to be a punishment from God for his sins, and the diviners who work for Herod conclude that it is because of his "impiety," though the exact nature of that

³⁶) Horace, *Epod.*, 2.2.146-49.

³⁷) Seneca, *Helv.*, 11.2-4.

³⁸) Plutarch, *Mor.*, 523C.

³⁹) Plutarch, *Mor.*, 524F.

⁴⁰) Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.6.5.

impiety is not described—whether pride or power or greed or injustice or lack of reverence for God, we are not sure.⁴¹ Nevertheless, Josephus does at the very least think that dropsy is more than a random disease in this case but is a punishment suitable to the crime. Among Christian writings, the Acts of Paul 4 reports that Paul heals a man with dropsy. The text at this point is only partially preserved with several large sections missing, including the part of the text that likely describes the man and his condition. One thing is notable from the text that survives: The man's son is angry at Paul and wants Paul killed for healing the father. The narrator tells us, "For he wished that his father should not be healed, but die, that he might quickly be master of his property" (Acts of Paul 4). It appears that greed is an inherited trait in this case; like father, like son.

Examples could continue at some length, but let these suffice to demonstrate that dropsy is, it would appear, a widespread, even proverbial, way of characterizing greed and wealth, and it would be fair to expect that Luke and his audience might be very well aware of the comparison and think of its implications when Jesus heals a man with this condition.

What Dropsy Might Mean for Luke

Having established that the metaphor of dropsy as the rich man's disease is prevalent in the ancient world, what remains is to read Luke 14 in light of this metaphorical understanding. Why is Luke alone among the Gospel writers in relaying a story of Jesus healing a man of dropsy? Why does it appear here in this context in Luke, and what meaning might it have? It is to that reading that we now turn.

⁴¹) Perhaps similar is the witness of Papias, who describes Judas as being swollen, and similarly accuses him of impiety: "Judas walked about in this world a sad example of impiety; for his body having swollen to such an extent that he could not pass where a chariot could pass easily, he was crushed by the chariot, so that his bowels gushed out" (*Fragments* III). We are left only to speculate whether the swelling was a result of greed, presumably based on the price of silver paid to Judas to betray Jesus. Special thanks to my colleague Jesse Robertson for bringing the work of Papias to my attention.

This scene is much more than the opening episode of yet another dinner scene in Luke. While it serves as a nice critique of the excesses, luxuries, and indulgences so often found and criticized in Greco-Roman dinner scenes, this is more than a simple dig at the dangers of excess. Indeed, it seems to me that this scene is a significant scene in the larger anti-wealth ethic of Luke; perhaps that is why no other Gospel writer includes the dropsy scene, as their purposes are not the same as Luke's purposes. Consider what follows the dropsy text: In vv. 7-11 Jesus condemns the practice of being greedy for honor; vv. 12-24 offer a parable about a banquet in which the guest list involves the poor and outcast; and v. 33 says outright, "So therefore none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." After defending his practice of eating with sinners in Luke 15, the economic critique really accelerates with Luke 16. For whatever else that strange parable of the steward might mean, it is certain that the wealth in the story is described as dishonest/unholy/unrighteous, and Jesus tells the audience they cannot serve God and wealth. He then insults the Pharisees in 16:14 with the epithet "money-lovers" before telling the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in which the Rich Man is condemned because he has wealth. Luke's Jesus is clear that the rich man's case would not have been helped had he passed the occasional scrap to Lazarus; that is, so long as he is named "Rich Man," he will be a "Damned Man." As Jesus' journey continues, he encounters that pesky ruler in Luke 18 whom he commands to sell everything and give it to the poor if he wants to inherit eternal life, and in Luke 19 we find the story of Zacchaeus who does exactly that. Indeed, the critique seems obvious in Luke, if we are honest: Wealth will inevitably separate us from the kingdom of God, and it will doom us in the same way that drink dooms the one with dropsy. As such, the dropsy metaphor seems quite at home in the Gospel of Luke, and one that serves a vital role in the Lukan Jesus' critique of greed. I might further propose that when it comes to greed, wealth, and selfishness, Jesus seems to suggest that it is a disease whose only cure is not simple renunciation but miraculous healing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me offer a few summary statements: (1) Dropsy is a common metaphor in the first-century Greco-Roman world for greed and excessive wealth; (2) very few commentators have noticed this trend, and those who have noticed have tended to underemphasize it; (3) our commentary tradition needs to pay far more attention to this metaphor, noticing it more and making more of it; and (4) we likewise need to notice how well this dropsy scene fits the larger Lukan critique of greed, wealth, and selfish indulgence. May we not miss the value of such a tiny scene whose interpretive impact far outpaces the relative brevity of the scene itself.